

hyperreality in a globalized and digital world

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IMAGE BY KEIICHI MATSUDA

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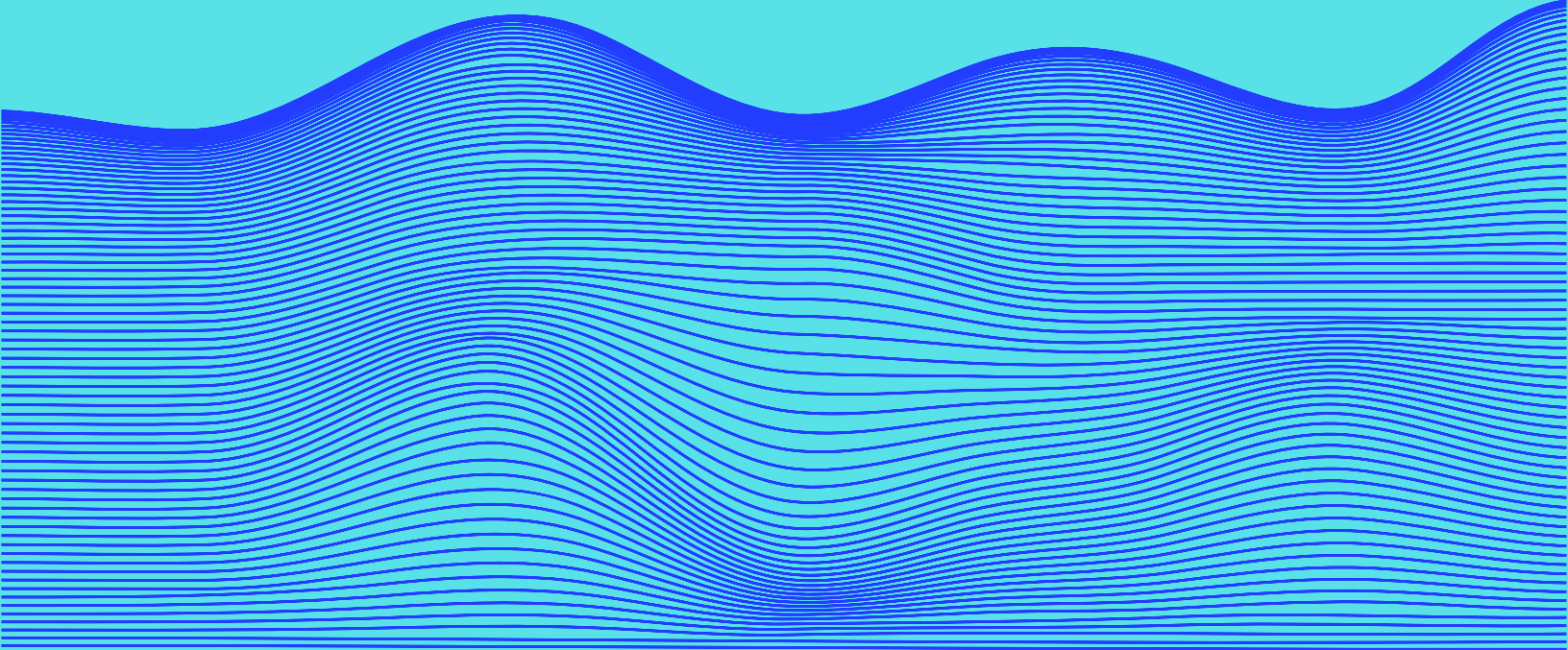
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abstract

The information era has overloaded humans with information, at the cost of meaning. People keep digging through this plethora of information, desperate to find the truth, establishing connections where there aren't any, and spreading harmful, alternate truths in the process. With Twitter being one of the most popular mediums, encouraging concision at the expense of context, 'fake news' often goes viral. Grifters have taken advantage of this, threatening the integrity of journalism, with virality rewarding false truths, creating a pipeline to ignorance and hatred. I looked to the works of foundational scholars in sociology, philosophy, and media studies in order to contextualize and assess the implications of viral, conspiratorial tweets peddling out alternate truths.



