AI-Generated and Distributed Reality:
How AI systems Democratized and Incentivized Visual Disinformation During the 2024 U.S. Election

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Abstract

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Marcus Barrett Werner

The emergence of commercial generative artificial intelligence (AI) models used for visual fabrication and distributive AI algorithms that curate content on social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the contemporary news environment, creating unprecedentedly favorable conditions for the creation and propagation of visual disinformation. This thesis argues that the synergistic relationship between these two AI systems has democratized the means of fabricating intersubjective reality through visual representation – and even incentivizes it – with profound implications for journalism and functional political democracy. Drawing on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, this thesis presents a case study of three stratified examples surrounding the 2024 US presidential election, tracing a trajectory across elite political actors, pseudo-journalists, and ordinary social media users, showing how each order of influence distinctively employed these AI systems synergistically, and how they were structurally incentivized to do so, to produce and distribute visual disinformation. Complementing this, a research-creation component – a fabricated political news report produced entirely using free, widely available generative AI tools – serves as a proof-of-concept demonstration of the unprecedented ease with which effective visual disinformation can now be created. Ultimately, this thesis suggests that these AI systems are cultivating an emergent regime of truth in which engagement metrics, rather than factual accuracy, increasingly determine 'what counts as true' for voters. In turn, news consumers veer toward either belief in nonfactual information or apathy toward factual information. Both outcomes corrode the intersubjective reality upon which functional political democracy depends, thus underscoring the need for stronger regulatory frameworks and reimagined platform algorithms.

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Prepare yourself for a shift in tone towards more serious matters.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the age of artificial intelligence (AI), the news landscape is increasingly saturated with fabricated images generated by rapidly evolving, widely-available AI technology – a system of models that, quite tellingly, has been called "the ultimate disinformation amplifier" (Endert, 2024). Paired with the distributive AI algorithms that increasingly serve as autonomous, engagement-driven curators of news on social media platforms, these burgeoning technologies pose novel and unprecedented challenges for news consumers' sense of reality (Zuboff, 2022; Harari, 2024). Indeed, a vast and increasing body of AI-generated disinformation is now prevalent on social media (CCDH, 2024), digital platforms on which people increasingly receive their news (Pew Research Center, 2024b). This thesis explores how the combination of generative and distributive AI systems is transforming the news environment at an unprecedented pace, becoming increasingly saturated with realistic depictions of easily generated and unreal events, and that we must pay attention to this because of the serious implications it poses for journalism, the social and cultural fabric of communities, the political economy of Western democracies and, indeed, functional political democracy in general.

In this thesis-creation project, the ramifications of these systems are primarily explored through the analysis of several examples of AI-generated disinformation surrounding the 2024 US election, which, in turn, serves to underscore the societal concerns and implications they pose. As Darrach (2023) has observed, a plethora of fabricated AI-generated images now effectively exists and function as a significant product of photojournalism on social media platforms. This thesis considers how these products are misleading voters about current affairs, undermining their shared sense of reality, and thereby pressuring functional political democracy. This is precisely the online context that political actors stepped into in the 2024 election cycle, which we now know brought Donald Trump back into power. As will be made clear, these images almost certainly swayed some voters, or at the very least, rendered a significant number apathetic to certain important realities and thus confused voting intentions.

Unprecedently, generative AI models have enabled anyone with access to the internet – from political operatives to ordinary citizens – to create realistic-looking imagery without significant skill or effort, and concurrently, distributive AI systems have enabled anyone to propagate such imagery on social media platforms that prioritize engagement metrics over factual

content. This dynamic is cause for concern, because as consumers increasingly turn to visual-dominated platforms, such as X, TikTok, Instagram and YouTube to get their news, they more directly depend on politicians, online political commentators, and ordinary people instead of trained journalists (Newman et. al., 2024, 2025). Although scholars have pointed out many issues surrounding the roles of more traditional journalists, especially those working in corporate-funded media, (see Provost & Kennard, 2023 and Herman & Chomsky, 2010), this thesis argues that the dynamic between generative and distributive AI has fundamentally altered the playing field of news production, distribution, and consumption by structurally democratizing and encouraging deviation from critical journalism that adheres to an ethos that seeks to embrace truthful, factual information (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). And this leads to the central argument of this thesis: That the democratization of these technologies, enabling all to engage in novel forms of news production, has greatly increased the ease and scale with which visual disinformation can and *is* now created and propagated, and that this is affecting the sense of reality shared by news consumers by either distorting it or causing apathy towards it.

This work builds on an interdisciplinary body of scholarship to situate AI-generated and distributed visual disinformation within a broader theoretical framework. Seminal works by Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Stuart Hall, and Jean Baudrillard provide a conceptual lens for examining what meaning is produced from visuals at the individual level that is useful for understanding the behavioral effects of AI-generated imagery on news consumers. Specifically, these theorists provide the tools for understanding how images function as proof of reality, how they subjectively inform our worldview, and thus, how they shape news consumers' sense of reality. For example, while Sontag's reflections on photography highlight how images function as the grammar and ethics of seeing, Barthes's concepts of denotation and connotation elucidate how they may affect political sentiment based on this grammatical function as applied to cultural cues. Hall's work on representation further underscores how meaning is produced and contested within culture, while Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality more broadly situates AI imagery as simulacra that, when applied to the current news environment, can be used to explain a collapse of the boundary between fact and fiction.

These foundational insights are extended by Pierre Bourdieu's ideas on 'cultural production' (which this thesis largely applies as synonymous with news production) by mobilizing his concepts of fields and capitals as a way to theorize change within the news

environment and to understand what incentivizes novel actors within cultural production to engage with these AI systems synergistically to create and spread visual disinformation. James S. McLean and Sue Robinson's work further situates these dynamics more contemporarily, especially in terms of how the AI-driven online news environment is reshaping the authority of journalism in the digital age. Furthermore, scholarship by Shoshana Zuboff and Yuval Noah Harari on, respectively, 'surveillance capitalism' and the mechanisms of contemporary information networks is highly instructive as it elucidates both the incentive and circulation structures that effectively enable the production and propagation AI-generated disinformation through distributive algorithms. And finally, Michel Foucault's concept of 'discourse' is adapted to understand how generated AI images synergize with distributive AI systems to structure what knowledge is legitimized or discarded, and how this relates to societal power structures.

To employ this scholarship coherently, this thesis employs multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) to analyze specific examples of AI-generated images during the 2024 US election, especially in terms of how they produced meaning and concurrently operated within an emergent discursive formation in which news consumers' understanding of reality and truth was, and remains, distorted. MCDA is particularly useful as it provides a dual lens for analysis. MCDA is first used to semiotically analyze AI imagery through concepts such as denotation, connotation, and cultural representation to uncover layered meanings, and second, to discursively situate these meanings within broader structures and patterns of novel cultural production, knowledge, and power. Following Machin and Mayr (2023), MCDA is particularly well-suited to unpack how visual and auditory elements "naturalize" ideology and legitimize forms of symbolic violence (p. 27).

More specifically, MCDA is applied to three examples that form a case study. From three different levels of political and economic influence, each example maps out stratified and discreet uses of AI-generated imagery from the 2024 US election. While each example focuses on a different order of influence – from political elites to pseudo-journalists to ordinary social media users – together, they form a cohesive case study of how the combination of generative and distributive AI technologies is being employed as a means of creating and disseminating visual disinformation in the context of electoral politics across different spheres of influence and, moreover, how the production, circulation and even consumption of AI-generated disinformation is structurally incentivized *at all levels* of production within the current online news environment.

The first example seeks to show how a first-order cultural producer, a political elite, leveraged generative-AI to propagate visual disinformation to distort news consumers' shared sense of reality. More specifically, based on several AI-generated images, this case argues that, during the 2024 election season, current US president Donald Trump strategically leveraged these technologies to both legitimize convenient but false AI-generated fabricated reality and delegitimize inconvenient but authentic reality.

The second example investigates the production of a second-order cultural producer – an AI-enabled 'pseudo-journalist,' or political commentator on social media who acts in a traditionally journalistically coded manner, but without reverence to the ethics of factual journalism. This example explores how the synergistic use of generative and distributive AI systems has enabled the production and distribution of audiovisual disinformation under the guise of commentary or satire, effectively bypassing traditional journalistic ethics while gaining mass reach.

The third example investigates the spread of "AI slop," low-quality AI-generated content created and shared by third-order cultural producers, or ordinary social media users, which now contributes to a pervasive flood of AI-generated visual disinformation online. This example analyses two specific pieces of AI slop to underscore how the AI-enabled democratization of news production has led to an unprecedented ease and scale with which anyone can produce and circulate reality-distorting visual disinformation.

This thesis also engages a research-creation section, a 'fake news report' video, to practically demonstrate the ease and scale with which it is now possible to produce AI-generated disinformation. This video both demonstrates and proposes a discussion about one of the central arguments of this thesis: that generative AI technology has enabled anyone with access to the internet to very easily and effectively propagate visual disinformation in the contemporary field of cultural production.

Moreover, by using MCDA and drawing from pertinent scholarship and its application to these three examples, this investigation analyzes how exactly the interplay between burgeoning generative and distributive AI systems is being used to disrupt or erode the shared sense of reality experienced by news consumers and, in turn, how this might be creating an emergent regime of truth in which engagement metrics, and (as will become clear) thus emotional resonance, increasingly outweighs factual accuracy in terms of what 'counts at true.' It explores the

possibility that the complete disengagement from any shared notion of journalistic truth – what John Hartley described as a pillar of modernity itself – is now a distinct possibility (Hartley, 1996; p. 35). As well, this thesis discusses the implications on our journalistic, political, and democratic landscapes.

To guide this investigation, the following research questions are proposed:

- How have generative and distributive AI technologies synergistically increased the ease and scale with which it is possible to create and spread visual disinformation?
- What do their observable employment at different levels of influence more broadly signify for the functionality of the news environment – especially in terms of the AI-driven (financial and political) incentive structures that increasingly dictate journalistic production?
- How is the ensuing ubiquity of AI-generated imagery affecting news consumers' sense of reality and, in turn, their voting behavior?
- What are the overarching implications of the rise of distributive and generative AI systems on our journalistic, political, and democratic landscapes?

Finally, this thesis-creation project highlights the growing vulnerabilities in our information ecosystem and the urgent need for countermeasures to safeguard critical journalism and constructive public discourse to maintain or restore a functional political democratic system. While research exists on the effects of text-based generative AI models on our notions of 'truth' (Kim & Jo, 2024), research is lacking on the visual aspects of generative AI as it relates to notions of political reality and truth. Accordingly, by highlighting how generative and distributive AI technologies have democratized the production and circulation of visual disinformation, and by elucidating the implications and concerns of this democratization, this thesis seeks to serve as both a warning and a call to action. As will become abundantly clear, the unchecked proliferation of AI-generated imagery has already begun to either distort or erode the shared sense of reality that underpins informed decision-making. Without appropriate safeguards – whether through regulatory guardrails, public awareness campaigns, reimagined algorithms, or perhaps even technological countermeasures – these disruptions risk further destabilizing political democratic systems. While the capabilities of AI systems to create and disseminate disinformation are certainly alarming, they also present an opportunity to reflect on and improve

the mechanisms that govern our media landscape to ensure it does what it is best intended to do – to serve the public good.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Definitions

Throughout this thesis, the term ‘disinformation’ is used continuously, and as such, it calls for a specific definition. Disinformation refers to false information that is *deliberately* created and disseminated in order to deceive. This is distinct from the related concept of misinformation, which refers to false information spread *without* malicious intent. Disinformation is thus produced with the intent to mislead (Wardle et. al., 2017, p. 20). It is also worth addressing the term ‘fake news,’ which is often used colloquially to describe news content that is “intentionally and verifiably false” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213). However, information scholars caution that because ‘fake news’ has become politicized and lacks a precise definition more specific terminology of mis- and disinformation should be used in information scholarship (Wardle et. al., 2017, p. 5).

The terms generative- and distributive AI are used extensively as core concepts to theorize the main thesis argument and therefore also call for specific definitions. ‘Generative AI’ refers to self-learning software models that, with a user prompt, can create new texts, images, or audio content through the mirroring of patterns from existing data (Zewe, 2023). To run effectively, these systems rely on large troves of internet data and powerful computing resources to model their output. Since 2018, transformer-led research has realized rapid advances in generative AI, especially around large language models such as the chatbot ChatGPT that can produce human-like text and more importantly, generative adversarial networks (GANs) that can synthesize realistic imagery (Zewe, 2023). In this thesis, generative AI mostly refers to the latter because it is mostly concerned with generated imagery.

Moreover, this thesis coins the term ‘distributive AI’ to describe the self-learning, algorithmic systems that curate and spread information to users on certain websites, primarily social media platforms, where they operate as recommendation engines that determine what content users encounter. Importantly, these distribution systems are explicitly programmed to prioritize user engagement above all else (Zuboff, 2019; 2022; Harari, 2024). In contrast to generative AI, distributive AI systems do not create new information but simply spread existing information. While much scholarship has examined how these systems tend to create ‘filter bubbles’ or ‘echo chambers’, reinforcing users’ biases (Hartmann et. al., 2025), this thesis mostly

employs the term to conceptualize their underlying function as algorithmic gatekeepers that structure information flows. In short, while generative AI provides the means to create new content, distributive AI provides the means to propagate that content widely. Ultimately, the terms are used to more easily grasp how their interplay functions as a powerful method to spread effective AI generated disinformation.

The term 'deepfake' is sometimes used to refer to hyper-realistic falsified visual or auditory content, that is now often created with generative AI models to imitate real people or events, and that often functions as mis- or disinformation. For example, a deepfake can be a convincingly realistic but false representation of an event, a face, or a voice. In essence, *"*deepfakes are the product of … AI applications that merge, combine, replace, and superimpose images and video clips to create fake videos that appear authentic" (Westerlund, 2019, p. 39; Maras & Alexandrou, 2018). Scholars have warned that the advent of deepfakes represents an "exponential leap" in the ability to distort reality (Citron & Chesney, 2019, p. 1753), since humans tend to trust visual evidence. Moreover, while deepfakes were prevalent before the emergence of generative AI systems, this thesis contemplates how the advances in generative AI have made it significantly easier and faster to create deepfakes.

Finally, it is important to define the use of 'reality' and 'truth' as they are used extensively throughout this thesis. Of course, the definitions of these concepts have been contested and discussed by philosophers and scholars for centuries, and as such, they have varying definitions depending on the viewpoint. To narrow down their meaning for a practical application, this thesis employs 'reality' and 'truth' as they pertain to information networks, drawing from the work of Harari (2024), whose notion of "intersubjective reality" is instructive (p. 50). He takes the position that intersubjective reality is built upon the existence of both objective reality, the idea that certain things, such as stones or mountains, exist whether or not people are aware of them, as well as subjective reality, which describes the things that exist in people's awareness of them, such as pain and pleasure. In contrast to subjective reality that operates at the individual level, intersubjective reality, as Harari posits, exists "in the stories people tell one another. The information humans exchange about intersubjective things doesn't represent anything that had already existed prior to the exchange of information; rather, the exchange of information creates these things" (p. 50). In other words, intersubjective reality is a

shared reality (and is often referred to as such throughout this thesis) that is malleable depending on the circumstances that people collectively agree upon.

With regard to 'truth,' this thesis builds upon the idea that 'truth' is a correspondence between a claim and objective reality, or to put it more simply, that if a statement is true, it aligns with facts (Blackburn, 2019, p. 17). For example, saying "the earth revolves around the sun," in this sense is true because it corresponds to an observed, *objective* and factual reality. Nevertheless, although truth can be defined as such, not everyone agrees on what is true. In fact, this is a central aspect of how the term 'truth' is mobilized, especially through the lens of Foucault (1980) and his reflections on how discourse constructs truth. Whereas this thesis relies on the definition of 'truth' as a correspondence to objective, factual reality, it necessarily acknowledges that intersubjective reality and discourse also determine how people understand the concept of truth. Importantly, in our current media environment this is partly due to the proliferation of disinformation and deepfakes, which have made it increasingly difficult to distinguish truth from falsehood. To that point, some scholars argue that we live in a "post-truth" era, "in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion that appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Flood, 2016). As such, the concept of truth is tied to verifiability and factual accuracy, and the central concern of this thesis is how an "information disorder" might obscure reality and erode this kind of truth (Wardle et. al., 2017).

Scholarship: two tranches

Beyond these definitions, this thesis draws from two tranches of scholarship. The first is seminal works by scholars, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Stuart Hall, and Jean Baudrillard, used to form a theoretical communicative foundation to analyze how visual disinformation affects news consumers' sense of shared, intersubjective reality. This tranche is tied to the consumption of generative AI audiovisual products. Barthes' work clarifies how viewers engage with images from a semiotic perspective, while Sontag and Hall's works help elucidate concerns about the broader societal implications of visual information on publics. Baudrillard's work situates these ideas in a conceptual frame around his notion of 'hyperreality' a condition that now seems to pervade our news environment.

This foundational positioning accommodates a second tranche of scholarship that reveals how and why AI-generated visual disinformation is saturating the news environment to begin

with and what it more broadly signifies for our political, journalistic, and democratic landscapes. Accordingly, this second tranche of scholarship is tied more to the production and circulation aspects of AI-generated audiovisuals under the rule of distributive AI algorithms. It draws primarily from the works of Pierre Bourdieu, James S. McLean, Sue Robinson, Shoshanna Zuboff, Yuval Noah Harari, and Michel Foucault.

While Bourdieu's concepts of fields and capitals help form a theoretical base for how to think about change within a field such as journalism and explain the underlying motivations of agents within this field, McLean and Robinson's work situates Bourdieu's ideas in more contemporary journalism practices. The works of both Zuboff and Harari serve the purpose of further building upon Bourdieu's ideas in the age of AI, elucidating how and why information networks between politicians, journalists, and publics have been transformed because of burgeoning AI systems. Finally, Foucault's seminal work on the intersection between knowledge production, discourse, and power helps to clarify how the synergistic relationship between generative and distributive AI systems might be reshaping the very conditions under which certain narratives are legitimized or discredited.

Moreover, pertinent news articles are mobilized to inform this research about the events following the 2024 US election. Empirical research on visual communication is also employed to support the analysis of images and conditions that legitimize them.

First Tranche

Roland Barthes's work on semiotic approaches to visual content provides a frame for extracting meaning from visual forms, notably still photography. Specifically, in *The Photographic Message* (1977) and *Camera Lucida* (1981), Barthes explicates the central structural concepts of 'denotation' and 'connotation' as well as *punctum*. These concepts help establish a framework that can be adapted to analyze the impact of visual mis- and disinformation and reveal how fabricated AI-generated content might affect news consumers' sense of reality and how it applies to political perception.

