Cognitive Warfare
Grey Matters in Contemporary Political Conflict

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7 Grey Matters in Technologies

From Terrorism to Insurrection via Information and Communication Technologies

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I have so far discussed a range of examples of cognitive warfare in international affairs and in the domestic context. However, in order to understand cognitive warfare in its modern form, we need to see it in relation to information and communication technologies. Information operations have frequently been driven by, and exploited by, the particular information and communication technologies of their time; think of the use of pamphlets by anarchist terrorists in the late 19th century and radio in the early- to mid-20th century (Laqueur 1977). Similarly, cognitive warfare needs to be understood by reference to modern information and communication technologies, in particular, technologies such as social media, big data, and smartphones that have revolutionised information conflict. Tracking developments in cognitive warfare from modern terrorism, to social media, through the upheavals in modern liberal democracies, COVID-19, and election skepticism, this chapter shows how modern technologies are playing a core role in cognitive warfare.

Stochastic Terrorism and Social Media

In Chapter 6, I discussed Al Qaeda's attack on the United States on 11 September 2001, noting that the footage of the attack on New York played a significant role in shaping people's perceptions of the attack. Following this attack, Al Qaeda became the focus of significant military and intelligence efforts from countries around the world, and they were forced to evolve in order to survive. Efforts were led by NATO in 2001, which became the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan in 2003, and at "its height, the force was more than 130,000 strong with troops from 50 NATO and partner countries" (NATO n.d.). Then, in 2003, the United States led a small coalition of countries in an invasion of Iraq. As one of the coalition leaders, David Killcullen, notes,

> The West's strategy after 9/11 – derailed by the invasion of Iraq, exacerbated by our addiction to killing terrorist leaders, hastened by precipitate withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, opportunism in Libya, and passivity in the face of catastrophe in Syria – carried the seeds of disaster within it.
> (Kilcullen 2016, 4)

The failure to have a comprehensive plan for Iraq after Saddam Hussein's defeat help sow the seeds for the emergence of the so-called Islamic State (IS).

So-called IS developed a particularly barbaric brand of warfare and international terrorism, utilising deliberately shocking tactics such as beheadings, crucifixions, and immolation. For a period of a few years in the mid-2010s, so-called IS posed a significant threat to people in the areas of Iraq and Syria that they occupied and were linked to a series of high-profile and ongoing attacks throughout the rest of world (Kilcullen 2016). Directing and inspiring attacks throughout countries such as France, England, the United States, Philippines, Australia, so-called IS were seen as the main international terrorist threat around the world.

Social media was essential to their strategy. As Haroro Ingram writes, "the overarching purpose of IS messaging [was] to shape the perceptions and polarise the support of contested populations" (Ingram 2015, 730). In order to do this, so-called IS developed, tested, and promoted a widespread propaganda campaign, with social media at its core.

> The reach and accessibility that social media provides generally was leveraged extensively by IS to distribute a wide range of sophisticated, nuanced, and frequently integrated and interrelated propaganda, consistently reinforcing key messages to their various audiences. It was this exploitation of communications technology method that enabled IS to distribute both an enormous volume and a wide variety of propaganda, seeking to achieve a range of purposes.
>
> (West and Henschke 2021, 71)

The global nature of social media was exploited by so-called IS, giving them international notoriety and the belief that they could extend into, influence, and draw from people all over the world.

This explains the particular threat that many felt around the world from so-called IS. While the vast majority of their carnage and destruction were in Iraq and Syria, they managed to inspire collective and lone wolf attacks in a range of countries.

> In conjunction with the broader body of violent propaganda, and the extensive efforts to provide theological and political justificatory propaganda, IS succeeded in radicalising hundreds of young men into attempting terrorist violence in their home countries. . . . In the context of the well-established narrative of global jihadism, these acts of relatively low-level terrorist violence were able to achieve disproportionate impacts on Western jurisdictions through their combination of shocking violence, and the regular exploitation of information and communications technology.
>
> (West and Henschke 2021, 74)