HYPERREALITY

the hyperreality of twitter

“
the medium is the
message.
-marshall mcluhan



The power of the medium has historically been exemplified through religious prophets. The angel Gabriel, believed to have revealed God's truth to Muhammad and Jesus, was deemed credible as an angel who transmits the word of God. Perhaps in contemporary times, Twitter exemplifies such power of a medium. As a medium, Twitter is often dubbed a 'microblogging' social media site since it features personalized and interpersonal communication into the public domain, with a 280 character limit (formerly 140), forcing people to be brief and to the point, often at the expense of context, and encouraging the use of vague, populist language. Unlike Facebook and LinkedIn, Twitter is not solely a social networking platform. While Facebook and LinkedIn users have semi-public profiles within a bounded system and connect with people they know offline, Twitter, is a social media platform in which users consume media from people that peak their interests, resulting in interactions with strangers, and more rarely, public figures and celebrities. Tweets are a public version of Facebook's status updates. To interact with others, tweets can take the form of chat room messages, where the @ symbol followed by a username to direct tweets to another user. This is part of a broader shift to interactive media, shown through comment sections on

online news articles or commenting on ratings on sites like ratemyprofessor.com. As opposed to social networking sites, social media sites like Twitter facilitate interactive broadcasting of many individuals to a large audience.

Twitter also provides researchers with new forms of data to collect that answer larger sociological questions, in a way that is inexpensive and easily accessible. It allows the general public to track public discourses on trending topics. The social media site has also been linked to political and social uprisings, such as the Arab Spring.

The true message delivered by media, decoded and consumed deeply and unassumingly, is not in the content of the sounds and images they deliver, but in the technical essence of those media amidst a consumer society engendered by symbolic and interactional exchanges. The form of media embeds itself in its message, fostering a symbiotic relationship where the medium influences the message perceived, and is as influential if not more, than the message relayed. Although the internet and Twitter was developed after his death, McLuhan was among the first to theorize how technology and communication create a "global village."

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The act of tweeting is informed by individual contributions, making it a form of self-presentation and self-production, reflective of Descartes' "I think therefore I am." Even the most banal tweets serve as a reaffirmation of one's existence, and because of its accessibility, it allows even the most ordinary person to be more visible by turning themselves into media content. However, this increased visibility is not to be conflated with the democratization of media, because no amount of public participation in game shows, reality TV, and social media will diminish media industries and companies' control of the symbolic economy, nevermind the state's ability to limit access, like the Egyptian government did in 2011 during the height of protests in the region.

Following Elon Musk's purchase of the app, Twitter as a medium is exhibiting major changes, changes that highlight philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard's ideas in more obvious ways. Baudrillard describes the state of the world we live in as "hyperreality," in which capitalism as an economic system has become dominated by signs and symbols rather than actual things, made possible by the transition from a society characterized by industrial production to one based on the production of information via computerization.

For some context, Elon Musk considers himself a champion of free speech, hence his first tweet, upon acquiring the app, "Comedy is now legal on twitter." Although, since his acquisition of the app it appears left-wing accounts are being deplatformed while right-wing accounts are being replatformed and amplified. Musk has outsourced

who to suspend based on the platform's right wing extremists such as Andy Ngo, a far right conspiratorial writer, in turn suspending accounts such as @chadloeder and @vps_reports that report on police violence and alt-right wing extremists. The app has also seen dramatic increases in the use of hate speech. Based on his tweets and his public statements, it seems Musk thought Twitter was run by SJW liberals suppressing free speech by suspending accounts. Although it is far more likely Twitter was run by business people trying to sustain a successful business model and make money, that is, until Musk bought the app and fired everyone. It is likely that he will trial and error his ways back to the exact former policies, or the app would succumb to irrelevance, given that follower counts are dropping, advertisers are leaving, and public figures are denouncing the app. Most importantly, the information shared about the inner-workings of Twitter and the subsequent discourse following Musk's purchase of the app are centered around the medium of Twitter itself, and how its content now revolves around the owner's personal beliefs. The medium is thereby feeding on itself, becoming its own topic of discussion, creating a very meta, or hyperreal moment.