In *The Photographic Message*, Barthes provides a "structural analysis" of how photography works to construct meaning (p. 16), arguing that a photograph conveys meaning to its viewers through both first-order, denoted, and second-order, connoted sensibilities. Barthes explains that the denoted message is what is immediately apparent in an image, as it purports to

simply present the iconic reality of a particular scene. In this way, it tends to convey evidence of something that has happened – what he describes as the "having been there" nature of photographs (Barthes, 1981; p. 40). In fact, he states that “in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past” (p. 76). In other words, when we view a photograph through its denoted sensibility, we tend to perceive it as analogous to objective reality – it is the next thing to physically being there. When we begin to describe an image, however, Barthes argues that we unavoidably begin to extract meaning from its *connoted* sensibility through its deeper coded implications. Barthes argues that the connoted message of a photograph conveys meaning to the viewer based on their subjective and intersubjective perspective of the world (what Hall calls the “cultural map”). He explains that when we unpack a photograph, we tend to understand it from a stock of traditional signs, or cultural codes, highlighting that different cultures or subcultures might understand a photograph in very different ways. Thus, to Barthes, when a photograph is interpreted, it is done through the lens of connotation, shaped by cultural norms, values, discourses, and so forth.

In his later work *Camera Lucida* (1981), Barthes develops the concept of *punctum* – the personally affecting detail that “pricks” the viewer. Barthes contends that *punctum* is what can more deeply affect a viewer. It is a unique detail or element of a photograph that breaks through the viewer’s connoted engagement with the image to create a more personal, and thereby, profound reaction.

As such, to Barthes a photograph may seem analogous to reality, but it is never purely denotative; it always carries with it the weight of connotation and is potentially dominated by the “prick” of *punctum*. Beyond their function as analytical tools, which, to be clear, is central to the methodology deployed by this thesis, each of the three examples examined in the case study contains all elements pertaining to Barthes’s photographic “reading” and are open to manipulation in the age of digital ubiquity and refinements in AI. For example, when looking at an AI-generated image from its denoted sensibility, a viewer might discern how it realistically represents something that has never actually happened and, in turn, how such an image might then effectively promote, for instance, a certain political narrative through a false, generated representation of objective reality. And by looking at the same AI-generated image through the lens of connotation, a viewer might be influenced by such generated, fake images, in terms of how they evoke specific cultural and ideological responses. As well, this framework is also

mobilized to examine how a generated *punctum* can be used as a tool of persuasion, drawing viewers in through emotionally charged elements to potentially manipulate political sentiment.

The work of Susan Sontag is applied as an extension of Barthes' concepts, offering an opportunity to examine the persuasive power – the rhetoricity – of visual content in shaping intersubjective reality. Similar to Barthes' idea of denotation, Sontag's seminal work, *On Photography* (1977), asserts that photographs are often perceived as incontrovertible proof that something has happened, "something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it" (p. 3). She further argues that images inform us about what we have the right to observe: that they are the grammar and ethics of seeing the world and deeply embedded into our culture. As she states, "needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted" (p. 8). This is an important concept; that is, that we have come to largely rely on photographs to inform our reality. Using insight from Sontag's work will help to more precisely unpack how AI images construct a distinct sense of reality, a simulacrum that carries the expectation of truth by implicating journalistic standards to influence the behavior of news consumers.

This aligns with the cultural theorist, Stuart Hall's argument that pictorial representations play a significant role in informing viewers about the nature of the world they inhabit. Hall's "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation" (1989) is used here to highlight the significance of such representations. Hall argues that meaning derived from an image is a production that is "never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (p. 68). This understanding lends a context to the work of Barthes and Sontag by opening the door to a reflection on the nature of just how digital forms operate when circulated at the speed of the electron in a milieu (social media) that is ever changing, and how visual disinformation in particular might make use of cultural codes to subtly align viewers' sentiments with specific political ideologies, not through overt propaganda but through specifically chosen representations with built-in cultural codes.

Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994) further provides this investigation with the concepts of *simulacra* and 'hyperreality' that together function as a useful theoretical framework to situate the works of Barthes, Sontag, and Hall. *Simulacra*, as defined by Baudrillard, are representations that no longer refer to any objective, or external reality, such as the reality that exists outside of representations constructed by popular media. These can be

thought of as copies of copies, or representations that reference only other representations rather than any original, external reality (Baudrillard, 1994). Although Baudrillard's ideas predate the digital age, this concept is presciently useful for this thesis because AI-generated images are epitomical examples of *simulacra*: they are entirely fabricated content, solely composed of representations of reality – images in databases, in this case – that make up their training dataset. And these *simulacra*, ever refined, increasingly pervade our media ecosystem.

Baudrillard's 'hyperreality' further situates *simulacra* in a theoretical frame useful for examining the effect of AI images on news consumers' sense of reality. The concept refers to a state in which the distinction between reality and simulation entirely collapses due to oversaturation of *simulacra* in an information environment (Baudrillard, 1994). In fact, drawing on Baudrillard's work, contemporary scholars Ferrari and McKelvey (2023) observe (in reference to AI-generated content) that hyperreality occurs *because* such simulations have become so deeply embedded in media systems. Under such conditions, audiences increasingly struggle to distinguish between what is objectively real and what is generated because "simulations are omnipresent features of reality itself" (Ferrari & McKelvey, 2023; p. 340). This raises a central concern of this thesis: if news consumers cannot distinguish between different modes of reality, or identify factual truth through their *shared* media environment, their *shared* intersubjective reality may very well collapse entirely.

This leads to the concept of 'reality apathy,' which is employed to discuss the implications of an AI-generated hyperreality on institutions such as journalism and democracy. The concept first appeared in a long-form online article in 2018, written by journalist Charlie Warzel and framed by an interview with AI expert, Aviv Ovadya. Situating Baudrillard's hyperreality in the contemporary news environment*,* reality apathy describes how an increasing volume of deepfakes negatively affect news consumers' shared sense of reality by overwhelming them into paying less attention to whether news is indeed accurate, factual, and trustworthy. This is a direct correlation with Baudrillard's diagnosis that "there is more and more information, and less and less meaning" (Baudrillard, 1994; 79). Warzel's article is particularly useful here, as his interviewee Ovadya further discusses the potential implications of reality apathy on democracy. As Ovadya argues, reality apathy could disrupt the most fundamental level of being transparently informed that is required for functional democracy to operate (Warzel, 2018). This has obvious implications for journalism.

Of course, reality apathy is not a given outcome, and as such this investigation also considers the implications of AI-generated hyperreality in the event that news consumers *do not* become apathetic to reality and instead simply perceive AI-generated representation itself as truth. To address this potential outcome, the work of journalist Brian Resnick (2018) is useful.

Resnick reflects on the implications of collective 'misrememberings' in response to the increasing pervasiveness of AI-generated disinformation. He argues that false images, "fester when they make sense to our political worldview, when it's familiar and repeated ad nauseam, when we trust the source of the information, and when this information is corroborated, shared, and discussed by like-minded people" (Resnick, 2018). In accordance, Andrew James Mills' doctoral thesis (2021) empirically demonstrates how doctored imagery impacts our memory, and in turn, our sense of reality. Mills' study adds a layer of scientific legitimacy to the analysis of the photographic objects of study for this thesis because he demonstrates empirically that even overtly doctored photos – when the viewer *knows* an image is fake – can skew our long-term memory of the depicted event. In other words, Mills shows that simply knowing a photo is fabricated may not be enough to prevent it from impacting what we remember.

Reports

To support these claims, this thesis also draws on empirically based reports that show the latest available pertinent statistics. Here, reports from Pew Research Center (2024a, 2024b), Reuters (Newman et. al., 2024; 2025), the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH, 2024; 2025**),** APNews and USAFacts (Swenson & Sanders, 2024), provide real world data on current trends in media consumption, especially regarding the sources of news that consumers rely on and how they engage with the evolving media environment. For instance, these reports document a rise in news consumption through visual content on social media (Newman et. al., 2024) and of the pseudo-journalist, or "news influencer" sphere and its audience (Pew Research Center, 2024a). These reports are important because they lend context and texture to how we situate publics in current news consumption dynamics.

The Reuters' "News Report 2025" is especially instructive. It documents a "continuing fall in engagement with traditional media sources such as TV, print, and news websites, while dependence on social media, video platforms, and online aggregators grows" (Newman et. al., 2025, p. 10). In particular, it shows that in the United States "social media news use was sharply

up (+6pp)" from the previous year, and that there was no such bump "for traditional sources" (p. 10). In fact, the proportion of consumers getting news from "social media and video networks in the United States (54%) is sharply up – overtaking both TV news (50%) and news websites/apps (48%) for the first time. … [and that] traditional journalism media in the US are being eclipsed by a shift towards online personalities and creators" (p. 11). To that point, it records the rise of an alternative media ecosystem in which YouTubers, TikTokers, and podcasters are engaged to access news. Accordingly, it reports that engagement with visual news continues to grow, as "consuming social video has grown from 52% in 2020 to 65% in 2025" and "more people now say they prefer to watch the news rather than read it, further encouraging the shift to personality-led news creators" (p. 10).

As these trends show, there is a rise in engagement with visually heavy social media platforms as news sources. Importantly, this is directly correlated with a rise of distributive AI algorithms as news curators. Moreover, the documented increase in reliance on alternative media sources and personality-led creators for news consumption also supports the justification for the central argument that informs this thesis: that the creation and propagation of visual disinformation has been democratized due to AI, and as reflected in the data, there are indications that so-called "news-influencers" (Pew Research Center, 2024a), who are referred to as 'pseudo-journalists' in this thesis, rely on distributive AI algorithms to propagate their news on social media.

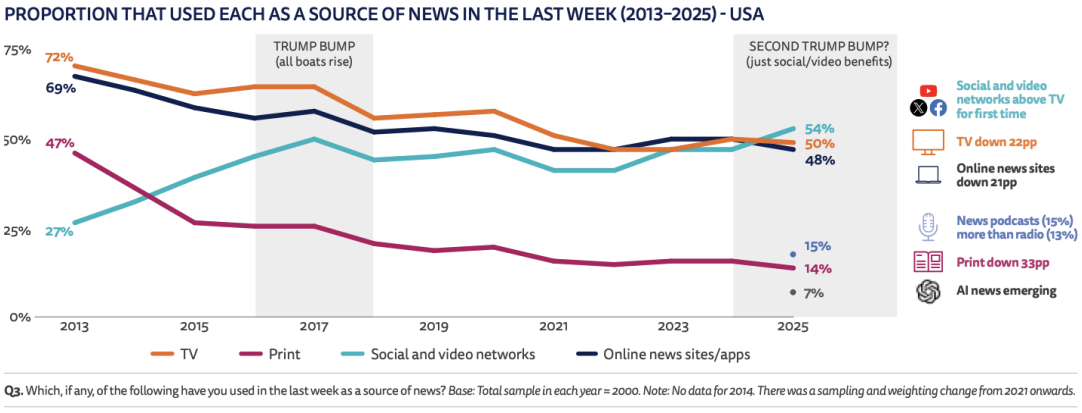

Figure 1: A graph from the Reuters Digital News Report 2025 depicts social media platforms as the only growing medium for engaging with news as compared to other (more traditional) mediums (Newman et. al., 2025, p. 11).

With respect to the spread of specifically AI-generated content on social media, a recent report from the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH, 2025) documents instances of AI-generated images of fictitious American people in posts during the most recent US election season. The report covers 169 posts of such AI-generated images (posted to Facebook) that, combined, received 2.4 million interactions and 476,014 shares, and in a plethora of ways offered "political opinions relevant to the US election" (p. 4). The CCDH study observes that Facebook also failed to label any of these images as AI-generated. The report is especially valuable because it details, through collected evidence, how AI-generated disinformation is not only being produced but also circulates in an unchecked manner on the platforms that increasingly dominate contemporary news consumption.

Second tranche

The second tranche of scholarly literature covers theory applicable to the distributive aspect of AI-generated visual disinformation, exploring concepts that help elucidate the underlying AI-driven mechanisms that increasingly govern the current media environment. Accordingly, this scholarly literature provides a theoretical approach for addressing how and why AI-generated visual disinformation has become so entrenched that hyperreality seems to have become a defining characteristic of the current news environment.

First, the work of Pierre Bourdieu is employed to explore the broader mechanisms and motivations that drive the creation of these AI images, and to theorize how to think about change within the field of cultural production, notably by drawing from his book *On Television* (1998) and his article "Television" (2001). Importantly, Bourdieu's notion of cultural production is adapted to describe forms of digital media production. In *On Television* and "Television," Bourdieu argues that cultural production, particularly through television news, is governed by an internal logic that is shaped by the characteristics of its encompassing field. Bourdieu proposes that the main characteristics of the field of cultural production include market-driven forces, such as competition for audience share, and professional norms that steer the social relationships between journalists. Indeed, agents within this field are influenced by financial pressures, such as the need to generate revenue and maintain audience engagement (Bourdieu, 2001; p. 250) and personal incentives, including career advancement, social recognition, and the accumulation of credibility (Bourdieu, 1998; p. 70). Moreover, he argues that the characteristics of the field of

cultural production shape the output of televisual media because journalists and other cultural producers use these characteristics to control what images are put on display for the public to see (p. 2).

In his earlier work “Forms of Capital” (1986), Bourdieu posits that various forms of capital – economic, cultural, social, and symbolic – are used by agents such as journalists to navigate their chosen field to accumulate prestige and influence. As he describes it, economic, cultural, and social capital, respectively, refer to agents' influence based on their access to financial resources, level of education and knowledge, and their network of relationships within the field. That said, it is Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital which pertains especially to this study. He describes symbolic capital as the prestige an agent acquires and classifies it as critical in determining who holds power and influence in that field; in other words, who gets to speak with authority about the field. Symbolic capital is thus dependent on collective acknowledgment and often results from the conversion of other forms of capital into a sort of social credit that agents in turn use to shape discourse and maintain authority. Nevertheless, these forms of capital are all somewhat interrelated and in tandem help to form a theoretical base both for understanding the motivations behind cultural agents’ decisions, particularly in the case of the emergent novel type of actor within the journalism field, the pseudo-journalist, who should now be considered a cultural producer.

As Bourdieu outlines in “Television” (2001), these ideas all point to how television news – visual news – cannot neutrally reflect reality because it functions within a field that is highly competitive and where its output is shaped by these characteristics. When certain news images are selected for distribution by cultural producers, for example, other images are discarded, and thus ‘reality’ can only ever be presented within narrow parameters. For instance, a news editor might choose a more sensationalist image instead of a more descriptive image to drive engagement. To Bourdieu, this leads to a homogenized and superficial portrayal of events, where sensationalism and easily digestible content are favored over depth and critical analysis found in media such as more “serious” newspapers. He describes this process as ‘symbolic violence,’ wherein dominant ideologies impose themselves on viewers through selective media representations. A central concern of this thesis is to explore how generative- and distributive-AI systems, in tandem, might be exacerbating symbolic violence.

While Bourdieu's ideas form a theoretical base for understanding change within the field of cultural production, the characteristics of the field have changed dramatically with the advent of AI systems, creating an immediacy of information dissemination and altering how news is produced, circulated, and consumed. For instance, there is a constant and increasing need to produce news resulting in systems of reproduction where the speed of reporting is often prioritized over thoughtful and more constructive ways of presenting political issues (McLean, 2012). With the distributive AI-enabled democratization of 'gatekeeping' the public conversation may now be more open, but it is also *more* anarchical (Harari, 2024). With this in mind, it is helpful to draw from a series of more contemporary scholars to put into perspective Bourdieu's theory on capitals and fields.

Here, the work of James S. McLean is useful as it draws from Bourdieu's theoretical concepts in an analysis of the inner workings of the New Democratic Party's general election campaign (in Canada) in 2005-06. Accordingly, his work is also useful to comparatively investigate more contemporary campaign strategies as they interact with AI systems. Specifically, McLean explores the NDP's use of the war room, a concept he discusses, partly using Bourdieu's theory on capitals and fields to explain how information networks flow in political campaigns. The war room, McLean points out, centralizes communication and ensures that campaign messages remain consistent across all platforms to impose a convenient vision of the social world. Its core functions consist of what he terms rapid response – quickly reacting to breaking news, potential controversies, or attacks from political opponents – and opposition research – the systematic gathering and analysis of information about political opponents to anticipate strategies and uncover weaknesses. McLean's investigation of the war room helps inform this thesis about the inner workings of campaign communications surrounding the 2024 US election. By understanding campaign operations from the 2005-06 Canadian federal election as a baseline, this thesis is better equipped to understand how AI technologies have significantly changed the way in which campaign operations were carried out in the 2024 US election.

Indeed, McLean discusses the technology-driven shift that has occurred in the news environment within the past two decades, arguing that the rise of the so-called blogosphere during the 2005-06 Canadian election marked a significant change in how journalism operated, as it introduced new and decentralized platforms for political commentary and debate. This shift seemingly challenged the operations of traditional journalism by democratizing the flow of

information and creating new online spaces for political engagement (McLean, 2012; p. 119). In terms of the case study at the center of this examination, this is a useful starting point to investigate how the role of journalism – or, at least, what *counts* as journalism – has evolved in response to new technologies.

One important facet of how journalism has changed involves the way in which authority is constructed and challenged in digital spaces, as Sue Robinson points out in "Check Out This Blog" (2017). Robinson argues that the shift from traditional journalistic authority to decentralized, networked spaces (social media, for instance) has not necessarily democratized information production, but instead, reconfigured power dynamics in ways that still privilege certain voices. Based on her questioning of "journalists, active bloggers, and "regular" people about their participation in online arenas," she argues that while digital platforms offer opportunities for more diverse participation, they also reinforce pre-existing offline hierarchies – those who already possess social, economic, and symbolic capital, more easily attain influence in online discourse (pp. 220-221).

Accordingly, there is a distinction to be made here. While this thesis argues that everyone with internet access now has the potential to propagate (dis)information, as Robinson's work suggests, certain cultural agents are more likely to productively utilize this technology than others, thus shaping cultural output depending on their held capitals. Indeed, those with sufficient capital may feel more inclined, and certainly are often better positioned, to engage with these technologies in ways that reinforce their authority. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, novel cultural producers who rely on social media to acquire economic or symbolic capital to maintain their profession also face pressures to produce a certain kind of content that fits into platform discourse. Ultimately, this incentivizes the prioritizing of emotional appeal or high frequency posting over journalistic rigor. This is textbook symbolic violence. As such, while distributive AI algorithms represent the most cutting-edge transformation in information dissemination and have theoretically democratized the means for producing and circulating news, this study argues that they have not replaced pre-existing power structures, but only reconfigured them in ways that still support the status quo.

The social media scholarship "Social Media, News and the Public Sphere" (Hutchinson et. al., 2024) is also informative because it highlights the seemingly contradictory outcomes of our democratized information sphere. They argue that:

> The diminished role of the [traditional] news media as gatekeepers of information has allowed citizen journalism to flourish, but social media platforms are also fertile ground for fake news, conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation … It has been said by some that we are living in a 'post-truth' era, where facts are no longer agreed upon (p. 109-110).