Further to this, so-called IS engaged in considerable efforts to use social media to draw foreign fighters to their war in Iraq and Syria (Weimann 2016). For instance, the declaration of the Caliphate in June 2014 is considered to have played a major role in drawing foreign fighters to the conflict (Gates and Podder 2015, 113). The effectiveness of declaring the Caliphate as a recruitment tool was heavily enhanced by the use of social media to publicise this declaration. While it is important not to overstate the importance of social media in so-called IS's success – their survival and impact was significantly tied to their military success and subsequent defeats on the ground in Iraq and Syria [Ingram](Ingram 2017) – so-called IS used social media to "reinforce their narratives to multiple audiences, contribute . . . to recruitment and radicalisation, and of most consequence to Western security agencies, [was] increasingly responsible for substantially contributing to terrorist attacks in Western countries" (West 2016, 9–10).

We can also see the impacts of social media in the strategies of right-wing terrorism. In 2011, 77 people were killed in a well-planned and orchestrated attack in Oslo, Norway. In order to try to explain his attack, the perpetrator produced a manifesto that "replicated earlier anti-Islamic and right-wing extremist ideology and political narratives and partly composed a new rationale for terrorism" (Berntzen and Sandberg 2014, 760). This manifesto was released online and has been subsequently been implicated in other right-wing terrorist attacks. For instance, in a 2019 attack on Muslim worshippers in Christchurch, New Zealand, the perpetrator of this attack cited the Oslo attacker as an inspiration (Brzuszkiewicz 2020, 74). This attacker produced his own manifesto,

> which broadly revolved around the conspiracy theory of 'The Great Awakening,' whilst drawing on various theme including fear of Muslim conquests (as epitomised in the past by Ottoman rule), White genocide . . . (orchestrated by increasing birth-rates and migration patterns of Muslims and other non-whites into Europe, the US, New Zealand); occurrences of immigrant violence against White Europeans and concerns over overpopulation and eco-fascism.
>
> (Lucas and Baldino 2021)

This manifesto was also released online, using social media. And the "killing spree itself was self-broadcasted to social media, with hundreds of thousands of viewers witnessing the events before the live-stream was taken down approximately hours after its initial broadcast started" (Lucas and Baldino 2021). If terrorism is the propaganda of the deed, then information and communication technologies like social media are the current tools used to communicate that propaganda.

One of the challenges around understanding and explaining the role of social media in modern terrorism, regardless of its political, religious, ideological, or social motivation, is whether social media can *explain* the

radicalisation and ultimate violent actions of these people. On the one hand, like everything else in the modern era, the use of information and communication technologies has had a profound impact on terrorism.

> Social media are used as a tool to lure recruits with the promise of attachments, affirmation, and sense of belonging. . . . The process of radicalization occurring without social interaction is improbable, thus highlighting the importance of online connections to explain self-radicalization.
>
> (Hollewell and Longpré 2022, 901)

On the other hand, however, many people online are exposed to a range of extremist content and material, and they do not radicalise, much less engage in violent political actions.

One way of resolving this challenge has been the concept of 'stochastic terrorism.' The basic idea of stochastic terrorism draws from probability. "It describes a pattern that cannot be predicted precisely but can be analyzed statistically" (Amman and Meloy 2021). On this approach, consider that a particular speaker is inciting people to violent action online. The speaker has a wide audience, and while we cannot say with certainty that this specific person or that specific person will be radicalised or incited to violent acts by the speech, we can understand probabilistically that the speaker's actions connect to a given outcome. Following the Christchurch attacks, for instance, a New York man had shared the "video of the Christchurch attack, [was] active in white supremacist Facebook groups and [discussed] potential violence with his cousin" and was subsequently arrested and charged by the FBI (Stack 2019). While it is certainly hard to *prove* that social media around the Christchurch attacks were *the* causal feature that drove this person to start planning an attack of their own, it seems statistically sensible to speak of the Christchurch attacks and their influence on these people's plans in New York. Likewise, while it is a simplification to state that social media was *the* most important aspect of so-called IS's terrorist activities, given the importance of lone wolf attacks and drawing foreign fighters to the conflict in Iraq and Syria, to understand their rise and impacts without reference to social media misses a vital element of their strategies and practices.