i tweet therefore i am.
-dhiraj murthy

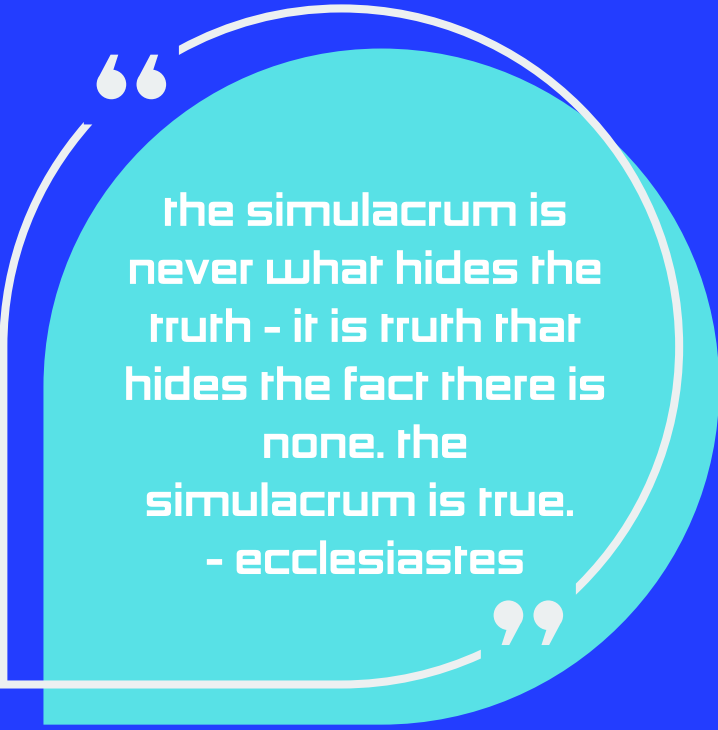


HYPERREALITY

Baudrillard begins *Simulacra and Simulation* quoting Ecclesiastes from the Old Testament, except if you read Ecclesiastes, you will not find anything like this quote. This quote is a simulacrum. Readers unfamiliar with Ecclesiastes, who do not go back to fact check it, will assume it as real, and in turn this quote takes on a hyperreal quality, shaping readers' newfound familiarity with Ecclesiastes. Readers walk away with the belief that the quote is real (nevermind the fact that much of the meaning from the original scriptures in the Bible have been lost in translation and context), rendering it a simulacrum. However, although it is a simulacrum, it is not a lie, as a simulacrum hides the fact there is no truth, and without truth, there is no lie. Note that Baudrillard never cites which chapter or verse, and one may assume that it summarizes the central theme of the book of Ecclesiastes. Suspected to be written by King Solomon of Jerusalem, often dubbed the wisest man in history, Ecclesiastes posits that all things are done in vain, that life lacks meaning and lasting value, and that God, rather than temporary pleasures, are the only way to find personal meaning.

Twitter has a verification system, allowing public figures like celebrities or journalists to be verified, allegedly to prevent the spread of misinformation. Musk wanted to further monetize the app, after spending \$44 billion on to purchase an app now worth \$8 billion, by introducing Twitter Blue, in which users can buy verification for \$8 a month. What has ensued, is the most spectacular corporate disaster of the century, perhaps its rights will be fought over by Netflix and Hulu to make an award-winning miniseries.

What seemingly started as attempts to go viral and make people laugh, could potentially result



**the simulacrum is
never what hides the
truth - it is truth that
hides the fact there is
none. the
simulacrum is true.
- ecclesiastes**

in Elon Musk being sued by larger multinational companies until he files for bankruptcy. Although Section 230 of Twitter's terms and conditions generally would prevent a suit against Twitter, the damage is caused by Twitter's verification badge, which is not necessarily user-generated, so it is possible Twitter could face liability for implementing the verification badge on accounts engaging in impersonation. So what is this damage?

The Twitter account representing pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly and Co. tweeted "We are excited to announce that insulin is now free." Only it wasn't actually someone working within Eli Lilly & Co. public relations or social media management that tweeted this. It was a user that purchased verification as part of Twitter Blue. Although it did not take long for Twitter users to realize this, the tweet sparked a discourse on the history and ethics of pricing life-saving medicine, and resulted in financial downfalls resulting in the loss in billions in market capitalization for Eli Lilly & Co.