Here, Hutchinson et. al. touches upon how this dynamic creates a trade-off where increased participation comes at the cost of information quality, basically favoring content that excites rather than informs. In this way, the ability to meaningfully spread information may be becoming increasingly democratized, but it seems to be only a certain type of information; engagement-driven, emotionally appealing, sensationalist information (all defining characteristics of symbolic violence and disinformation) that is being circulated, rather than information that traditionally adheres to evidence and facts and is therefore worthy of trust.

Accordingly, an examination of the role of distributive AI systems as both a disruptive force and an extension of existing systems of power is in order. Such an examination points to how these technologies increasingly shape what is accepted as *truth*. While Zuboff and Harari's work serves to outline the mechanisms of distributive algorithms, they both can be situated in Foucault's concept of a 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980; p. 131). This is a useful concept to mobilize in order to understand how distributive AI algorithms do not simply circulate knowledge but actively define the conditions under which knowledge is produced, legitimized, or discarded.

Shoshana Zuboff's book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (2019) is instructive, as is her journal article "Surveillance Capitalism or Democracy? The Death Match of Institutional Orders and the Politics of Knowledge in Our Information Civilization" (2022). Zuboff argues that the institution of journalism has been corrupted on a global scale due to the rise of surveillance capitalism: a new economic order that treats human experience as behavioral data for extraction and manipulation to shape and predict future actions, enabled by new large-scale information technologies and carried out by big technology corporations. Surveillance capitalism is a remarkably important concept for understanding the underlying incentive structure that is transforming the field of cultural production.

More specifically, on the corruption of journalism or cultural production in general, Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism disrupts what happens inside any institution (including

journalism) that cares for meaning and truth and that maintains codes of conduct and professional constraints. Instead, the transfer of information within such an institutional frame has now largely been overtaken by (distributive) AI systems that are "blind by design," meaning systems that "convey signals according to *a priori* instructions; they do not decipher or evaluate meaning" (Zuboff, 2022; p. 22). Importantly, these instructions are most often based on maximizing engagement metrics and demonstrate what Zuboff calls "radical indifference" to truth (p. 315). This understanding is critical because it helps elucidate the mechanisms that drive the new AI curators of news.

Moreover, Zuboff argues that big platform corporations, such as Alphabet or Meta (owners of YouTube and Facebook, respectively), use these AI systems to control and sell the production of knowledge, and to turn this knowledge into power and profit through microtargeted advertising – the ability to curate and recommend specific (influential) information tailored for individual consumption at scale using AI algorithms. In fact, she argues that surveillance capitalist agents – big platform corporations – extract human experience to control or sell the ability to control the behavior of news consumers. This explains why these algorithms have become so prominent as curators of information in the first place: they have been optimized to harvest user behavior through audience engagement, ultimately to sell to other companies (looking to advertise their products or services) for profit.

As well, platform companies now commonly package and sell the means to 'microtarget' voters in political campaigns, enabling them to theoretically shape individual and collective behavior (Burke & Suderman, 2024). Behavioral influence through political advertising is, of course, not a new phenomenon; however, the way it is now mobilized for effect has changed, as LaChapelle and Tucker point out in an expert brief from the Brennan Center for Justice (2023). As such, Zuboff's work is also used to discuss how the growing industry of behavioral modification has changed the field of cultural production because of distributive AI technology.

Yuval Noah Harari's book *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI* (2024) is also useful as a detailed means to parse how new distributive AI systems have transformed Bourdieu's field of cultural production. Harari explains that surveillance capitalists subscribe to what he calls "the naive view of information" wherein they seemingly believe that by "gathering and processing much more information than individuals can, big networks achieve a better understanding" of the world, as "sufficient quantities of

information leads to truth" (p. 12). However, Harari challenges this notion, arguing that more information does not guarantee that *the truth* becomes evident. Instead, he posits that an increasing amount of accessible information creates new realities that may either be factual or fictitious, emphasizing that the defining characteristic of information is connection rather than accurate representation. Harari's work is particularly relevant to the overarching case study as it builds upon Zuboff's ideas in terms of how platform corporations justify the use of distributive AI technologies that increasingly dominate our information systems. This in turn raises pertinent questions about how such technology affects the democratic health of our information landscape.

Moreover, Harari's work uses historical examples to support his case against the naive view of information. For instance, he breaks down the spread of mis- and disinformation through Facebook's AI algorithms and how they contributed to the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar in 2016[1]. Here, he argues that information has been and can be further weaponized by AI, even unintentionally, to create new intersubjective realities that reinforce existing biases. This example is particularly telling, as it highlights the discrepancies between distributive AI algorithms and a healthy journalistic environment in which truth should be prioritized (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2021). Instead, along with Zuboff's notion of 'radical indifference,' Harari argues that these algorithms are most commonly programmed to prioritize engagement metrics above all else, as was the case with his study of the Rohingya. In addition, he observes that this function operates independently from human decision making (beyond initial database training). In this way, his work highlights how the distributive AI algorithms that increasingly control our information systems can be understood as independent agents that increasingly replace human curators of news within Bourdieu's field of cultural production. This is unprecedented.

[1] Facebook's algorithms significantly influenced the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar in 2016–17. Harari posits that they functioned as "active agents" making "fateful decisions by themselves," actively promoting hate speech through mis- and disinformation (Harari, 2024). To that point Amnesty International found that these algorithms "proactively amplified and promoted content on the Facebook platform which incited violence, hatred, and discrimination against the Rohingya" (Amnesty International, 2022; Harari, 2024) because of their inherent goal to maximize user engagement. Indeed, through experimentation, Facebook's algorithms discovered that "outrage generated engagement" and conspiracy theories rather than moderate or compassionate content. Accordingly, an aid worker in Myanmar in 2017, noted that "if someone posted something hate-filled or inflammatory it would be promoted the most – people saw the vilest content the most… Nobody who was promoting peace or calm was getting seen in the news feed at all" (Amnesty International, 2022). It is quite clear then that Facebook's algorithms incentivized individuals to create and post outrageous and false content because such content was rewarded with greater reach, and thereby greater popularity and income. Ultimately, a UN fact-finding mission concluded in 2018 that Facebook's algorithms had played a "determining role" in the ethnic-cleansing campaign by disseminating hate-filled content (Miles, 2018; Harari, 2024).

Lastly, Michel Foucault's concept of 'regimes of truth,' as explained by Stuart Hall in "The work of representation" (1997), situates the underlying mechanisms of distributive AI systems put forth by Zuboff and Harari into a theoretical framework. This deepens the analysis of information dissemination – which can be thought of as knowledge production – in relation to societal structures of power. Here, Foucault's ideas on discourse, knowledge and power are instructive.

Discourse, in this sense, refers to the different, but structured ways in which meaning is produced, communicated, and legitimized in a given historical period within a particular social formation. It is concerned with who has the power to define meaning, and thus, what counts as truth and how that truth is reinforced (Hall, 1997; p. 44). Foucault suggests that knowledge is never neutral but is always tied to power structures that control its production and distribution: those who produce knowledge obtain the power to form discourses. This suggests that the platform corporations which design and control AI systems exercise unprecedented influence over public perception, not by directly telling people what to believe, but by structuring the flow of information itself. By controlling what knowledge is disseminated through distributive AI systems, big platform corporations can now be seen, through the lens of Foucault, as central actors in shaping discourses and manufacturing truth by "legitimizing" what information counts as true.

Such argumentation points to how big platform companies are constructing a new regime of truth, a type of discourse wherein a society and culture is held hostage as it "accepts and makes function as true" the crafted truths of those who control knowledge and power (Hall, 1997; p. 49; Foucault, 1980; p. 131).

In traditional journalism, human oversight (editorialization) played a central role in validating knowledge. However, as Zuboff and Harari point out, platforms now operate under a different logic where the notion of truth seems not to be determined by factual verification, but by engagement metrics. As such, platform-owned distributive AI systems can be understood as a controlling force for determining which narratives gain attention, thus establishing a new kind of regime of truth in which disinformation might achieve legitimacy merely by being shared. Yet, paradoxically, while these corporations hold unprecedented power over public discourse, they do not always fully understand how, why, or what their algorithms promote (Harari, 2024). This lack of accountability in knowledge, power, and truth production marks a fundamental shift in our

news environment, one that not only destabilizes traditional forms of knowledge dissemination but also might well erode any notion of a shared reality necessary for large scale societies to effectively function (Harari, 2024).

Ultimately, Zuboff (2019; 2022) and Harari (2024) elucidate the contemporary structures and mechanisms that increasingly permeate the media environment, while Foucault's work (Hall, 1997; Foucault, 1980) helps explain the significance of this in terms of power relations. As a note, for ease of conceptualization, Zuboff and Harari's understanding of the mechanisms that govern distributive AI algorithms, and thus, online cultural production, is often referred to in this thesis as 'platform dynamics.' It is a term that has increasing relevance to current and future analyses of the effect of burgeoning AI technologies' effects on media, particularly those that touch the field of journalism.

In conclusion, these theories incorporate seminal concepts that are due to be reconsidered in light of the contemporary technologically defined information landscape. At the heart of it all is a fraught concept of 'truth" that is being redefined before our eyes by a new paradigm based on the possibilities of burgeoning AI systems and their enabling of surveillance capitalism. In this respect, the choice to examine in detail the communicative aspects of generative- and distributive AI during a presidential election campaign – the beating heart of the democratic process that gives legitimacy to a superpower – is not just an interesting intellectual exercise. It is evidence of deep and possibly malevolent forces at work in the body politic.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

This thesis-creation project employs a multimodal approach to critical discourse analysis (MCDA) to examine the creation, circulation, consumption, and, in turn, the implications of AI-generated visual disinformation for our political, journalistic and democratic landscapes. In addition, an AI generated 'fake news report' video that employs multiple modes of generative AI tools and functions as a proof-of-concept creation has been created.

Through three examples that form a case study centered on the 2024 US election that examine AI generated visuals produced by political campaigns; pseudo-journalists; and ordinary social media users, this methodology outlines the specific ways used to analyze and understand how a synergistic relationship between generative and distributive AI systems incentivizes the creation and spread of AI generated visual disinformation at different orders of influence. Using MCDA, each of these examples investigates specific instances of such visual disinformation to argue that our current media environment increasingly resembles hyperreality that is eroding news consumers' shared sense of reality or, conversely, how such disinformation may be leading to an emergent regime of truth that almost certainly is distorting news consumers' shared sense of reality.

This approach situates semiotic analysis within a broader framework of discourse analysis, recognizing that meaning is constructed not only through language but also through the visual representations embedded in imagery. As Machin and Mayr (2023) note in *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction*, "in practice this means we can explore the way that individual elements in images, such as objects and settings, can signify discourses in ways that might not be obvious at an initial viewing" (p. 53). Here, the combined scholarship of Barthes, Sontag, Hall, Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Zuboff, Harari, Foucault and others provide a seminal theoretical foundation necessary to analyze each of the three examples through MCDA.

Finally, the research-creation component – a fabricated AI-generated political video (or simply, 'fake news report' video) – serves as both a methodological experiment and proof-of-concept, illustrating the ease with which readily available and commercial generative AI technology can be used and employed to construct and promote visual disinformation, and thus form persuasive political narratives.

MCDA is used as a methodological approach to examine how semiotic elements of AI-generated visuals and the discourses that they operate within and often generate, construct and reinforce power relations and social realities. As Machin and Mayr explain, “MCDA is concerned with drawing out the kinds of ideas embedded in instances of communication which somehow serve to perpetuate, legitimize, or 'naturalize' actions, processes, or forms of social relations that may create inequality or injustice in the world” (p. 29). Therefore, MCDA is used to analyze these three examples of AI-generated and distributed material because, as well as providing the organizational foundation for which pertinent scholarship can be employed for specific visual analyses, it also allows for a systematic examination of the discursive formation in which such visuals exist and even help create.

More specifically, MCDA is employed as a tool for qualitative analysis. Together, the three examples selected for this study contain a trajectory of nodes that can be plotted: from the elite, first-order entities behind political campaign war rooms in the first example; to second-order, pseudo-journalists in the second; and finally to third-order, ordinary social media users in the third. This permits the construction of a comprehensive illustration of how three different levels of influence, or three different orders of agents, (distinguished here by their held capitals), synergistically leverage generative and distributive AI systems to create and effectively propagate effective visual disinformation. The objective is to first understand how and why the output of generative and distributive AI systems is manifesting itself as disinformation at different orders of influence, and then, importantly, to employ that understanding to theorize how the field of cultural production is being transformed at different levels of influence exactly because of this interplay between generative and distributive AI systems.

Through MCDA, the still and moving images chosen are analyzed in two stages using established structuralist and post-structuralist methods; that is, through semiological interpretation and discourse analysis. Although these two methods of analysis may be intertwined, and collectively fall under MCDA, it is useful to distinguish between the two to more clearly outline the analytical structure of the three examples and the case study of which they are composite parts. Accordingly, in terms of semiotics, the various images are analyzed in terms of the constructed meaning they produce for their audience. In terms of discourse analysis, these meanings, as well as the context in which they are presented, are analyzed in terms of what

they reveal more broadly for the rapidly evolving field of cultural production, and ultimately, how they affect news consumers' shared sense of reality.

Approaching the case study

The first example looks into how Donald Trump's 2024 presidential campaign leveraged existing cultural iconography into AI-generated visuals to shape political narratives and potentially distort or erode shared reality.[2] As the first node in a broader trajectory that traces AI-generated disinformation across different levels of influence, this example focuses on how elite entities, or capital-wealthy cultural producers – political actors – strategically employed AI systems to engineer and manipulate public discourse. Specifically, using MCDA, manipulated images of Taylor Swift and her fans are examined to show how Trump used the output of generative AI models propagated through distributive AI systems to tap into a cultural force and falsely claim support for his campaign. The example focuses on two key AI-generated images to illustrate the broader disinformation strategies at play.

The first image was posted by Trump on his social media platform, Truth Social, and features various AI-generated images of Taylor Swift and seemingly some fans, wearing Trump T-shirts (Vigdor, 2024). A semiotic analysis is applied using Barthes' concepts of pictorial denotation, connotation, and *punctum*. This stage helps form an understanding of how such images operate at multiple levels of meaning production.

In addition, part of this stage includes analyzing the images in relation to Hall's theory of representation and Sontag's proposition that images are a grammar and ethics of seeing. The point of semiotic analysis here is to understand how specific AI-generated images function as mechanisms for constructing political reality and reinforcing ideological positions, and as such, how they shape audiences' intersubjective realities.

In the second stage, the images are analyzed discursively. This entails examining the significance of the semiotic meanings more broadly, drawing from the sentiment of commenters to the post and the context in which they circulated, and situating this in pertinent scholarship.

[2] This thesis focuses on Donald Trump's campaign rather than Kamala Harris's because, beyond the fact that he ultimately won the election, investigative reporting has provided significantly more evidence of his campaign's use of AI-generated disinformation, making it a more robust case study for this thesis.

Zuboff and Harari's critique of engagement-driven algorithms is employed at this stage and further situated within Foucault's theory pertaining to discursive formations.

The second part of this example revolves around Trump's baseless claim that Kamala Harris used AI to manipulate images of her rally crowd sizes (Chatterjee, 2024). This example is used to reveal a different mode of AI disinformation: not the creation and spread of deepfakes, but the weaponization of AI's presence in the media landscape to delegitimize authentic visual content already in circulation. Accordingly, while this image is analyzed semiotically, it is more pertinently used to examine the discursive context in which it circulated.

These two examples are also mobilized to later discuss how Trump's campaign weaponized distributive AI technologies to optimize the circulation and impact of campaign advertising. Using Zuboff's framework of surveillance capitalism, it explores the political implications of AI-powered microtargeted advertising that Trump's campaign employed to engage with specific voter segments. From the standpoint of discourse analysis, it examines Trump's use of social media platforms as a new and strategic channel of communication used for political messaging.

As the first example contributing to a three-part case study, Trump's campaign serves as a starting point for understanding the stratified diffusion of AI-generated disinformation. It establishes how elite political actors with a wealth of capitals, utilize AI to inform intersubjective, shared reality, and thus shape political narratives.

As the second node in the trajectory of AI-driven disinformation, the second example examines how second-order actors, 'pseudo-journalists,' employ generative and distributive AI technologies to position themselves as alternative sources of news. It does so by investigating a specific pseudo-journalist, Patrick Christopher Kohls, and exploring the way in which he constructed, circulated, and profited from a campaign parody video of Kamala Harris that uses a cloned AI-generated voice of hers to match existing, real visuals of campaign moments. This example is analyzed to examine the interplay between audio and visuals, and how the resulting video functions as visual disinformation through reality distortion.

Accordingly, using MCDA, the video is analyzed semiotically, using Barthes, Sontag, and Hall's theoretical conceptualizations to understand potential produced meanings. As a note, because this example is a video – moving pictures as opposed to a single frame – this case

examines a few selected but representative frames for semiotic analysis. More broadly, it seeks to reveal how the entire video produces a certain kind of politically convenient meaning for its viewers. In terms of discursive impact, it then explores the motivations that incentivized its creation, the strategies employed to legitimize it, and the broader platform dynamics that facilitated its spread. The concepts of Bourdieu, Zuboff and Harari are used to articulate this aspect of this contribution.

Semiotically, the nature of the campaign parody video, which utilizes AI-generated audio matched to existing, authentic visuals, falls under the MCDA framework designated for texts "where linguistic and visual representations clearly differ" (Machin and Mayr, 2023, p. 147). Since the primary analytical focus here is not verbal features like pitch or tension, MCDA is used for this example to analyze and address this discordant aspect of the video. Accordingly, this case compares and analyzes the authentic visual context of the video (which foregrounds real actions or events) against its fabricated verbal content (the AI-generated speech). In this way, the analysis seeks to articulate how Kohls' video may have succeeded in achieving a constructed and distorted political reality by examining the likely intentionally applied semiotic opposition between the genuine imagery and the spurious message. As for discourse, this case centrally utilizes Bourdieu's theory of fields and capitals to unpack and understand the AI-driven transformative effect on cultural production of pseudo-journalists such as Kohls. It then explores the discursive formation in which Kohls operates, looking mainly at the inventive structure of current platform dynamics (as outlined by Zuboff and Harari) that encourage the creation of such manipulated videographic objects.

Ultimately, this second case builds on the first by elucidating how AI-driven disinformation is not confined to elite-controlled campaigns but is increasingly decentralized, moving into the hands of independent cultural producers. Through MCDA, it raises pertinent questions about the ethical boundaries of such 'journalism' and how the field of cultural production is transforming to increasingly favor a decentralized output of disinformation and displacing traditional factual information, as individuals without allegiance to traditional journalistic ethics use AI technologies to redefine cultural production.