The basic point of this section is that we can use the idea of stochastic terrorism to help explain the role of social media in cognitive warfare. Speaking of *stochastic influences* allows us to capture the idea that social media – underpinned by information and communication technologies – is a particularly important feature not simply in modern political violence and propaganda but that it is also a dangerous reduction to see cognitive warfare *only* through the lens of social media. Moreover, one has to be quite careful and avoid saying that cognitive warfare and modern information operations are simply just about information and communication technologies. As we have seen in the previous chapters, information conflict is an old phenomenon that

predates the rise of social media. That said, information and communication technologies are playing a significant role in the evolution of information conflict and are a defining feature of cognitive warfare.

Psychographic Profiling and Perspecticide

To expand this point, we must also take into account the role of big data and analytics in shaping modern information conflict. We live in an era of information, where there are vast amounts of information that can be produced, collected, aggregated, analysed, communicated, and sold. This is the basis for the development in informational power that is driving the evolution of cognitive warfare. Here we need to see big data in a context of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019), in which that information gains its value and power through the analysis of vast amounts of data. The range of new information and communication technologies that underpin this surveillance allow virtual identities to be created for individuals and groups (Henschke 2017). These virtual identities are now being put to use for political ends.

In 2012, Barack Obama was returned as US president, and many credited this win with the Obama campaign's use of big data. They utilised a

> massive data effort that helped Obama raise $1 billion, remade the process of targeting TV ads and created detailed models of swing-state voters that could be used to increase the effectiveness of everything from phone calls and door knocks to direct mailings and social media.
>
> (Scherer 2012)

Basically, the Obama campaign had started using high volumes of data to identify and target potential donors, to craft the tone and content of their messaging, and to target specific areas and potential voters. Further to this, they started using Facebook to target people.

> [People] were told to click a button to automatically urge those targeted voters to take certain actions, such as registering to vote, voting early or getting to the polls. The campaign found that roughly 1 in 5 people contacted by a Facebook pal acted on the request, in large part because the message came from someone they knew.
>
> (Scherer 2012)

Importantly, it was not simply that the Obama campaign was using vast amounts of data to guide their decision-making, they were using social media to push messaging, pivoting off the social connections between people to enhance their messaging.

This was a nascent recognition of the ways that big data, collected and deployed in a social context, could be used to sway individual's behaviours, and other people were taking note. By directly communicating "select messages to select voters, the microtargeting of the Obama campaign had started

a journey toward the privatisation of public discourse in America" (Wylie 2020, 14). A group in the United Kingdom, Strategic Communication Laboratories (SCL) sought to utilise this for their services. SCL "worked primarily for militaries, conducting psychological and influence operations around the world, such as jihadist recruitment mitigation in Pakistan, combatant disarmament and demobilisation in South Sudan, and counternarcotics and counter-human trafficking operations in Latin America" (Wylie 2020, 39). What SCL sought to do was to combine their PSYOP and influence operations with big data, particularly, psychological profiles.

> With the advent of social media, suddenly military and security agencies had direct access to the minds, and lives of [people] all around the world. What social media offered was a trail of detailed personal information that previously would have taken months of careful observation to gather. The targets were in effect creating their own dossiers with rich data that could quicken a psychologist's assessment of their disposition. This spurred a host of research into psychological profiling that could be automated with machine-learning algorithms.
> (Wylie 2020, 49–50)

SCL began to use big data as part of their political services. They then started testing and selling the idea that, through big data, they could craft and hone messaging that could influence a narrow and specific audience's political inclinations.

They started working with the government in Trinidad and Tobago, who

> wanted to know whether it was possible to use data to identify Trinidadians who were more likely to commit crimes [and] whether it was possible to predict when and how they might do it . . . They knew that if [SCL] built a tool to forecast behaviour, they could use it in elections.
> (Wylie 2020, 52–53)

In order to achieve this, the Trinidadian government furnished SCL with raw census data and gave them access to all internet traffic in real time (Wylie 2020, 53).

SCL began to develop what whistleblower Chris Wylie called "a non-kinetic weapon designed for scaled *perspecticide* – the active deconstruction and manipulation of popular perception" (emphasis original, Wylie 2020, 48). They way that they did this was to use the vast amounts of data that Facebook had on people and to utilise that to craft specific messages that would not simply appeal to people but would exploit their existing beliefs, motivations, and moods.