**we live in a world where there
is more and more information,
and less and less meaning.
- jean baudrillard**

@LockheedMartini, representing the American weapons company tweeted, "We will begin halting all weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United States until further investigation into their record of human rights abuses." Their share price dropped 5.5% as a result, and its capitalization dropped by over \$7 billion. Bank of America's former head of global media claimed the accounts generated an "overwhelming reputational risk," and media professionals and companies advised against Twitter advertisements in response. The average American is at the very least aware that medicine costs money, and that the US military uses weapons in war. Less known to the public are the details of the corporate entities like Eli Lilly & Co price gouging life-saving medicine or Lockheed Martin helping to terrorize the globe with its arms sales. These tweets not only wiped billions off the stock market, but also shaped an unfamiliar public's perception of these companies in the same way Baudrillard's readers' perceptions of Ecclesiastes are influenced by his quotation. In this sense, the case of Twitter Blue is a prime example of simulacra in a state of hyperreality.

The first known incident of this was done by comedian and actor @jaboukie, whose fame commenced through his tweets. As a rising comedian, he was verified, and frequently went viral for his humor. Around this time, the official FBI Twitter account tweeted in memory of Martin Luther King Jr. In response, the tweet resulted in a lot of discourse highlighting the alleged role the FBI and CIA played in his assassination. Shortly

after, verified Twitter user @jaboukie, pretending to be the FBI by changing his display name and profile photo, tweeted "Just because we killed MLK doesn't mean we can't miss him." The joke not only cost Jaboukie his verification status, but also began to reshape the way in which twitter users who saw the tweet think about the FBI and its troublesome history and hypocrisy.

In an increasingly online world, there is a special nexus between visual information and political beliefs, one that Twitter under the reign of Elon Musk encapsulates, perhaps in more obvious ways than ever before. Despite the astounding rate at which we navigate visual data through social media, search engines, memes, icons, smartphones, platforms, and interfaces, there remains a lack in literacies developed to debunk bad information. The digital age ensued an automated, rapid production of information that is devoid of human intervention. Humans are the mechanisms by which meaning is created from information, but in the digital information age, the production of information and meaning operate in tandem, suggesting three possible hypotheses accounting for the increasing lack of meaning in the face of seemingly endless information: meaning cannot keep up with the supply of information; meaning is a separate system from information; information destroys meaning. Historically, we have seen the latter in debates of science and theology, as the information brought forth through science takes away meaning people derive from religious beliefs preceding scientific

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**you can have data without
information, but you
cannot have information
without data.
- daniel keys moran**

discovery, accounting for the ongoing battle between the American Christian right and scientific discovery.

In the digital age, our lives, especially our sociopolitical realities, are regulated by the online environments we partake in. In the U.S., the aftermath of the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections dramatically illustrates the lack of media literacies among Americans, hence their susceptibility to “fake news,” or bad information deliberately meant to exacerbate existing political prejudices via misleading or false reports that spreads virally despite the internet’s vast capabilities to fact-check (Meyer 2018). There is a paradoxical relationship between the increase of data in the digital age, and the interpretation of less accurate information, best exemplified by the QAnon conspiracy born out of the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Hannah 2021). We have arguably entered a new era of extremely-online conspiratorial thinking, one characterized by beliefs of global, online censorship and shadowbanning of conservative right-wing platforms.

Being exposed to massive amounts of data has accustomed Americans to rely on visual interpretations to make sense of it. These visual interpretations are often associated with a sense of authenticity and authority, despite lacking any empirical observation, and is especially evident in the online world of conspiracy theorizing. This results in a nexus between the visualization of

information and conspiracy theorizing, which rely on a unique sort of negligence between concepts of data and information. While data and information are often used interchangeably, they differ in regards to interpretation and context. Information is “that which is obtained by the processing of data” (Oxford English Dictionary). It is also the realization of the informational potential of data, and is thereby the process of receiving, perceiving, and translating data into knowledge (Meadow and Yuan 1997). Data is a set of sensory stimuli, or symbols and signs representing such stimuli, constructed to account for any form of perceived differences in the world, while information is the meaning derived from data, creating empirical knowledge (Ko 2021).

The distinction between data, information, and knowledge lies in progression. Data leads to information, which leads to knowledge, which can produce a response or action (Marsh 2012). The last step is arguably the most dangerous, as it can foster unpredictable and violent behaviors. In conspiratorial theorization, amidst an age with an immense scale of possible data sources, people rely on Internet searches and collaborative research, increasing the possibility of apophenia, or the tendency to perceive a connection between unrelated or random things. This leads to information warfare, which has co-opted the gathering and visualization of information to communicate data about our world, in order to present ridiculous unhinged theories about our political realities.