The third example examines the phenomenon and significance of AI slop as the final node in the trajectory of AI-generated disinformation at different orders of influence. AI slop is

commonly defined as low-effort, AI-generated visual content that saturates social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X (Roose et al., 2024). Using MCDA, this case analyzes the production and circulation of two examples of AI slop, created and shared by everyday social media users, by exploring both their semiotically produced meanings, the underlying incentive structures that drive their production, and what this signifies for the changing field of cultural production, especially in its political manifestations.

More specifically, this case uses the two-stage MCDA process to examine how AI slop was used to propagate certain constructed political narratives (Jingnan, 2024). First, the AI-generated images are analyzed through the semiotic framework of Barthes, Sontag and Hall, as well as pertinent findings from empirical studies on visual memory to further bolster the understanding of how these two images, as core examples of the proliferation of AI slop, may be shaping intersubjective, shared reality. As for discourse, the significance of produced meanings carried by these AI-generated images are examined through dissecting accompanying captions, the sentiment of those who commented on the post and, more generally, the context in which these kinds of posts circulate in order to illuminate the broader discourse and its objectives. This discursive analysis draws on the work of Zuboff, Harari and Foucault.

To summarize these three examples in order to achieve an overview of their combined impact:

- The first analyses the Trump campaign's strategic use of engineered AI-generated visual disinformation to craft and inform a shared reality and bolster effective political messaging.
- The second explores the role and motivations of pseudo-journalists who leverage these same AI systems for similar disinformation purposes.
- The third example investigates how the decentralized, emergent phenomenon of ordinary users who, perhaps unknowingly, participate in the simulation of reality and, in effect, propagate potential disinformation with ease at an unprecedented scale.

In this manner, while each of the three examples focuses on different modes of AI-distributed and AI-generated disinformation, together they function as three parts of an articulated overarching case study that points to how the synergistic relationship between generative and distributive AI systems is reshaping the online news environment during a time of

high-stakes political tension and helping to construct a discourse that, in turn, supports a developing regime of truth. This happens within the field of cultural production as it pertains to the political moment, and reveals how the intersubjective, shared reality of news consumers at different levels of influence is affected.

Creation Project: Fake News Report Video

Finally, this thesis-creation project features a short, politically charged video, crafted to represent a 'fake news report,' entirely made using entirely generative AI systems. The intent is to demonstrate the capabilities of the generative AI systems that are now widely available. This video creation was produced using off-the-shelf consumer programs and free tools to generate a script, voice, images, and video as well as a musical underscore.

Specifically, the script was generated using High-Flyer's open-source large language model DeepSeek, a free application available to use by anyone, requiring simple access to the DeepSeek website. It requires the user to open a free account and requires no software download (Deepseek, n.d.). The following passage is the initial prompt used to generate this script:

> *"Create a short script using only voiceover, and not any description of visuals, around 200-250 words, or about one-minute in length. The script is for a 'fake news report' video, an example of disinformation. It should be about Donald Trump and his staged competence framed as statesmanship to produce positive reevaluation. It should leave American audiences with a more positive view of him."*

After a few iterations of refinement using the DeepSeek application, the model generated the following script, which has been used for the 'fake news report' video:

> "*Confirmed reports reveal that President Donald Trump met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Geneva last month. The discussion, initiated through backchannels, focused exclusively on brokering a renewal of the Black Sea Grain Initiative. Sources indicate Mr. Trump leveraged his personal rapport with Putin to secure a temporary agreement, ensuring the safe passage of Ukrainian grain for an additional 120 days. This interim deal was struck during a period when official diplomatic efforts had completely stalled. The current administration has acknowledged the grain corridor's extension but has not commented on the meeting, referring to it as "informal diplomacy." However,*

shipping records confirm a significant increase in departures from Odessa following the encounter, directly impacting global food prices."

The voiceover was generated using the free AI voice generator, Fish Audio which allows users to replicate the voice of a large catalog of user-trained voice models of many public figures (Fish Audio, n.d.). In this case, the voice of CNN anchor Anderson Cooper was used to "read" the script, which was then used as the voiceover to the 'fake news report.' Fish Audio is available to use on the website *Fish.audio*, requiring only the creation of a free account using an email address.

To generate images for the 'fake news report,' the website *Yupp.ai* has been employed (Yupp, n.d.). The website provides free access to a daily-limited amount of AI image-generation from a catalog of models, including flagship models such as OpenAI's "GPT image 1," X's "Grok 2 Image Generation," as well as Google's "Gemini 2.5 Flash Image (Nano Banana)" (Yupp, n.d.). After testing various models on the website, the lesser-known model "Seedream 4.0 Max" was deployed because of its ability to create the most realistic looking images to suit the purposes of the constructed reality at hand. To generate these images, prompts such as "Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin shaking hands on a tarmac surrounded by personnel" were provided to the model. The time per generation averaged five to ten seconds per still image. To give some perspective on the feasibility of using *Yupp.ai* as a free AI image generator, all the images that have been used in the fake news report were generated using the daily number of credits allotted to free accounts.

Moreover, three of these generated images were transformed into moving images using the application and website *Pixverse.ai*, deploying its "V5" image-to-video model (Pixverse, n.d.). Following the daily allowed free video generations, only three of the initial generated images were selected for this conversion into video. While it would not have been an issue to transform more of the AI-generated images into video over the span of a few more days, or even by simply using different email addresses to create new accounts on the same day, the point of this 'fake news report' video is to demonstrate the ease with which effective AI-generated disinformation can be created. The intent behind generating just three moving images is to keep the focus on feasibility and ease-of-creation.

The free-to-use application Suno, accessed through the website Suno.ai, has also been employed to create a news broadcast audio track (Suno, n.d.).

Lastly, all the AI-generations – the script, voiceover, visuals, and background music -- were inserted into the free editing software Davinci Resolve from BlackMagic Design (n.d.). The material was then compiled, or edited, into a coherent one-minute fake news report, effectively demonstrating how cheap and easy it is to produce AI-generated disinformation. In this manner, the implications of the democratized capabilities of this commercial technology are made manifest and explicit. No one should be left in the dark about how accessible and powerful generative AI tools have become. The discussion section of the thesis delves into a more detailed reflection on the creation of this fake news report and the implications for political campaigning and, indeed, for online mediated information in general.

Chapter 4: Case study

Three Orders of AI-Enabled Visual Disinformation in Cultural Production

This case study presents three examples that trace a trajectory of AI-enabled visual disinformation across distinct orders of cultural production during the 2024 United States presidential election campaign. Analyzed through MCDA, each example examines how generative and distributive AI systems are leveraged at different levels of cultural production – each defined by their held capitals – to distort news consumers' reality and, more generally, manipulate public discourse.

Example 1 – The First-Order AI-Powered War Room

The first example examines how Donald Trump's 2024 presidential campaign, as a first-order elite entity of cultural production, leveraged generative and distributive AI systems in an effort to shape political narratives by distorting reality. As the first node in a broader trajectory that traces AI-generated disinformation across different levels of influence, this example focuses on how capital-wealthy cultural producers – political actors – strategically employ these AI systems to engineer and manipulate public discourse. To do so, it analyses two examples of AI-enabled visual disinformation propagated by Trump himself.

Of particular interest is the way Trump and his support team used social media platforms to propagate politically persuasive generative AI images – one of which is the first example in this case. To understand its significance, this example is semiotically and discursively analyzed using MCDA. The second image example, however, is not in fact an AI-generated image, but a real one that is used here to reveal a different mode of AI disinformation: the use of AI deepfakes to cast doubt on inconvenient but real visual evidence.

On 18 August 2024 Donald Trump uploaded to Truth Social a post featuring a number of separate images – all to do with the mega pop star, Taylor Swift – that together seemed to document a real campaign moment (see figure 2). One image features Swift posing in Uncle-Sam fashion, mirroring James Montgomery Flagg's famous wartime recruitment poster (Flagg, 1917). The other images all depict various young women in matching "Swifties for Trump" T-shirts. The post was captioned by Trump with the words "I accept!" (@realDonaldTrump, 2024a).

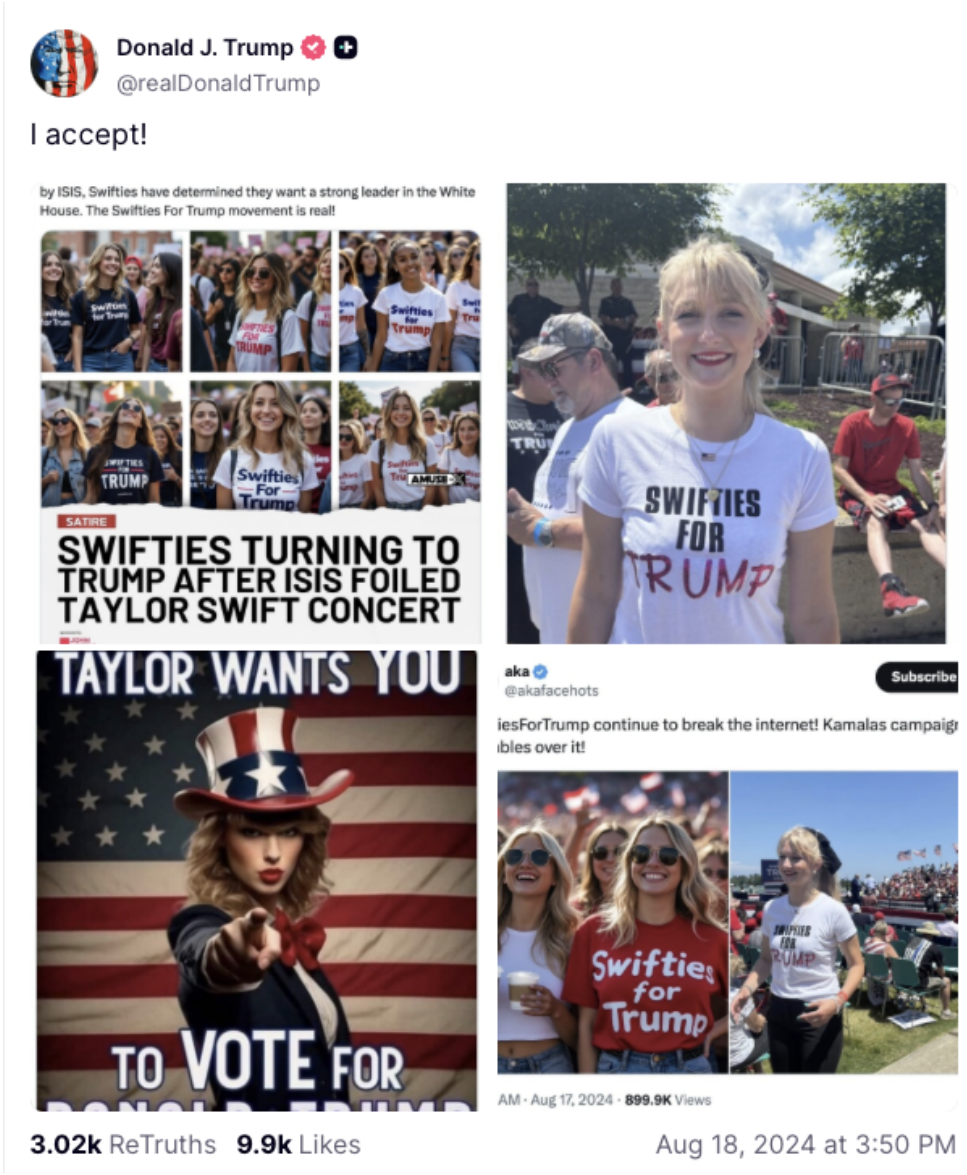

Figure 2: A post on Truth Social featuring various images of Swift in Uncle Sam attire and her fans wearing "Swifties for Trump" T-shirts, with the caption "I accept!", posted by Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) on August 18, 2024.

While Trump presented these images without alluding to their pedigree, the CBS News Confirmed team, along with various other news outlets, quickly found that most were AI-generated. They did so based on visual cues, such as distortions in one woman's teeth, and a belt that had no buckle (Tarrant, 2024). Swift also later discredited the post on Instagram, endorsing instead democratic candidate Kamala Harris (Swift [@taylorswift], 2024). The original creator of one of the images – user @amuse, on X – also confirmed that these images were AI-generated.

Notably, this user, "@amuse" is known as a right-wing X account linked to the John Milton Freedom Foundation, a small Texas nonprofit that specializes in "engagement bait", and whose "stated goal is to raise $2-million from major donors to award $100,000 grants to a list of "fellows" made up of rightwing media influencers" (Robins-Early, 2024). As such, the images, reposted by Trump, were originally generated, likely for the political purpose of solidifying a conservative narrative on social media. Strategically speaking, this is unsurprising given that 53 per cent of U.S. adults are fans of Swift, and moreover, that the majority of these fans consider themselves Democrat leaning (Dellatto, 2023).

While Trump's post initially received a lot of coverage, even gaining virality and appearing in over 200 news articles (Ground News, 2024a), the following semiotic analysis attempts to discern how it may have persuaded these majority-Democrat followers of Swift through a distortion of reality.

Viewed at the denotative level, Trump's "I accept!" post offers what appears to be a straightforward photographic dossier of a campaign moment. At a glance, a few motifs stand out: first, Taylor Swift herself; second, young women wearing shirts that read "Swifties for Trump;" and third, the recurring, familiar campaign décor of stars-and-stripes bunting, flag lines, crowd barriers, and so forth. Although these images were AI-generated, they are photorealistic and thus appear as a realistic depiction of an actual event. Indeed, except for the image of Swift herself, which stands out as overly cinematic,[3] the images appear as if they were captured on a smartphone in bright outdoor conditions. All subjects carry natural expressions; there are no obvious malformations expected in AI-generated limbs; and the backgrounds all seem natural with no obvious blemishes.[4] Put differently, nothing about these images seemingly conveys that they are AI-generated, unless the viewer is familiar with the telling cinematic style of the AI-generated image of Swift herself which is far from given. In fact, a consumer-focused study from Attest found that only a quarter of US-based consumers correctly identify AI images over real images in a commercial setting where images have a professionally lit, cinematic "look" (Attest, 2024). Moreover, considering the low level of scrutiny the average viewer likely directs to a post

[3] The "cinematic" look is considered a tell-tale sign of AI-generation. However, as generative AI models have further developed, as of 2026, this is no longer the case.

[4] As a note, this is telling of the speed at which these generative AI models are advancing. For example, the printed slogans that wrinkle very realistically on the cotton T-shirts that are depicted in these images would be a given tell that the images were not AI images in previous years: During most of 2024, these models struggled to generate any form of coherent text, let alone integrate it into wrinkled fabric.

they casually encounter on an online social media platform such as Truth Social, these images likely passed as real photographs for the scrolling audience. That means they passed for what Barthes describes as the trace of what "has been there" (Barthes, 1981, p. 76), or that they stood out as proof that these scenes actually played out.

Therefore, at the denotative level, these images likely distorted some viewers' sense of reality by providing proof where none exists. For instance, the presence of Swift in a classic and ubiquitous patriotic costume literally provides false visual evidence that the singer has dressed up as Uncle Sam to position herself in support of Trump's campaign. And in case the viewer did not get the message, the image features a caption: "TAYLOR WANTS YOU TO VOTE FOR DONALD TRUMP" (Trump, [@realDonaldTrump], 2024) that brazenly supports its false visual 'evidence.' The other images that all feature different young women in coordinated T-shirts have a similar denotative effect. They inform the viewer in a first-order manner that an organized "Swifties for Trump" fan rally really took place.

Denotatively, there is also something to be said about the style and detail of these images. For instance, all of the environmental cues — the objects in the background, such as the metal barricade typical of concert security, the lawn scene dotted with grand-stand seating, or even the shallow depth of field appearance of some of the images, often associated with professional journalistic photography – anchor the supposed fan endorsement in recognizable spaces, or in a reality beyond our immediate surroundings (Sontag, 1977). While each of these denotative signifiers may not be persuasive when viewed individually, together they holistically provide visual proof that a live rally took place, was accredited on social media, and ultimately, that the pop star's fan base turned out in support for Trump.

Such denotative proof is why these images, even before audience interpretation, matter in political communication and, to a certain extent, why AI-generated images are impactful for any news consumers' sense of reality. Indeed, an endorsement that has been photographed such as this, rather than merely reported in a written story, may neutralize doubt of the false reality conveyed because, as Sontag argues: "something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it" (Sontag, 1977; p. 3). For the undecided "Swifty" voters who encounter the post, these images thus provide *false* 'proof' that their peers support Trump.

Nevertheless, Barthes argues that it is at the connotative, second-order level of signification that such images begin to produce meaning for their audience. This is when the

viewer begins to interpret a given image based on their general beliefs, values, culture, societal norms, and so forth (1977). To Barthes, it is at this connotative level that images are at their most persuasive.

Because the images function as documentation of real depicted events, they prompt a connotative reading of certain inferences worth considering. One such inference is that there exists a crossover demographic between Swift fandom and MAGA politics, and moreover, that it is prominent enough to warrant photographic media coverage. For the average Swift fan who encounters this image, they see their peers – other 'Swifties' – represented as Trump supporters. This is clear from the textual references, "Swifties for Trump" as well as Swift herself wanting "YOU" to "VOTE FOR TRUMP!" Considering that Swift fans tend to be Democrat-leaning (Dellatto, 2023), these associations may be a persuasive tactic in themselves in terms of how they challenge the associations Swift fans already may have of Trump. It certainly stands in contrast to how Trump is presented in more liberal legacy media. The represented peers also appear to be happy, smiling merrily at the camera, which may invoke the sense for these viewers that supporting Trump might provide a sense of belonging. To that point, social-identity research has shown that when one's fandom group, one's "crowd," aligns with a certain political camp the scales are then tipped towards that camp for the undecided voter (Devine, 2015). Also, there is something to be said about the fact that Trump himself does not actually appear in any of these images, yet his presence still is felt through their context. Here, Trump's absence-in-presence may work on a persuasive level, aligning sceptics to his cause, but without neutralizing any potential feelings of grievance that Swift's fandom potentially feels towards him when they see him.

Another example of how these images may be connotatively politically persuasive for this demographic is how Swift's Uncle Sam costume carries with it a deeply embedded cultural meaning for US audiences. The reference here, to James Montgomery Flagg's 1917 "I WANT YOU" poster (Flagg, 1917), is intentionally unmistakable. In fact, it is among the most recognizable icons of U.S. patriotism, and alludes to themes around wartime unity, duty, and mass mobilization. Historically, the poster has functioned as a call to action for the US population to fight for the common good (Hansen, 2015). Mirroring this function, the image of Swift similarly represents a call to action, and a very specific one – that Swift "WANTS YOU TO VOTE FOR DONALD TRUMP!" This representation may well raise notions of patriotism

and instill the idea that voting for Trump is a duty one must act upon for the common good. Hall elucidates the significance of such a representation, arguing that meaning derived from an image is a production that is "never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall, 1989; p. 68). In other words, the meaning of this image is not fixed in the photograph itself but is produced through the interpretive lens of cultural symbolism, the costume, gesture, and slogan all working within their own cultural frameworks. The image gains its persuasive power precisely because it invites these interpretations, allowing its political message to take shape in the act of viewing. As well, by outfitting a highly popular and self-acclaimed feminist figure such as Swift (Norwood, 2016) in the uniform of early-twentieth-century masculine nationalism, the image may even connotatively signify that it is acceptable to vote for an arguably sexist political figure such as Trump. In this way, connotatively, the image serves to bridge two ideological codes that usually pull in opposite directions.