> First we used focus groups and qualitative observation to unpack the perceptions of a given population and learn what people cared about . . . We then came up with hypotheses for how to sway opinions.

> [We] tested these hypotheses with target segments in online panels or experiments to see whether they performed as the team expected, based on the data. We also pulled Facebook profiles, looking for patterns in order to build a neural network algorithm that would help us make predictions.
>
> (Wylie 2020, 119)

Information and communication technologies were absolutely essential to this. The data was originally drawn from social media, and AI and other technological methods were used to create the psychographic profiles. These psychographic profiles were then used to develop messaging and content, and again, social media was then used to test and ultimately communicate these messages.

While some might see this simply as sophisticated marketing, SCL's efforts have three particular features that are essential to discuss. First, the data that they were gathering and using was done either illegally, or at very least, with little to no consent from the sources of that data. In standard human research ethics, any research participant must know what information is being collected on them and have a reasonable understanding of what it is being collected for, and who will be using it (Verheggen and van Wijmen 1996; Beauchamp and Childress 2001). Without this, the basic conditions of informed consent have not been met. In the SCL case, none of those conditions were met. Large amounts of data were gathered through apps like 'MyPersonality,' "which offered users a personality profile for using the app" (Wylie 2020, 100). This app, however, was integrated into people's Facebook accounts, and when

> a person used their app, [the app's developers] could receive not only that person's Facebook data, but the data of their friends as well . . . [Facebook] viewed being a user of Facebook as enough consent to take their data.
>
> (Wylie 2020, 100)

They developed another app called ThisIsYourDigitalLife that also scraped data from Facebook. In Australia, 53 people used the app, which reportedly led to approximately 310,000 Facebook user's data being gathered. In New Zealand, 10 people used it, leading to approximately 64,000 people's data being gathered (Knaus 2018). In short, they used apps like MyPersonality and ThisIsYourDigitalife, Facebook's lax concerns about data privacy, and a lack of any concern about informed consent to build detailed virtual identities for people. Andrew Wigmore, communications director for Leave.EU, described the process as this:

> [U]sing artificial intelligence, as we did, tells you all sorts of things about that individual and how to convince them with what sort of advert.

And you knew there would also be other people in their network who liked what they liked, so you could spread. And then you follow them. The computer never stops learning and it never stops monitoring.

(Quoted in Cadwalladr 2017b)

The purpose of these tools was to influence people's political beliefs, motivations, and behaviours. For instance, they identified "a series of cognitive biases that [were hypothesized to] interact with latent racial bias. Over the course of many experiments, [they] concocted an arsenal of psychological tools that could be deployed systematically via social media, blogs, groups and forums" (Wylie 2020, 127). The access to big data, and using increasingly sophisticated analyses, they developed a range of psychographic profiles which were then deployed to exploit existing beliefs and motivations. "And this is, in essence, how you weaponise data: you figure out which bits of salient information to pull to the fore to affect how a person feels, what she believes, and how she behaves" (Wylie 2020, 66). Earlier PSYOP efforts like this would either only be able to do this for a specific target; doing so at a community or population level was simply not feasible. Social media allowed for identification of specific targets and let you hit them with increasingly accurate precision.

The second feature which makes this case particularly problematic is that this was done explicitly for political purposes. In 2013, the SCL group met with and paired with Steven Bannon, a political actor who subsequently became Donald Trump's 2016 campaign advisor and was on his national security council. Bannon then helped introduce SCL members to the Mercer family, who are political donors with a set of very strong political preferences (Cadwalladr 2017a). Having outlined what SCL's psychographic profiling could potentially do in political campaigns, the Mercer family agreed to fund further research and activity for at least US$15 million (Wylie 2020, 58–94). From this, Cambridge Analytica was born.

Cambridge Analytica, under Bannon's guidance, became increasingly involved in political operations. "Bannon wanted to fight a cultural war, and so he had come to the people who specialised in informational weapons to help him build his arsenal" (Wylie 2020, 67). Running experiments in the US state of Virginia, they started honing their political arsenal, soon coming to the realisation that they "were able to sway voter's opinions by tailoring the candidate's message to match their psychometric tests" (Wylie 2020, 71). As will be discussed in a later chapter, this combination of exploitation of people's psychological biases with the desire for changing political outcomes poses significant ethical and political concerns.