Examining the persuasive semiotic properties of this image further, a single element can be seen to stand out as its *punctum:* the index finger of Swift herself, thrust straight at the viewer, mirroring Flagg's Uncle Sam posture. Although, as Barthes (1977) argues, the punctum of an image varies depending on the individual spectator as an involuntary detail that "pricks" the viewer, capturing their attention, this gesture is perhaps so iconic and so unexpected to be seen from a twenty-first-century pop star, that it is pertinent to unpack as a constructed punctum. Indeed, as a spectator, one feels pointed at before one has time to think. As well, because spectators of this image are likely to encounter it on social media, scrolling past it without much context, in that moment, this punctum may function to ensure the image is embedded in the mind of the viewer. Accordingly, the connotative meaning that supporting Trump is a patriotic duty may then be conveyed quite effectively even when the image is only viewed in passing.

In this way, Trump's post exemplifies how he and his team effectively made use of a combination of generative and distributive AI systems to manufacture evidence where none exists in order to create a certain convenient narrative. The AI-generated images provide false 'proof' that are conveniently loaded with connotative political meaning while the distributive AI systems that power social media platforms like Truth Social provide a direct link to potential voters for Trump to spread his false message. For the unassuming spectator, the combination of these AI technologies has thus enabled Trump to easily and *directly* promote a false sense of reality – one in which the 'Swifty' identity is yoked to patriotic duty.

Of course, this is not axiomatic. Some spectators likely identified these images as AI-generated and then disregarded them, thus sidestepping their intended political meaning. However, as empirically based research shows, even overtly doctored images, when the spectator knows an image is fake, still can skew how they remember depicted events (Mills, 2021). Still, disregarding that fact for now,[5] the mere presence and growing ubiquity of AI-generated images such as these have allowed for another very effective AI-driven political disinformation tactic. And it is one that Trump has utilized time and time again and of which the aim is to "smear political rivals and muddy the informational waters" (Oremus, 2024).

The second part of this first example explores how the tactic referred to as the 'liar's dividend' by legal experts may be leading to the distortion of any notion of shared reality in the online news environment (Goldstein & Lohn, 2024). Specifically, this example revolves around Trump's baseless claim that Kamala Harris used generative AI models to create an image of her own rally crowd sizes on the campaign trail in August 2024 (Chatterjee, 2024). Accordingly, in contrast to the fabricated images of Swift and "Swifites for Trump", this example demonstrates a different mode of AI disinformation: not the creation of fake images meant to disinform, but the weaponization of AI's presence in the media landscape to delegitimize authentic visuals.

The image in question (see figure 3) is a real press photograph, featuring thousands of supporters massed behind a security cordon with a Harris campaign jet looming on the tarmac in the background. It initially circulated on various mainstream media outlets but was then quickly picked up by Trump himself when he reposted it to Truth Social with the caption, "Look, we caught her with a fake 'crowd.' There was nobody there!" (Superville, 2024). However, this was a false statement. As Reuters' Fact Check made clear, the image matched the "same scene taken by Reuters and other media sources" and was even scrutinized by a forensic analyst, concluding that it was "unaltered" (Reuters Fact Check, 2024). This also points to the fact that it is doubtful that Trump even believed the image was indeed AI-generated, making it clear that he mobilized it for disinformation purposes.

[5] The following chapter (findings and conclusion) explores and discusses the significance of this finding more deeply: How overtly doctored images fester in the minds of audiences by affecting working memory.

Figure 3: A post on Truth Social featuring an image of a crowd at a Kamala Harris campaign rally, with the caption “Look, we caught her with a fake ‘crowd.’ There was nobody there!”, posted by Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) on August 11, 2024.

To understand the significance of the accusation that this image was AI-generated, it is important to first consider its semiotic properties, because had this image not been labelled as AI, it would be politically persuasive in favor of the Harris campaign.

Denotatively, the image functions as an ordinary press photograph of a moment on the campaign trail and in that regard serves as evidence that a Harris rally occurred and drew a sizable crowd. Connotatively, this fact frames Harris as a candidate who has considerable support, enough, at least to draw a large crowd at an airport campaign stop. Politically speaking, such photographic meanings reflect Harris in a favorable light, which, at the time, was an optic that clashed with Trump's narrative of her alleged unpopularity. It is worth noting that Trump seemed to have struggled to attract large crowds to his own rallies, which quickly became a point of attack from Democrats (Norton, 2024; Bickerton, 2024). Therefore, it is likely that Trump accused the Harris campaign of doctoring the image to downplay and discredit the favorable attention that was accruing to the Harris campaign. In other words, by labelling this image as an AI-generation, Trump sought to dismantle the effectiveness of the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in a legitimate image.

As to the effectiveness of Trump's accusation, *Le Monde* reported that Trump's supporters rallied behind the claim (Audureau, 2024). One even declared that "Kamala Harris is so unpopular that they have to use AI to fake crowd sizes on TV for her rallies" in a post on X viewed over 100-thousand times (@BGatesIsaPsycho, 2024). As well, the tactic aligns with former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon's media strategy to "flood the zone with shit," not to establish the truth, but to make truth itself unstable and contested (Illing, 2020).

As such, this example reveals how the interplay between generative and distributive AI systems are leveraged by elite cultural producers to disinform for political purposes. Whereas the Harris crowd-size claim sought to delegitimize a real image, Trump's AI-generated Swift post sought to legitimize a false reality. This first example thus clarifies how Trump used multiple modes of AI-enabled disinformation during the 2024 US election campaign period. Put differently, while Trump sought to disinform his audience on social media with false but effectively realistic depiction of unreal events, he also weaponized the very presence of AI in the information landscape to dismiss an inconvenient reality as false.

Moreover, nor was the attack on Harris' campaign photos limited to direct intervention by the Trump campaign. Second-order cultural producers also piled on

Example 2: Fake Narratives and AI-Powered Pseudo-Journalism

The second example shifts from examining the visual disinformation strategies of elite political establishments, operated by first-order cultural producers with a wealth of capitals, to investigating how second-order cultural producers – in this case, a so-called 'pseudo-journalist' – leverage the novel opportunities afforded by the synergistic relationship between generative and distributive AI systems. Indeed, AI systems were used to enable a particular pseudo-journalist, Christopher Partick Kohls (also known online as Mr. Reagan), to create and propagate effective audiovisual disinformation, which he then posted to social media with the intention of distorting and disrupting news consumers' sense of reality and generating revenue. In particular, Kohls created an AI-enabled production, a video that went viral on YouTube.

The Kohls video offers an effective example of how a particular production strategy that is now unprecedentedly available to second-order cultural producers can engage public sentiment. Accordingly, examining the video through a semiological filter permits us to explore how platform dynamics and the ways that symbolic capital can now be acquired have not only ushered in novel opportunities for second-order cultural producers to produce disinformation, but have structurally incentivized it through financial gain. As such, the examination of Kohls' content illuminates incentive structures of concern that are embedded in current surveillance capitalist platform dynamics and how they may be powering the production of pseudo-journalistic visual disinformation.

Kohls is a California-based conservative political commentator and self-acclaimed journalist, whose work primarily appears on YouTube on which he has 400,000 subscribers (Kohls, 2025a). And while Kohls also claims to be a political satirist, he has the trappings of a pseudo-journalist, someone who acts like a credible journalist, but who is not limited by the ethical and moral obligations of the craft, including a basic adherence to reporting facts. His public *Xing.com* profile, a professional social networking platform, states that Kohls has no formal education or training in journalism, nor any professional newsroom experience. Instead, his profile lists a background in screenwriting, acting, and voice work in the entertainment industry (Kohls, 2025b). Nevertheless, he launched the 'Mr Reagan' YouTube channel in May 2018, branding it as a platform for political satire (Kohls, 2025c). Yet, most of his content consists of polemical opinionated political commentary, analysis, and importantly, partisan truth claims. In this way, he presents himself as a journalistic authority, despite the absence of

conventional journalistic credentials. This positions him as a textbook example of a pseudo-journalist: an individual who occupies the contemporary field of cultural production without adhering to traditional journalistic ethics.

Moreover, beyond YouTube, Kohls' X profile extends this persona, where he engages directly with political discourse and amplifies his video productions to a wider audience through his 130,000 X followers (Kohls, 2025d). It is in this context that, during the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign, Kohls published the video central to this example.

The video was published on YouTube in July 2024 and quickly gained virality, garnering over 450-thousand views with the title ‘Kamala Harris Ad PARODY’ (Kohls [@Mr Reagan], 2024a). Visually, it features material Kohls sourced from a different video – an original political advertisement – which was published to Harris’ own YouTube channel (Harris [@KamalaHarris], 2024). The original ad features real moments from a campaign rally. Importantly, while Kohls’ video largely mirrors the original in terms of its visuals, his edited version features an AI-generated voice-over track of Harris. Somewhat ironically, the Kohls video gained much more traction than the original, even ‘going viral’ and attracting national media coverage from news outlets such as Politico, Fox News, CBS News, and others (see Ground News, 2024b). The mainstream reporting focused mainly on Kohls’ use of generative AI.

Accordingly, the following semiotic analysis is brief with respect to visual elements, focusing instead on how the AI-enabled marriage of audio and visual meaning functions as persuasive and reality-distorting political content, or, as effective disinformation.

Because both versions of the video feature similar visuals, they produce similar meanings at the denotative level. In both cases, Harris is depicted in front of a podium, speaking to a large crowd of seemingly attentive, passionate supporters. In other scenes, these supporters cheer for her and wave posters featuring the printed word, “KAMALA.” Other scenes depict Harris merrily mingling with her supporters and feature close-ups of rally attendees' faces as they smile and cheer (See Figure 4). Denotatively, the visuals in both videos thus simply communicate that Harris held a well-attended rally which was received with cheers by her supporters. It suggests a documented event in which people showed up and Harris energized people who believe she would be the best person to vote for.

Figure 4: Frames from "Kamala Harris Ad Parody," a video published to YouTube on the @MrReagan channel, produced by Christopher Patrick Kohls, depicting a real campaign rally and superimposed AI-generated audio with matching subtitles, July 2024.

Although these visuals are authentic – they are not AI-generated – as Hall (1997) reminds us, visual representations are not simply the reflection of neutral reality, but a practice that

produces meaning and directs how viewers interpret the world (p. 28**)**. Likewise, Sontag (1977) argues that images always frame and constrain our worldview, presenting particular versions of reality while excluding others. As such, this representation of Harris frames reality in a certain way that produces political meaning at the connotative level – the subject can be seen as warm, engaging, and inclusive – especially when a spectator begins to interpret the image based on their subjective worldview. Even at the denotative level, it is a meaning that frames Harris in a positive light, or as a highly supported, credible and electable leader simply by representing the human attributes of joy and hope, reflected in the responses from her supporters.

This is important to note because Kohls' edited version of the video completely reframes the original. Indeed, the edited video "flips" the connotative meaning. As Machin & Mayr (2023) note, "analyzing the way people are represented as speaking both in language and images" is vitally important because speech is perhaps *the* foundational element of meaning. By simply keeping the importance of speech in mind, the sarcastic tone of the re-cut, AI-generated audio delivers a completely different connotation. No longer is Harris portrayed as a warm, caring human being, but a political agent who 'admits' to supporting extreme positions of American left-wing (identity) politics. For example, as her supporters are shown applauding her, in a direct play on 'woke' discourse, Harris' AI-generated voice proclaims, "I was selected because I am the ultimate diversity hire. I'm both a woman and a person of color. So, if you criticize anything I say, you're both sexist and racist" (Kohls [@Mr Reagan], 2024a). Connotatively, this declaration, even as an obvious caricature, positions Harris as an unsympathetic actor and thereby flips the crowd's genuine enthusiasm into ironic validation of these claims.

In fact, throughout the video, there are many such instances in which the AI-cloned Harris exaggerates tropes often levied by conservative critics, claiming, for example, that Democrats leverage diversity rhetoric to deflect criticism and are controlled by shadowy 'deep state' forces (Johnson, 2021; p. 3). For instance, when the AI-generated voice states, "I may not know the first thing about running the country, but remember, that's a good thing if you're a deep state puppet," Harris is presented as a conspiratorial pawn which may prompt spectators to question her competencies. In this way, Kohls' use of audiovisual interplay reframes Harris from an inspiring candidate – the way she is represented in the original campaign advertisement – into a fraudulent or "hyper-woke" figure whom even her own base supposedly cheers on for all the wrong reasons.

Rob Weissman, an expert on government accountability, argues that the video resonates with viewers "precisely because it feeds into preexisting themes" about Harris (Swenson, 2024). That is to say that viewers familiar with right-wing critiques of 'wokeness' may have felt vindicated by the generated connotative messages, which, in turn, reflects how political orientation colors the interpretation of satire. LaMarre et. al. (2009) has pointed out that conservatives, in particular, often interpret such types of satire in line with their biases, and sometimes regard them as factual. As such, the parody's contemplation on 'woke' identity politics reinforces the suspicions of conservative-leaning viewers that Harris actually embodies these spoken AI-generated traits.[6]

Moreover, while the edited video may validate the political bias of Kohls' likely conservative audience, it also may attract new, potentially Democrat-leaning viewers to engage with content in a less-than-critical manner because even ostensibly humorous content can pollute the information ecosystem if audiences are fooled by it. In fact, media researcher Claire Wardle places satire on the spectrum of information disorder, calling it "low-level information pollution" (Wardle, 2020). Accordingly, by framing these exaggerations as "just a joke," the edited video may lower the interpretive guard of spectators. As digital forensics expert Hany Farid notes, while "most people won't believe it is VP Harris's voice … the video is that much more powerful when the words are in her voice, and I'm not sure that an AI-generated label would have had much impact on blunting this effect" (Milmo, 2024). The point here is that, even though viewers may have recognized the edited video as satire, the *realism* of the deepfake still may reinforce the edited video's underlying connotative meanings. It is precisely in this way that the video may distort the reality of spectators.

Furthermore, the fact that the edited video is a parody based on a caricature – e.g. Harris calling herself "the ultimate diversity hire" – makes it highly sensationalist and therefore primed for mass circulation on social media. This is because recommendation algorithms on social media prefer to promote highly sensationalist rather than factual content, simply because it is more engaging. And this is true even for inherently political content (Harari, 2024). In this case, after publication to YouTube on which the edited video received almost 500,000 views, it was shared by Elon Musk on X where it garnered over *140 million* views. And concerningly, Musk initially

[6] This is unsurprising, given that the term 'woke' itself has been co-opted by conservatives as a pejorative for progressive identity politics (Alfonseca, 2025).

shared it without indicating it was satire or featured AI-generated content. His caption simply stated, “This is amazing” (Musk [@elonmusk], 2024a). It is not difficult to see how this would cause confusion within the X audience, at least, until he later clarified that it was a joke (Milmo, 2024).[7]

In any case, most responses to the edited video on both YouTube and X suggest that viewers engaged with the video’s AI-generated political message without dwelling on its synthetic nature. For example, the top YouTube comment, from user @wyclefmarie5385, states that the video “Depicted her exactly how she is” (Kohls [@Mr Reagan], 2024a). The second comment, sorted by relevance, features the user, @markstratton79 claiming that “[mainstream media] is acting like this isn't an obvious parody. Why do we have to be surrounded by such stupidity?” to which the top reply from user @MagicGame_ answered, “Because everything in it is true. So the only way to talk bad about it is the fact it has AI voice” (Kohls [@Mr Reagan], 2024a). These responses highlight the efficacy of manufactured connotative meanings even when material is overtly labelled as satire. Of greatest concern here is that the vast majority of comments share this sentiment: that the parody is representative of Harris’ actual persona, without remarking on the significance of its false pedigree. This lack of critical discussion about the fakery implies that the parody succeeded in persuading viewers at the connotative level. Put differently, many spectators seemingly absorbed the satirical point (that Harris is unqualified or a token candidate) as if it were a genuine critique, rather than focusing on the AI-enabled artifice behind it.

It is worth noting here that this stands in contrast to the way in which first-order cultural producers, such as Donald Trump, spread disinformation; that is to say, without any satirical pretense, showing little concern for whether claims are real or not. As seen in the first example, Trump does not bother with strategically labelling disinformation as parody or with disclaimers,

[7] The virality of the edited video also prompted the governor of California, Gavin Newsom, to sign a law targeting fraudulent AI-driven campaign materials which in effect would ban the video (Korte, 2024). Musk publicly disagreed with this action and countered by sharing the video on X again, but this time with the caption, “The governor of California just made this parody video illegal in violation of the Constitution of the United States. Would be a shame if it went viral” (Musk [@elonmusk], 2024b). Kohls also countered, but with legal action, filing a lawsuit that challenged the California’s Defending Democracy from Deepfake Deception Act. He argued that this law would unconstitutionally restrict political satire, and was shortly after granted a preliminary injunction blocking enforcement of the law against him. Kohls won the lawsuit, and it became recognized that parody and satire are core First Amendment speech (Zeff, 2024). As such, Kohls’ video remained public on YouTube and X.

but instead, simply repeats debunked narratives outright and ad nauseum. By doing this, Trump bulldozes through facts and fact-checks until his repeating falsity is accepted as truth. In turn, this highlights the significance of held symbolic capital within the current AI-led transforming field of cultural production. Trump's wealth of symbolic capital evidently insulates him from the consequences of spreading disinformation because his base seems to believe his claims as they are, deeming him truthful and credible even if the information he shares is not factual.[8] In some sense, as evidenced by the success of his campaign, Trump 'owns' the truth of his supporters: His own social media platform is literally named "Truth Social."

But, without such a wealth of symbolic capital, a second-order cultural producer, such as Kohls, necessarily must lean on a different approach to produce culturally resonant material. In this case, Kohls uses satire as a shield to avoid fact checks and to amplify the reach of his content based on its inherent sensationalism and symbolic violence.[9] Kohls' different approach to propagating disinformation raises the question of how held symbolic capital influences the output of cultural producers in the current field of cultural production. And crucially, as the following discourse analysis elucidates, it illuminates why second-order cultural output heavily relies on the acquisition of symbolic capital, in turn, made possible by current platform dynamics.

In one of his following videos, also published to YouTube – a 'making-of' video titled "How I Made My Viral Video" (Kohls [@Mr Reagan], 2024b) – Kohls describes the production choices that went into his edited parody video as optimizations for frictionless circulation. As he states, the script was engineered to be "very simple, very digestible and very clear," with repeated, salient cues, such as "Kamala Harris is a puppet… Joe Biden is a puppet," tailored for an audience "who didn't even know anything about politics" (Kohls [@Mr Reagan], 2024b). Here, Kohls makes clear that he produced the video with the intention of mass appeal. He wanted something simple, sensationalist and in the zeitgeist to maximize his chances to go viral. In his own words: "I knew this video would go viral… I texted my friend… 'If this doesn't go viral, I

[8] As well, a central reason for why Trump is able to bulldoze through fact-checks is because there is simply too much information to discern truth from falsehood in the current information landscape (Warzel, 2018). As Harari diagnoses it, this situation stands in sharp contrast to the justification that surveillance capitalists use to continually develop and use algorithms as curators of information. Harari posits that platform corporations naively assume that the accumulation of more information inherently leads to truth, overlooking the fact that information's fundamental characteristic is connection and not an accurate representation of objective reality (Harari, 2024, p. 12).

[9] Kohls has a long catalog of similar parody videos to the one in question on his YouTube channel (Kohls [@Mr Reagan], 2024a).

give up'" (Kohls [@Mr Reagan], 2024b). Put simply, virality motivated the creation of this piece of reality-distorting disinformation. And within current platform dynamics, gaining virality is directly linked to the acquisition of digital symbolic capital.

Indeed, the strategy to acquire symbolic capital that Kohls exhibits is *not* motivated by the more democratically constructive and traditional method within journalism: by building a reputation through value-bound work. Instead, as Kohls exemplifies within current platform dynamics, virality ensures the amassing of 'followers' or 'subscribers,' a quantifiable metric that now represents 'digital' symbolic capital (Woods & Scott, 2024). That is to say when a viewer browses a given social media platform and sees content such as the "Kamala Harris Ad Parody" video on offer, they also see that the producer (be it Kohls himself or Musk who shared the video) holds a large number of 'followers,' a number that is always visible to the potential spectator. The video, therefore, appears more credible because this metric represents recognized value within the valuation system accepted by digital publics. After all, if other people 'follow' this producer, it also follows that the producer's content must be worth watching. This public and specific number that represents symbolic capital is a novel departure from the way in which symbolic capital is conferred more traditionally within journalistic cultural production – through critical work that adheres to particular democratic values and ethics. Instead, in the AI-driven field of cultural production, symbolic capital is decreasingly garnered through adherence to any such values and ethics, but simply through quantifiable platform metrics gained through exposure and virality, which, in turn, ensures further exposure.

Furthermore, beneath this preference for virality (and the prerequisite acquisition of symbolic capital) lies the real motivation for the creation of such disinformation by pseudo-journalists: the desire for personal financial gain. This is fundamentally due to the simple fact that the more views Kohls receives on his videos, the more microtargeted advertisements are shown to his audience. This provides revenue to both Kohls and the given social media platform to which he publishes. As such, both parties – the platform and the producer – are financially incentivized to create or promote more sensational content geared to go viral (Varoufakis, 2024).[10] Secondly, with more views, Kohls also gains access to more consumers to whom he can

[10] Economist Yanis Varoufakis refers to this dynamic as "technofeudalism:" the digital platform owners constitute the "lords" who collect rent from their "vassals," the producers of content. This content is shown to an audience of "serfs," social media users, that give their attention and data to the "technofeudal lords," which is converted to profit through microtargeted advertising (Varoufakis, 2024).

sell merchandise and promote sponsorships. In this case, Kohls operationalizes this logic in his 'making-of' video in which he both promotes the copper company, World Copper Limited, as a paid sponsor of the video, and redirects his audience to buy his mugs and T-shirts (Kohls [@Mr Reagan], 2024b). The point here is that, for a pseudo-journalist such as Kohls, gaining subscribers, or symbolic capital, through virality, or vice versa, is simply a method to earn advertising revenue and to sell products and services rather than to promote a specific ideology.

This is also why catering to the political views of a highly influential online figure such as Elon Musk (and, in turn, Trump,) as Kohls does, is a financially desirable choice within current platform dynamics: the potential to be 'retweeted' greatly increases the chances for virality. As Kohls himself puts it, "obviously Elon Musk retweeting the video was critical to it going viral" (Kohls [@Mr Reagan], 2024b).

As an actor within the emergent AI-driven field of cultural production, Kohls is representative of a broader structural shift. The lowering of production costs and even enabling of previously unattainable production methods brought about by generative AI systems, paired with the engagement-driven spread of this production through distributive AI systems, seemingly reconfigures who can perform journalistic cultural production and on what grounds they do so.

As well, although these dynamics have, in some sense, democratized cultural production – which is not necessarily constructive for a factual information environment – the promise of democratization coexists with the reproduction of offline inequalities (Robinson, 2017). Cultural producers who possess sufficient time, technical skill, and equipment more readily convert those holdings into online influence. In fact, Kohls alludes to this himself in his 'making of' video, stating that he "spent quite a lot of time just trying to make this [video] perfect," stressing that AI-cloning Harris' voice "has as much to do with the artist… as it does with the tools," and that his success depended on "how you fiddle with the AI program… trying to make Kamala sound like Kamala" (Kohls [@Mr Reagan], 2024b). His statement underscores the importance of possessing enough time, technical craft, and access to software. Crucially, these online advantages sit atop an offline hierarchy of skills and experiences. Kohls' public profiles emphasize this with his entertainment-industry background – such as screenwriting, video production, and voice work – rather than traditional newsroom training. Such preexisting cultural capital maps neatly onto the demands of platform dynamics, helping him to generate polished, emotionally legible content at low cost.

Put differently, the case of Kohls shows that democratization is all but a flat field. Actors with sufficient offline capitals such as Kohls – especially those without adherences to traditional journalistic values and ethics – are structurally better positioned to translate time and technical skill into visibility and manufactured credibility and are now structurally incentivized to do so for financial gain. This dynamic permeates down to the third order of cultural production as well.

Example 3 – Third-Order Ordinary Users and AI Slop

The third example examines the final node in the trajectory that plots how different orders of cultural producers leverage generative and distributive AI systems to create and propagate disinformation. Accordingly, it examines two instances of 'AI slop' – commonly defined as low-effort and easily AI-generated visual content that is often emotionally and politically charged, created using widely available software (Roose et al., 2024). This material is used to disinform by third-order cultural agents, or simply, ordinary social media users. Based on an MCDA investigation of two examples of AI slop images, this case highlights how the AI-enabled democratization of cultural production has led to an unprecedented ease and scale with which anyone can create and spread reality-distorting visual disinformation.

The two examples of AI slop investigated here are images that circulated widely following the Hurricane Helene disaster that struck the U.S. Gulf Coast during election season in late September 2024. Both images pertain to the event.

Helene left a trail of devastation with dozens of fatalities reported and vast flooding across four states (Associated Press, 2024), and because the disaster struck just weeks before election day, it opened an opportunity to promote campaign narratives. Indeed, politicians and online influencers alike sought to frame the hurricane in ways that supported their agendas. For instance, then-nominee Donald Trump falsely claimed that Georgia's governor had been unable to reach President Biden for aid, despite Georgia officials confirming they had spoken with Washington. Many similar myths "found believers – or at least opportunistic fans," especially among key Republican audiences, who seemingly tied the disaster to issues like immigration and voter impact (Leingang, 2024). It was in this context that Helene's aftermath was used to propagate disinformation – specifically using AI slop images (Jingnan, 2024).

The first image features Donald Trump wading through floodwaters (see Figure 5). The image first appeared on Facebook followed by Threads, Meta's X equivalent, and popped up shortly after Helene struck. Although it is difficult to pinpoint its pedigree, an early posting of the

image was published by user, Steve Youell to Facebook, who shared it with the caption “I don’t think FB [(Facebook)] wants this picture on [Facebook]. They have been deleting it” (Youell, 2024). This infers that the platform had been removing other posts featuring the image for political reasons. Another early post by Threads user @fredsmithj, posted it with the caption “Can anyone verify this or disprove it?” (Smith [@fredsmithj], 2024), indicating that some users were in doubt about its authenticity. Still, according to a fact check by USA Today, the image was shared roughly 160,00 times in only two days, quickly gaining virality, despite being AI-generated (Hudnall, 2024).

Figure 5: An AI-generated image depicting Donald Trump wading through floodwaters following Hurricane Helene, originally posted by user Steve Youell to Facebook, September 30th, 2024

While the image received wide coverage that exposed it as an AI-generated fake, its circulation persisted. PolitiFact, for instance, noted that the image was a ‘fake,’ because Trump had visited a different location, Valdosta, GA, in completely different attire at the time he was supposed to be wading through floodwaters. In addition, several visual cues were a tipoff to AI-generated content. For example, Trump sports malformed, four fingered hands and the text on his life vest is incomprehensible, as is the text on his companion’s hat (O’Rourke, 2024a). Meta’s own platforms also flagged the post as AI-generated. Yet, concerningly, the image still seemed to

function as an authentic news photograph for spectators on social media platforms, where it reached millions of eyes.

Through a semiotic analysis, it becomes clear how the image distorted spectators' sense of reality. At the denotative level, the image depicts Trump beside an unrecognizable man, both wearing red life vests and wading through a flooded street with water reaching their thighs. It is easy to consider how the casual viewer who encountered it scrolling through his or her social media feed with minimal context might react.[11] The denotative message is that there was a severe inundation of this particular roadway, and that Trump was physically present. For a particular kind of spectator, the image functions as proof that this occurrence took place. As Susan Sontag puts it, "photographs furnish evidence… A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened" (Sontag, 1977; p. 5). Yet, of course, the image is AI-generated and therefore only mimics the denotative look of documentary evidence, effectively presenting itself as "message without a code" (1977; p. 17). It functions as a depiction that is analogous to reality and presumptively depicts what occurred in this 'captured' moment, despite it never actually occurring. As such, it functions as a fallacious distortion of journalism that seeks to insert itself into a viewer's sense of reality.

Moreover, as Barthes argues, when we encounter an image, we naturally unpack its produced meaning based on our subjective world view – at the connotative level – which in this case, likely further distorts a viewer's sense of reality. Indeed, for the unassuming spectator, a few motifs stand out. For example, while the floodwater may signify a genuine crisis, the life vests position Trump as *a president* responding seriously and responsibly to such a crisis. As well, the character adjacent to Trump serves as a tacit marker of a coordinated relief effort. Trump's casual attire of blue jeans and a jacket also frames him as an 'everyman' who, at least for a moment, has stepped out of elite politics to set aside his own comfort in a show of solidarity with those affected. This portrayal aligns with Trump's broader in-group persona through which he often "paints himself as an American everyman" (Agnew, 2020; p. 13). These potential connotations all highlight one common theme: that Trump is a leader who, rather than observing such a disaster from dry ground, is present, engaged, and useful in the eye of disaster. In other words, based on these connotations, this *AI-generated* image portrays Trump in a positive light,

[11] Due to the fact that anyone can publish almost anything to social media platforms, these platforms are inherently susceptible to lack of proper or factual context (Metwally, 2020).

potentially constructing a version of him in spectators' minds that positions him as a man of the people – a highly electable leader – just weeks before the US federal election.

This aligns with the sentiment evident from the plethora of social media posts through which users shared the image with captions framing Trump as a hands-on hero and explicitly contrasting this portrayal with his opposition at the time, Joe Biden. One viral post, for example, insisted that "Trump was willing to get his hands dirty while old Biden struggled back in the nation's capital," explicitly using the image as a symbol of Trump's leadership and empathy, and, in turn, bolstering a narrative of Trump's hands-on leadership that stood in contrast to Biden's perceived inaction (Thalen, 2024). Commenters on social media reacted with similar praise and credulity. On Facebook, for instance, users lauded Trump's apparent personal involvement, where one exclaimed that "He's got my vote! Trump 2024!!!," while another apparently read the image as evidence of Trump's compassion, stating that "It did happen in Valdosta, Georgia, today! He lives and cares for people, all people!" (Thalen, 2024).

Yet, perhaps of greater concern is that other users *did*, in fact, recognize that the image was AI-generated, but still embraced the spirit of its 'photographic message.' One commenter stated that, "As a Trump supporter, it's okay to recognize that this photo is AI-generated. Yes, he is helping with relief efforts in Georgia" (Thalen, 2024). This sentiment seemingly maintains that Trump, although he was not actually captured on camera, nonetheless, was an aiding force during the crisis. Considering this commenter's political position, "as a Trump supporter," this response reveals a more troubling potential effect of AI slop on social media users: that one's preconceived worldviews may bolster an AI-generated 'photographic message' as evidence of the 'truth.' The following analysis of the second example of AI slop delves further into this understanding.

This example depicts a young girl in tears on a rescue boat (see Figure 6). It provoked intense emotional reactions from social media users – emotions that, for some, seemed to linger, even after they discovered its AI-generated pedigree. The image first surfaced on social media shortly after Helene struck and was widely shared on X and Facebook with claims that it showed a child survivor in North Carolina (Green, 2024). While media outlets such as Full Fact and Politifact were quick to debunk the image as AI-generated, pointing out tell-tale anomalies such as malformed hands with missing fingers and an unnatural glossy sheen of the girl's skin as evidence of digital fabrication, it still gained virality, with some posts on X garnering millions of

views (O'Rourke, 2024b; Jingnan, 2024).[12] As the following semiotic analysis shows, these posts featured emotional reactions tied to political sentiments and may have affected spectators in concerning ways.

Figure 6: An AI-generated image depicting a distressed young child clutching a puppy on a rescue boat following Hurricane Helene, widely shared on X, including by Amy Kremer on October 3rd, 2024

[12] Local news reports also highlighted how this fabricated rescue scene was being used to mislead the public: some scammers even circulated it to solicit donations under false pretenses (Davis, 2024).

At the denotative level, this image mimics the familiar visual language of humanitarian photojournalism. Specifically, the image depicts a scene of a young girl in a life jacket aboard a small rescue boat surrounded by floodwaters. The girl, with her soaked clothing, clutches a puppy and wears a distressed expression with tears filling her eyes. While the image is AI-generated, if accepted as an actual captured moment – which is very likely on social media where proper context is most often missing – its denotative cue is simply that this occurrence happened: a street was flooded, and this resulted in the distress of a girl and a puppy.

At the connotative level, the image engages spectators based on its emotional sensibilities which, in this case, were used to promote certain political narratives. For instance, for the unassuming spectator, the life jacket may connote a danger and attempted survival, especially alongside the flooded street that signals the severity of the disaster. From the child's expression and soaked appearance, there is a sense of acute distress and suffering, and by extension, a need for urgent rescue. Taken together with the potential attention-capturing *punctum* of the puppy – 'cute' pets do well on social media – these connotative cues point to a very poignant disaster scene in which a child suffered (Lavertu, 2025). And while this reading is not inherently political, for many, these connotations seemed, at the time, to imply that there was an official failure to protect the vulnerable. In fact, the absence of officials was used to suggest an abandonment of those meant to protect – of those presently in power.

This is evident from social media posters who explicitly used the image to accuse the Biden-Harris administration of neglect. For example, one widely viewed post featuring the scene[13] by Juanita Broaddrick, a social media figure with 1.8 million followers on X (@astensnut) declared that "Comrad Kamala and Sleepy Joe have deserted them." Another post featuring the image by Buzz Patterson, a figure with almost 500,000 followers on X (@BuzzPatterson), asserted that "Our government has failed us again" (Gattuso, 2024). In both cases, the image was thus used as affective proof of an abandonment by the Democrat party. As such, the scene was used by these influential figures to advance political narratives, equating the distressing visual to federal neglect. Yet, because the image, of course, is AI-generated, it

[13] This image of this post depicts the same scene of the distressed child, but from a different angle. That it is not the exact same image, but still features the same core elements, is likely due to the fact that generative AI models often generate two to four similar images from the same prompt. As such, Broadrick likely used one of the other generated images from the same prompt used to generate the image in question (Figure 6).

constitutes either mis- or disinformation, depending on the intention of the posts, or as fallacious symbolic proof, based on its poignancy, that the Biden-Harris administration had failed survivors of Helene.

More tellingly, and what certainly constitutes disinformation, is when Republican National Committee member Amy Kremer realized the image in question, which she already had posted to her X page, was AI-generated. She refused to delete it, explicitly defending its use on the basis of 'emotional truth.' As she wrote on X: "Y'all, I don't know where this photo came from and honestly, it doesn't matter. It is seared into my mind forever. There are people going through much worse than what is shown in this pic. So I'm leaving it because it is emblematic of the trauma and pain people are living through right now" (Kremer [@AmyKremer], 2024). Despite X's 'Community Notes' clearly labeling the image as AI-generated, Kremer's action constitutes a form of disinformation because, even after discovering its fallacious nature, she presented it as so-called "emblematic" representation of suffering to her 130,000 followers.

In fact, Kremer's decision to stand by the depiction of an AI-generated image because it "feels" true is more significant than it may at first seem. It signifies the emergence of an epistemic shift within our information environment in which emotional resonance outweighs factuality. Indeed, rather than engaging critically with the image's AI-generated provenance, Kremer embraced it as symbolic of a deeper, ideological truth. This reflects a key function of emotive disinformation – that it reinforces existing belief systems by tapping into instinctive emotional responses. As well, as Martel et al. (2020) empirically demonstrate, spectators are more likely to believe 'fake news' when they rely on emotional rather than analytical reasoning (p. 3). They argue that the reliance on emotion becomes a cognitive shortcut, allowing images or stories that 'feel' true to be accepted as real. Moreover, Frenda et al. (2013) demonstrate that this effect is especially pronounced when mis- or disinformation aligns with prior political or cultural worldviews, with participants in their study even forming false memories of fabricated political events (p. 284). In Kremer's case, the AI-generated image aligned with an existing partisan narrative of governmental failure, ensuring its symbolic, emotional truth outweighed concerns for accuracy.

In this sense, the two examples of AI slop analyzed above resonated with certain audiences based on either their political or emotional appeal and may have been politically persuasive as such. Nevertheless, it is worth examining the response of spectators who may not

have suspended disbelief but instead understood and thought critically about the fact that these images were false, AI-generated depictions – because such responses still have concerning political implications.

For example, in suspending disbelief, some spectators may have become more 'apathetic' to reality. As a Houston-based local news outlet reported, when a spectator of the distressed child photo learned it was fabricated they felt "manipulated after finding out it is fake" and stated that "this AI technology, it's very scary and people are using it to manipulate us and I'm very scared of it" (Aswad, 2024). The sentiment highlights not only the efficacy of AI slop to disinform – this person initially took the image at face value – but also the attitude spectators may adopt *when* and *if* they realize the power of AI slop to effectively distort reality. For instance, this particular spectator felt "manipulated" and "scared" after uncovering the image in question was AI-generated. Consider the attitude this person may then adopt when encountering future images on social media: likely, it would be one of uncertainty or confusion. Thereby, it is not unreasonable to assume they would fall into a general state of apathy towards what is 'real' and what is not, unable to distinguish authenticity from manipulation.

On a similar note, after the Trump-in-floodwaters image gained viral circulation, the local Buffalo newsroom, WGRZ reported that "several readers emailed and texted to ask if this image of Trump wading through floodwaters is real," before it was verified as AI-generated (WGRZ, 2024). Again, it is clear that the image created some confusion about what was real and what was not. Here, readers of WGRZ were engaged and took action to verify the image. But considering the sheer volume of AI slop now circulating online – by 2023, the blog Everypixel Journal estimated the creation of 34 million AI images *daily* (Valyaeva, 2023) – it is worth speculating on how spectators will react moving forward, as they encounter an increasing amount of AI slop that becomes more realistic by the week as the technology rapidly advances. The following chapter delves into this discussion.

Lastly, it is important to underscore, as Koebler (2025) also argues, that the flooding of platforms with high volumes of AI slop by ordinary users is encouraged by the engagement-driven logic of distributive AI systems, which amplifies posts that generate clicks, shares, comments, and so forth. This amplification, in turn, translates directly into material gain for ordinary users who post AI slop because social media platforms operate creator monetization programs that pay users based on the views and engagement their content attracts. The more

virally an image circulates, the more advertising revenue (and economic capital) both the platform and the poster collect. And generative AI has made this calculus almost frictionless. A politically charged image that might have taken skill and effort to fabricate a decade ago can now be produced in seconds, for free, and posted immediately. Ordinary users are therefore structurally incentivized, within current platform dynamics, to generate and circulate politically and emotionally charged AI slop: the technology lowers the cost of production to near zero while the potential financial reward remains real. It is in this light that the AI slop images pertaining to Hurricane Helene are best understood. They are not merely isolated acts of political mischief, but products of a platform ecosystem that makes their creation and spread not only easy, but profitable.

To conclude, this example clarifies how the democratization of the creation and propagation of AI slop increasingly floods our information landscape with disinformation that effectively functions to distort spectators' sense of reality in various ways. The concerning part is that *anyone* with access to the internet can now create and spread emotionally evocative political narratives by utilizing the grammar and ethics of seeing. As well, similar to the motivations behind Kohls' production choices, this very action is incentivized by platform dynamics which monetarily rewards posting engaging, and thereby emotional, content – content that is now easier to produce than ever using widely available generative AI models. Accordingly, before discussing the implications of this, a brief demonstration of the democratization of the creation of disinformation in practice is valuable. The following is a 'fake news report' produced entirely with generative AI technology.

Creation project: ‘fake news report’ video

Available to watch on Figshare.com:

DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.31796479

Link: https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31796479

Chapter 5: Findings and Conclusion

Due to burgeoning AI technologies, the online field of cultural production is incentivizing the production and promoting the circulation of visual disinformation. Drawing from both the 'fake news report' video produced for this thesis-creation and the case study findings, this section discusses the significance and implications of this on our journalistic, political, and democratic landscapes. Firstly, through a reflection of creating the 'fake news report' video, it considers the implications of widely available and free generative AI tools that have essentially democratized the means of fabricating reality through visual content. Secondly, it discusses how distributive AI systems configure an emergent regime of truth in which engagement metrics, rather than factuality, determine what 'counts as true' by democratizing not only the production but also the circulation of reality-distorting visual disinformation. Accordingly, it reflects on the underlying economic logic and incentive structures that establish, legitimate, and perpetuate the use of these AI systems for creating and spreading disinformation. And finally, based on this, it argues that the use of the synergistic relationship between these two types of AI systems – generative and distributive – is casting the field of cultural production into a hyperreal state that may condition publics toward either belief in nonfactual information or disbelief of factual information, and that this, as evidenced by the 2024 US election, has alarming implications for functional political democracy.

Research-Creation Demonstration

To better grasp the significance of the democratization of AI-driven disinformation, it is worth reflecting on the process of creating the 'fake news report.' The video itself is a piece of AI-generated disinformation, created solely using free and widely available generative AI tools, and thus intended to mirror the methods observed in the examples of cultural production investigated in the case study. While its production is perhaps more elaborate in scope than the case study examples – most of which likely were generated and posted in minutes rather than hours – it is further intended to showcase multiple modes of generative AI-driven disinformation; from the use of AI-generated images and moving pictures to voice-cloning and music production. This positions it as an exposited example to use as a demonstration of the democratized capability of generative AI technology and a consequent reflection.

The video was created in the format of a 'reel,' a short-form video in the 9:16 aspect ratio that is commonly associated with smartphone formatting, to mimic the feel and form of a short news report that one might encounter on a social media feed. It presents a fabricated news story conceptualized and written by a large language model, presented through AI-generated images and voice-clones. The story centers around relations between the US and Russia, specifically recounting diplomatic efforts taken by US president Donald Trump to broker a trade deal between the two countries. As such, it depicts AI-generated images such as Trump and Russian president Vladimir Putin shaking hands, their meeting in large conference rooms, and officials presenting trade propositions through slide decks.

Similar to the examples analyzed in the case study, this video might have easily distorted spectators' sense of reality if it were posted to social media. For example, at the denotative level, because the visuals are AI-generated, for someone seeing it without context, it might function as false proof that these events actually happened. Furthermore, because it features a voice-over cloned from the recognizable CNN anchor Anderson Cooper, this proof may be afforded a veneer of legitimacy. At the connotative level, for an unassuming US-based audience, it may thus present a (fabricated) reality, promoting a narrative that Trump is a capable and diplomatic leader. If seen during election season, it is not a stretch to believe that this video could render spectators confused towards reality, or more concerningly, persuade others to vote based on a fabricated story.

This is concerning because of how easy it was to create this video – it required only a laptop and an internet connection. Admittedly, some browsing and testing was needed to find a model capable of generating unfiltered images, and even then, several images required re-prompting when, for instance, some generations depicted the faces of both Trump and Putin in an uncanny way. However, this is likely due to the nature of using publicly recognizable figures. This slight impediment would not be an issue with generating more commonplace AI slop such as the image of the child investigated in the third example of the case study. This image effectively promoted a false political narrative, and likely did not require meticulous prompting, and was probably generated in just a few seconds. On the other hand, had *more* effort been put into iterating and polishing the 'fake news report' video's AI-generated narrative and visuals, it might have been even more convincing as political disinformation. Yet, the point of creating it in

only a span of hours – and with free tools, at that – is to showcase the simplicity and brevity with which it is now possible to convincingly fabricate reality.

As such, this video demonstrates an emergent phenomenon: that the ability to distort the reality of news consumers has become democratized. When deepfake technology first became available in 2017 the models were time-consuming, expensive and difficult to use (Langguth et. al., 2021) and the images they produced were often unconvincing. Now, however, less than a decade later, a sea of aesthetically pleasing websites designed for ease-of-use where one may generate AI images and videos at scale have become commonplace. In this case, the website *Yupp.ai* provided free access to over 800 AI models and plenty of free generations with a simple search bar. Considering this is only the advent of a rapidly advancing information technology, which increasingly is used for news production and consumption, this is cause for concern.

Moreover, the way in which this technology is advertised and incentivized to use is doubly concerning. These websites play into an increasingly common discourse surrounding generative AI more generally: that the technology "promotes creativity freed from its material realisation through human labor" (Caramiaux et. al., 2025), and further, and more importantly, that using generative AI for business purposes is a lucrative venture within platform dynamics. The promise of having your imagination become reality, of 'creatively' expressing yourself without technical skill, certainly draws many users into the generative AI space (Caramiaux et. al., 2025). While there are a set of serious issues pertaining to this use of the technology, such as intellectual property rights, what is more relevant to this thesis is how this promise may function as a pathway for users towards another more nefarious, but common use of generative AI: for personal financial gain. Indeed, social media platforms now implicitly encourage users to easily create and upload sensationalist content (Koebler, 2025), a defining characteristic of AI slop, because such content is engaging and thus generates advertising revenue for both the platform and creator.

Moreover, using generative AI is often explicitly presented as a way to get-rich-quick. For instance, the flood of websites that have streamlined generating unfiltered AI images with accessible user interfaces often promise new and easy revenue streams. One website, *imagine.art*, for instance, asserts that "from selling AI-generated images to building passive income with short-form videos, the possibilities are multiplying" (Sohail, 2025). As well, an abundance of online creators now tap into this emergent market by making tutorials on how to most effectively

use generative AI models, purporting that anyone can use the technology to earn money through programs such as Alphabet's AdSense. One need only do a Google search for a phrase similar to "how to make money with AI" to discover a truly vast sea of such tutorials. While these creators likely upload these tutorials to also profit from platform ad revenue themselves (mirroring the logic of a multilevel marketing scheme), their claims are not unfounded: Websites, creators and social media platforms *do* all stand to benefit financially from AI slop, be it through its marketing, creation or spread. The bottom line: all parties profit.

Considering this, if one graduate student motivated by educational purposes can fabricate a credible-looking news report in a matter of hours, how much more deceptive content has and will be unleashed by countless others with less, similar or greater resources, and importantly, with the more powerful incentive (within capitalism) of personal financial gain moving forward? And how does this affect the production and consumption of newsworthy information? As the following discussion makes clear, if both generative and distributive AI systems are left unregulated, their continuous development and use will have serious consequences on our journalistic, political and democratic landscape.

Discussion

Both the case study and the 'fake news report' shows how generative AI tools are already widely accessible instruments of disinformation, no longer confined to well-resourced, high capital actors. However, of equal importance is the fertile ground on which such disinformation is allowed to flourish and the parallel rise of distributive AI algorithms as curation engines of platforms such as X, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and so forth, on which consumers increasingly rely on for their news input (Pew Research Center, 2024b). This is because distributive AI algorithms now serve as de facto gatekeepers of information, and thereby, of AI-generated disinformation too, enabling everyone from presidential nominees to ordinary users' content to become amplified within the current information ecosystem. The main problem here is that algorithms decide on what is 'worth' viewing based on engagement metrics and user profiling rather than editorial judgments of factuality or truthfulness. And as the Rohingya genocide repugnantly exemplifies (Harari, 2024), the engagement metrics that steer these

distributive AI algorithms on social media largely, if not entirely,[14] prioritize sensationalism – or, more poignantly, symbolic violence – because negative emotional content evidently keeps users engaged for longer time periods than truthful information (Harari, 2024).

Zuboff (2019) argues these distributive AI systems are 'blind by design:' they are not built to decipher meaning or truth, but rather, to collect data for profit. As she outlines in her investigation, the engineered aim of distributive AI algorithms on social media platforms is to collect data (e.g., clicks, likes, dwell times), through the spread of information, regardless of truthfulness, in order to maximize advertising revenue. If users are engaged, more data can be collected. And the more data these companies collect, the more efficiently they can sell placements on their platforms for other businesses looking to advertise their products. The bottom line here is that engagement-driven algorithms have been developed from a motivation to profit. Zuboff (2019) calls this reverence to engagement metrics "radical indifference" (p. 315).

One major issue with the prominence of radical indifference is the supplanting of "professional journalism on the internet" (Zuboff, 2019; p. 316). For example, Zuboff argues that both Facebook and Google (respectively owned by Meta and Alphabet), have effectively "inserted themselves between publishers and their populations, subjecting journalistic "content" to the same categories of equivalence that dominate surveillance capitalism's other landscapes" (p. 316) – that is to say, that they treat vastly different types of human experience and content as equivalent from their capacity to yield "behavioral surplus," or put differently, from their efficacy in collecting user data through user engagement. Radical indifference can thus be understood as the antithesis of fact-based journalism. Indeed, while the objective of distributive AI algorithms is to produce maximum engagement for profit, the raison d'être of the journalist "is to produce news and analysis that separate truth from falsehood" (Zuboff, 2019; p. 316) in order to inform the public. However, social media companies have seemingly undermined this foundational principle to capture journalism's revenue streams. And they have done so under the guise of a democratized information sphere in which everyone can seemingly contribute to the public conversation.

[14] A major issue with the use of AI algorithms is that they operate as what is referred to within a 'black box.' Because AI systems are self-learning, it is impossible, even for their developers, to understand how AI algorithms reach a certain conclusion (Harari, 2024).

Yet, as Harari argues, while this AI-enabled democratization of gatekeeping has made the public conversation more open – anyone can inject content now – it has also made it vastly more chaotic and prone to falsehood (Harari, 2024; p. 341). In previous decades, gatekeeping of mass media was controlled by a relatively small number of editors and producers. But increasingly, this gatekeeping function is handed over to algorithms (p. 341). As a result, political influence is no longer only tied to institutional media power or expertise, but also to large social media platform companies that increasingly control information flows. And while this theoretically has opened up public participation in the information sphere, it has done so without replicating the norms and accountability of professional journalism. As well, as Robinson (2017) reminds us, this democratization of information still seems to favor offline hierarchies, or preexisting held capitals. The first example in the case study, for example, shows how an individual elite cultural producer, now-president Trump, can now leverage their wealth of symbolic capital to bolster truth claims and convenient narratives on social media to effectively impose their vision of the social world. And as the second case shows, even without elite status, by tapping into platform dynamics, second-order cultural producers are now able to effectively spread partisan narratives that mimic journalistic productions, but, in fact, are untethered from both reality and traditional journalistic ethics. Moreover, the third case shows that even ordinary social media users – with minimal capitals – are incentivized to create politically and emotionally charged false content, and do so, because it is financially beneficial within platform dynamics.

As such, if some cultural producers are better positioned within the field and if a certain type of content is favored, and its creation is incentivized over another, the field of cultural production has not truly been democratized. Rather, the synergistic relationship between generative and distributive AI systems has simply shifted cultural production further from an adherence to truth to the incentivization and intensification of symbolic violence: what follows is not the democratization of *information* sharing, but the democratization of creating and spreading of *disinformation.*

Another issue with the 'democratized' rise of alternative cultural producers, is the consequent decline in the influence of traditional journalistic gatekeepers. In the past, the credibility and reach of news content was largely governed by established media institutions and their editors. As McLean (2012) documents in his study of a 2005-06 campaign war room, political strategists once, not long ago, had to work through journalists to inject their narratives

into the public sphere. Journalists served as both conduits and filters, exercising editorial judgment and upholding (to varying degrees) standards of truth. The professional norms of journalism, such as verification and balance, have traditionally acted as a check on overt propaganda (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Even though some scholars have criticized the mainstream press for amplifying corporate agendas, or "manufacturing consent" (Herman & Chomsky, 2010), the presence of human editors and reporters has meant that, at least, *some* factual vetting and ethical reflection could occur before information reached the masses. And while journalism that adheres to truthful information still exists, the flow of newsworthy information between politicians and publics is increasingly dictated, not by journalists, but by AI algorithms.

Consider, for example, how social media platforms have opened up a direct connection between any given politician and their audience. During the 2024 election cycle, time and time again, Trump was able to impose and thereby legitimize his own vision of the social world directly through Truth Social or X, thus bypassing the external editorialization and gatekeeping that journalists desperately attempt to maintain (Brown, 2025). To that point, the images analyzed in the case study would not be of any significance if they were not put into circulation – and their circulation was enabled by social media feeds. Already back in 2017, a *Guardian* analysis of his "Twitter storms" reached a similar conclusion: that Trump uses Twitter "to bypass the media and speak directly to the public," quoting the consultant who created his account: "This is the point of Twitter: the immediacy" (Smith, 2017). The article added that Trump's "restless thumbs" could cause a diplomatic rupture, endorse extremist content or sack a cabinet secretary "all in a morning's work" (Smith, 2017).[15] In 2024, Trump averaged 24 post per day (Angle, 2024) during the month of October to his 95 million (then[16]) followers on X (Papageorgiou, 2025), exercising unprecedented and virtually unrestrained reach to potential voters provided by social media platforms. As such, these platforms do for Trump what traditional journalistic gatekeeping has

[15] It is worth noting that this intense use of social media is not merely a strategic choice but reflects a symbiotic relationship between the platform's affordances and Trump's documented personality traits. As psychologist Dan McAdams (2016) outlines, Trump's disposition is characterized by a lifelong need to dominate the news cycle and a continuous quest for affirmation. The core features of platforms like X – immediacy, constant visibility, and an environment that rewards provocation – seems to specifically gratify these fundamental psychological drivers.

[16] Trump's follower count on X has only risen since his election victory.

(theoretically) attempted to constrain. Likely, the only editorialization embedded in the algorithms is whether the shared content is engaging.

With the concurrent proliferation of autonomous AI agents – often referred to as 'bots' – that artificially inflate engagement metrics on posts such as those spread by Trump (through, for instance, retweeting partisan content on X at scale (Rossetti & Zaman, 2023),) some scholars argue that the online information landscape is "dying," drowned by artificial voices (Walter, 2025). For example, a recent report from Imperva, a cyber security company, shows that the majority of internet traffic is now carried out by bots (Imperva, 2025). Harari argues that a 'dying' internet filled with autonomous bots that both create and distribute information make it "extremely difficult for large numbers of humans to conduct a meaningful public conversation" (Harari, 2024, p. 221) because algorithms increasingly orchestrate the public conversation, determining "which views to disseminate" (p. 343).

Meanwhile, legitimate journalists find their work drowned out in a flood of click-bait visuals and are often forced to respond after the fact by, for instance, debunking AI-generated images after they have already gone viral. This reactive position may weaken journalism's authority, because by the time a fact-check is published by an ethical news outlet, (if such outlets survive the current financial turmoil of the industry (Bauder, 2022)), a fake narrative may have already entrenched itself in the worldview of the news consumer. As well, with the sheer volume and speed at which AI-generated visuals can be, and are now, created and spread points to how news consumers may see and form impressions before verification is available. Likely, some will never encounter the debunk.

In this way, news consumers face novel challenges with the onslaught of AI-generated visual disinformation. Photographs and videos have traditionally carried an air of truth because they were understood, with some caution, as a recording of reality – what Barthes calls a "certificate of presence" of a moment (Barthes, 1981, p. 87). And while images have long been used as vehicles for disinformation through, for instance, staging or misrepresented context (Griffin, 1999), widely available generative AI tools are now used to exploit this power with unprecedented ease and scale. As the case study makes clear, these tools afford new opportunities at all levels of cultural production by enabling the creation of visuals that mimic the certificate of presence, providing false proof of any convenient narrative very easily, effectively, and for free (and even allows for the delegitimization of any inconvenient but factual narrative). Moreover,

within platform dynamics, cultural production is now motivated by financial incentives to employ these tools. As the case study points to, AI-generated disinformation is a structural problem: producers now use these tools to acquire greater economic or symbolic capitals without regard for factuality.

What results is an omnipresence of AI-generated visuals in our information landscape, which, in turn, prompts the question: How do these AI-generated visuals, that convincingly pass as a certificate of presence, affect news consumers?

The case study analysis indicates that our news environment is becoming saturated with realistic fakes to the point where it becomes difficult for spectators to discern objective reality from manufactured reality. In other words, it is beginning to mirror what Baudrillard calls "hyperreality" (1994). Baudrillard argues that in a hyperreal condition, representations of reality become more salient than reality itself, until the boundary between the real and the simulated disappears. As he puts it, appearances may feel "more real than the real" (Baudrillard, 1994; p. 81). To Baudrillard, there is a ubiquitousness of *simulacra* within hyperreality – copies without originals – that come to precede and determine what is perceived as real. This is exactly what AI-generated visuals do: They permeate the feeds of news consumers, flooding their awareness with simulated constructions that may be crude, but that also apprehend attention. For example, all the AI-generated images analyzed in the case study have been stitched together from a vast dataset of older pictorial representations. They are representations of representations. In turn, even fallacious depictions of reality may now appear "more real than the real."

As such, the news environment seems to be morphing into a state in which the line between the real and the simulated blurs. And here, news consumers face two concerning behavioral changes: They may begin to accept these simulations as a part of objective reality, or conversely, reject the notion of shared reality altogether. Both outcomes erode functional political democracy.

First, the widespread belief in simulacra as representations of objective reality may earnestly prompt news consumers to accept false AI-generated images as representations of objective reality, having them inform their worldview based on false beliefs (e.g. believing a candidate was at a disaster scene when they were not). This logically leads to collective misunderstandings of factual reality and results in news consumers voting based on manufactured

realities instead of voting based on factual or objective reality. This means news consumers may not vote based on their best self-interest.

As well, even if other news consumers manage to discern what is real and what is not, empirical research on memory suggests that humans are susceptible to absorb fabricated events into our memories, especially when realistic visuals are involved. Andrew J. Mills' (2021) metareview and study shows and demonstrates that even blatantly doctored photos – when viewers are fully aware they are doctored – can skew a memory of a depicted event in the long-term. While much empirical research has proven that "well-doctored photos could make people remember events that did not happen ([see Mills 2021;] French et al., 2006; Frenda et al., 2013; Garry & Wade, 2005; Sacchi et al., 2007; Strange et al., 2006; Wade et al., 2002)," Mills' study shows that even "poorly doctored photos" with explicit warning labels that the photos are doctored, fester in our memory (Mills, 2021; p. 120). In fact, as time passes, the events depicted in these overtly doctored photos seem to consolidate themselves as genuine events in participants' memories, even "after a full debriefing" (p. 120). As such, even when news consumers can discern AI-generated manufactured reality from objective reality, they may be fooled by their own memory, and again, cannot vote based on their best self-interest.

The second behavioral change is the complete public disengagement and apathy towards news altogether: Consider here the case that news consumers become aware of the fact that *any* of the visual content they encounter might be AI-generated. It is then plausible that they may determine that nothing can be trusted, deeming it futile to discern truth from falsehood. As early as 2018, AI expert, Aviv Ovadya dubbed this attitude "reality apathy" (Warzel, 2018), a state that describes citizens becoming skeptical of reality to the point that they simply stop staying informed at all. The concern here is that if news consumers categorically disbelieve everything, including legitimate journalism, they cannot stay informed, and therefore, likewise, cannot vote to the best of their interest.

These potential outcomes indicate that burgeoning AI systems are positioning news consumers between two fires; on one side, they may be duped by falsehoods, and on the other, they may doubt truths. Both scenarios corrode the foundation of shared factual reality that democratic discourse relies upon. If publics cannot agree on truthful or even basic facts, constructive discourse and discussion becomes impossible. And if publics disengage with facts entirely, discussion ceases. In this way, rational discussions and consensus-building –

cornerstones of a democratic process – may very well give way to an AI-assisted fractured shared reality within a populace.

Lastly, if this democratized means of producing and distributing disinformation is allowed to continue and develop unchecked, the prevalence of *truthful* information will consequently lessen. While the authority and economic viability of journalism has often been challenged, and often for valid reasons as Herman and Chomsky (2010) elucidate, now its very *raison d'être* – to inform the public accurately – is being undermined by an environment saturated with distortions. Traditionally, a certain level of transparency about government actions and election campaigns has been maintained through the press (Mclean, 2012). But critical journalism – defined by its commitment to gathering verified facts and holding power to account (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021) – finds itself in an existential crisis. Cultural theorist, John Hartley stated three decades ago that "the most important textual feature of journalism is the fact that it counts as true. The most important component of its system is the creation of readers as publics, and the connection of these readerships to other systems, such as those of politics, economic and social control" (Hartley, 1996; p. 35). However, these new AI technologies are disrupting this notion: that journalistic output counts as true. Increasingly, truth seems rather to be determined by actors leveraging emotionally and politically charged AI slop circulated by engagement-driven algorithms owned by large technology corporations. Political actors, pseudo-journalists and ordinary social media users alike can now operate in an AI-generated fog linked directly to publics (gatekept only by engagement metrics), fabricating unreal events or plausibly denying real ones, in turn, manufacturing their 'own' truth. As a result, critical journalism necessary for functional democracy *weakens* and news consumers' ability to scrutinize those in power *diminishes*, and all the while, bad actors find themselves with access to new manipulative strategies they deploy to both generate a particular discourse and to control it for political and financial reasons.

This is evident from the case study. Large and small manipulations of reality alike served to construct a discourse that favoured Donald Trump. Here, the central theme attacks the opposition Biden-Harris campaign as incompetent and promotes the 'truth' that Trump is a more favourable candidate because he gets things done, represents the everyman, is beloved by peers, and so on. This is a discourse that emotively uses simulated knowledge to construct a certain kind of power. And importantly, it is a discourse that has been cemented from the top, at the first order

of cultural production, and has been made incredibly lucrative to engage in for second- and third-order cultural producers because of platform dynamics that reward engagement.

If Christopher Patrick Kohls, for instance, made outrageous parody videos of politicians picked largely at random, he would be an also-ran. The power of using Kamala Harris as a target lies in its virality, and its virality lies in its ability to tap into an established constructed reality in which there exists a primed audience that readily accept simulation as truth.

In some sense, enabled by burgeoning AI systems, the case study shows that Trump has constructed an emergent regime of truth: a discourse that a society "accepts and makes function as true" (Hall, 1997, p. 49; Foucault, 1980, p. 131). As Foucault argues, knowledge is never neutral, but inseparable from power because those who control the production and circulation of knowledge shape discourse, the historically specific structured ways meaning is produced, communicated, and legitimated within a social formation (Foucault, 1980, pp. 131–133). Under current platform dynamics, (dis)information accrues legitimacy by circulation alone. This circulation is predicated on 'radical indifference' by algorithms that, despite the name of the concept, are not in fact neutral, but arbiters of information that bind knowledge to power for actors who leverage their power.

To expand on this: Trump has organized the conditions under which statements gain uptake, credibility, and repetition. He has created an environment in which the 'truth' is tied not to factuality but to repeating debunked claims ad nauseum, stating whatever claims that shines a favorable light on himself, and importantly, by relying on AI systems instead of journalists to decide what 'counts as true.' And this environment, or discourse, is fertile soil for second- and third-order cultural producers to engage in.

Slick operators like Kohls (and even Elon Musk on a different level) and ordinary social media users see an opportunity to tap into the discourse that is already framing the "truth" from above, which, in turn, opens the door to an audience that is already embedded and primed to engage in this discourse. In the case of Kohls, from his 'making-of' video, we can see that he employs the language of the discourse created in large by Trump. For example, Kohls describes his intent to say "the things we're all thinking," not because they are verifiable and thus true, but because they are "brutally honest" (Kohls [@Mr Reagan], 2024b). As well, he notes that many of his viewers of his parody video insisted the AI-cloned voice in fact *was* "true," and that they "verbatim" treated the perceived mimicry as evidence of truth. And for ordinary social media

users, posting AI-generated images that evoke intense emotional responses gain uptake because they now appear for this audience (as Amy Kremer perfectly illustrates) “emblematic” of the truth and thereby merit engagement.

It is important to understand that a central reason for actors such as Kohls and ordinary users to tap into the discourse created by Trump is because it is profitable; because it provides access to an already primed audience, it is an easy way to quickly acquire symbolic and economic capital. In a way, Trump has created a ready-made truth, and thereby, an easily accessible ready-made audience which increases views, watch-time and subscriber counts – all metrics that lead to financial gain for the second- and third-order cultural producer. As journalist Charlie Warzel puts it: “to defect to the right is a proven lucrative path and, just as important, a way to find a highly engaged audience who’s ready to leap to your defense online” (Warzel, 2024). Moreover, by playing into this constructed reality cemented by Trump, second- and third-order cultural producers further legitimize this very discourse because it adds exposure to the false narratives promoted at the top level, or first order, of cultural production.

The bottom line is that by using burgeoning AI systems, Trump himself has generated a particular discourse and thus deployed elements of ‘knowledge’ to his advantage. This is the generative essence of the power to strategically name truth regardless of the facts. When the time came, whether voters cast their ballots based on manufactured and false realities or others simply did not show up to voting booths, Trump had enough cultural producers and voters onside to beat the odds and ultimately win the presidency. And part of his success stems from the fact that the actual truth, objective reality, does not matter at all within this AI-enabled discourse. Be it for political or financial reasons or both, these burgeoning AI technologies now permit those who have no compunction against lying to construct visual truth or promote apathy towards reality.

What is perhaps most concerning is that the 2024 US election was only a taste of what is to come if these technologies continue to be developed and used in an unbridled manner. Therefore, it is crucial to reflect on possible solutions to the democratically erosive AI-led issues put forth in this thesis.

Although counter-technologies are being developed and deployed (to some extent) to combat AI-generated visual disinformation, the online news environment is enduring an “infocalypse” (Warzel, 2018). There is simply too much information out there for audiences to be

able to discern truth from falsehood (Pocol et al., 2023). And instead of tackling this issue, social media platforms, such as X and Facebook, are shying away from fact-checking (Oxford, 2025).

Nevertheless, fact-checking alone may be insufficient to counteract the effect of AI-generated visual disinformation. Consider here the, albeit diminishing, efforts taken by some social media platforms on which AI slop proliferates to curb disinformation by flagging visuals as potentially doctored with warning labels. While some of the examples of AI slop examined in the case study, for example, were flagged as potential misinformation (O'Rorke, 2024a; O'Rorke, 2024b), because even explicitly doctored photos fester in our memories, these efforts may have had a negligible effect. Scholars also argue that platforms' reliance on such warning labels simply offloads the responsibility of policing misinformation onto users (Bakir & McStay, 2018). As well, spectators may forget the discrediting source and still later consider and use the information as reliable: repeated exposure increases processing fluency – the subjective ease with which our minds process information – and thus perceived truth; and labels often do not supply corrective explanations (Mills, 2021; p. 121). And lastly, AI slop is likely to take hold of a spectator's memory when it aligns with their pre-existing beliefs or emotional expectations. AI slop festers in our minds when it makes "sense to our political worldview… and when [it is] corroborated and shared by like-minded people" (Resnik, 2018), thus rendering questionable the efficacy of warning labels to curb visual disinformation.

Similarly, regulating the development and employment of these AI technologies may not suffice either. For example, in response to Kohls' parody video, California's attempt to outlaw deceptive deepfakes in campaigns quickly became entangled in First Amendment debates (Korte, 2024; Zeff, 2024). Democracies are wrestling with how to balance free expression with the need to prevent willful deception. Meanwhile, in the case of the U.S., foreign adversaries and non-state agitators observe these dynamics, and plot influence operations that exploit internal divisions and the difficulty of verifying 'truth' online, as the Russian-funded influencer network Tenet Media exemplifies (Suderman & Swenson, 2024). Moreover, the velocity with which AI is advancing poses a dilemma in regard to regulatory frameworks, as "the lag between AI's fast-paced evolution and the slower democratic process of lawmaking poses risks of either stifling innovation or failing to address new ethical and societal concerns" (Walter, 2024). Although governments have the responsibility to address the consequences of cutting-edge AI systems,

they attempt to do this while holding on to their vested interest to develop and utilize these technologies to maintain competitive economies (Walter, 2024).

Meanwhile, it seems entirely speculative whether generative and distributive AI technologies are actually constructive for society in any sense of the word. Presently, the public discourse around AI is oriented around speculative futures – be it social and environmental salvation or catastrophe – while downplaying the real and concrete harms that are currently ongoing. Apart from the serious concerns raised in this thesis, these AI technologies are leading to many more social and environmental harms. For example, the 'AI economy' is built on extraction: generative AI models are developed through the mass scraping of writers' and artists' work without consent (Hao, 2025; p. 27), and a business model that treats personal data as a quarry for prediction markets (p. 106). At the same time, low-wage workers are hired to label toxic content in order to "clean" models by repeatedly viewing sexualized and violent content, often through outsourcing firms in the Global South (p. 140). As well, datacenters consume massive electricity loads and significant volumes of fresh water for cooling (p. 268). Mineral extraction, mostly in the global south, for chips and batteries is also deteriorating ecosystems and reshaping indigenous life in places like Chile's Atacama Desert (p. 264). In the Democratic Republic of Congo, "of the 255,000 labourers mining for cobalt, 40,000 are children, some as young as six years" (Lawson, 2021). And despite this list of problems, of which there are many more, investments into the AI industry are abundant, justified by grand promises: Charismatic tech-CEOs assure the imminent advent of an intelligence age in which AI will cure social ills (Hao, 2025; p. 28) while overlooking the many issues and injustices behind the development and employment of the very systems they develop. As such, this discourse seems to function simply to legitimize continued extraction and investment while shifting attention away from the social and environmental costs.[17]

[17] As well, credible critics argue that these speculative promises are empty. For example, cognitive scientist, Gary Marcus, agreeing with the 'father of modern linguistics,' Noam Chomsky's position, argues that large language models (AI chatbots) need to be hardcoded with symbolic structures instead of solely relying on the current method of development of scaling and self-learning techniques. Marcus argues that relying on the increase of data and computation power cannot solve artificial general intelligence, or AGI (Marcus, 2023), a popular marker of progress for AI systems. (Although definitions vary, AGI is most commonly understood as a state in which AI systems can carry out any cognitive task a human worker can).

Moreover, while distributive AI systems are hugely profitable (Zuboff, 2019), the businesses that focus on the development and deployment of generative AI models likely promote and rely on this discourse because generative AI technologies are unprofitable "sinkholes" (Mackintosh, 2025). For example, "Microsoft's share of OpenAI's loss in the three months to Sept. 30 [2025] implies the startup lost more than $12 billion in the quarter" (Mackintosh, 2025). Perhaps this is why OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT, recently shifted from nonprofit toward a capped-profit limited partnership (Hao, 2025, p. 76): to attract sustained capital investment.

Conclusion

In response to these social, environmental and democratic inadequacies, and the economic logic behind distributive AI systems, the "godfather" of AI Geoffrey Hinton has warned that current capitalist dynamics will also concentrate what *potential* progress may be gained into the hands of the powerful. When asked how to ensure AI's benefits are fairly distributed, Hinton's response was "socialism" and stronger regulation (Criddle, 2025; Peston [@ITVPeston], 2025; Novak, 2025).

Importantly, however, it must be acknowledged that the AI-driven field of cultural production is not synonymous with the online information environment more generally. Indeed, certain aspects of modern information technology could be conducive to functional democracy. The democratization of media production and circulation, for instance, could empower voices outside of mainstream media to be heard if engagement and, in turn, profit is not valued above all else, and if production assets and digital literacy learning were socialized. However, under current platform dynamics, the muddying of shared reality and incentivization of creating and spreading of visual disinformation might erode the foundations of political democracy, such as a common factual basis for debate, trust in institutions (including a free press), and in turn, informed participation. Therefore, governments and regulators must more strongly consider systemic and technological changes in how information is managed and consumed. This could, for example, mean reimagining platform algorithms to boost factual information rather than just engaging in information sharing for profit. And it is important that this be considered now. While AI-assisted deepfaking will only become more sophisticated as models continue to develop (Jai

& Shih, 2024), as this thesis creation project makes clear, the current state of the technology is already at the level of producing seamlessly realistic falsifications of reality.

Indeed, through the synthesis of theoretical frameworks and empirical case study findings, this thesis has argued that the online field of cultural production is being transformed by burgeoning AI systems that incentivize the production and promotes the circulation of reality-distorting visual disinformation. Mainly, this is a symptom of the synergistic use of emergent generative AI technology, such as image-generating models, and distributive AI algorithms that have, for some time, steered news distribution through social media feeds. Indeed, generative AI models now function as easily accessible tools available for anyone to effectively fabricate intersubjective realities through the generation of AI simulacra. In this sense, they have democratized the means of creating convincing false narratives, and disinformation more generally, through the persuasive form of visual representation. Visual content has historically provided insight into the happenings of the world beyond our immediate surroundings and has thus functioned as proof of reality, but with the emergence of generative AI models, this is no longer the case. Instead, users of these models exploit the "certificate of presence" that visual representation carries (Barthes, 1981, p. 87). And, more often than not, it seems, the use of these models is incentivized at all levels of cultural production due to the underlying engagement-driven logic of the distributive AI algorithms that increasingly act as curating arbiters of news.

The trajectory within the case study reveals that the synergy between generative and distributive AI has facilitated an emergent regime of truth, where the relationship between power and knowledge is reconfigured. While AI technologies, especially social media feeds, are sometimes celebrated for lowering the technical barriers to entry for cultural production, the findings of this thesis suggest that we are witnessing not the democratization of information, but the democratization of disinformation. Within this new discursive formation, which in this case is fortified by Trump, distributive algorithms, that operate with a radical indifference to factuality, now determine what 'counts as true' based on engagement metrics and emotional resonance (tied to pro-Trump discourse) rather than human editorialization or adherence to factuality. This shift poses an existential threat to professional journalism, which, as John Hartley argues, can only function as a democratic pillar that safeguards publics from political power if its output maintains the status of 'counting as true.'

Moreover, as engagement-driven AI systems prioritize and incentivize the production of sensationalism and symbolic violence over factual accuracy, and as generative AI systems enable this production, the entire news environment can be understood to be cast into a state of hyperreality. And in this hyperreal state, the boundary between the real and the simulated effectively collapses, leaving news consumers to navigate an information ecosystem of simulacra that merely mirrors reality without ever being grounded in it.

The implications of this AI-enabled transformation of the field of cultural production for journalism and functional political democracy are profound. As the line between the real and the simulated blurs, news consumers are caught between two equally corrosive outcomes: belief in nonfactual information or a total disbelief of factual information. These outcomes may very well lead to publics no longer being able to agree or simply engage in a shared intersubjective reality and the consensus-building required for constructive democratic discourse.

Ultimately, this thesis suggests that the 2024 U.S. election was likely a preview of a broader socio-political transformation led by burgeoning AI systems. Without stronger regulation, reimagined platform algorithms, and a critical reflection on the incentive structures of surveillance capitalism, truthful information may continue to degenerate into a capital-driven free-for-all of disinformation proliferation. While the online field of cultural production more generally offers a promise of democratization, in its current unregulated AI-driven state, it instead empowers the forces of those who hold political power through the creation of convenient discourse backed by engagement and thus profit – all at the expense of the public good.

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Figures