These concerns come to the fore when we see the third aspect of Cambridge Analytica's actions. SCL had historically dealt with a large of range of clients, some of whom were likely engaged in ethically and politically controversial actions. As Cambridge Analytica gained notoriety and attention, they started working with a range of Russian actors.

> Keeping true to its origins in foreign information operations, there were new characters arriving at Cambridge Analytica's London offices almost daily . . . It was obvious that many of these men were associates of Russian oligarchs who wanted to influence a foreign government, but their interest in foreign politics was rarely ideological.
>
> (Wylie 2020, 133)

However, in 2014 Cambridge Analytica started working with the Russian oil company Lukoil (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison 2018). Not long after this, Cambridge Analytica started asking US citizens about their attitudes to Russia and Vladimir Putin (Wylie 2020, 137). Further to this, one of SCL and Cambridge Analytica's lead researchers and app developers Alexandr Kogan was working in Russia, "identifying disordered people and exploring their potential for trolling behaviour on social networks . . . [and] also explored political themes on Facebook, finding that high scorers in psychopathy were the most likely to post about authoritarian political issues" (Wylie 2020, 138). Building off of Kogan's research, they realised that "with the right kind of nudges, [these people] could be lured into extreme thoughts or behaviour" (Wylie 2020, 139). So we see here that Cambridge Analytica was developing a set of tools that could be used to shift people's ideas, beliefs, motivations, with the hope of changing their actions. This knowledge was being developed with the hope to influence political outcomes, and they were possibly connected to Russian actors. This combination soon bore fruit with the 'Brexit' vote in the United Kingdom.

On 23 June 2016, the United Kingdom underwent the 'United Kingdom European Union Membership Referendum,' (typically referred to as Brexit) to decide whether the United Kingdom should stay in the European Union (EU) or not. To the shock of many in the United Kingdom and around the world, the campaign to leave was ultimately successful, with an over 1.2 million more people voting in favour of 'Brexit' than remaining in the EU. According to Wylie, Cambridge Analytica's psychographic profiling played a decisive role in this outcome. As part of the campaign, Cambridge Analytica and an associated company AggregateIQ (AIQ) were hired to help in the Leave.EU and Vote Leave campaigns, respectively. For their part,

> Vote Leave and AIQ had together disseminated more than a hundred different ads with 1,433 different messages to their target voters in the weeks leading up to the referendum . . . [the ads were] targeted at a narrow segment of a few million voters, which resulted in their newsfeeds being dominated by Vote Leave messages.
>
> (Wylie 2020, 171)

The work pioneered by Cambridge Analytica helped guide the AIQ strategy, their messaging often seeking to provoke anger and indignation in their targeted audience, with the hope that this would override the economically

rational arguments being put forward by the Remain campaign (Wylie 2020, 172). As Wylie details, there were likely connections between Cambridge Analytica and AIQ (Wylie 2020, 155–73), and both groups were fined for running afoul of UK campaign financing laws (The Electoral Commission 2018a, 2018b).

In addition to this, there seems to be a series of connections between the various parts of pro Brexit groups, Cambridge Analytica, and Russian interests. One of the main parties supporting Brexit was the UK Independence Party (UKIP), who used Cambridge Analytica to "map the British electorate and what they believe in, enabling us to engage with voters" (Wylie 2020, 216). Arron Banks and Andy Wigmore "the top donors to UKIP and Leave. EU" had multiple meetings with a Russian diplomat and the Russian ambassador in London (Wylie 2020, 217). While it might seem of interest to the UK government to have sought intelligence on whether there was any foreign influence in the Brexit referendum, a subsequent Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament investigation found that the government "had not seen or sought evidence of successful interference in UK democratic processes or any activity that has had a material impact on an election, for example influencing results" (Intelligence And Security Committee Of Parliament 2020). While it is incorrect to state that there is proof of Russian involvement in the Brexit outcome, there were certainly a set of reasons to investigate connections. As Stewart Hostie, "a Scottish National party MP who sits on the cross-party committee" stated, "The UK Government have actively avoided looking for evidence that Russia interfered. We were told that they hadn't seen any evidence, but that is meaningless if they hadn't looked for it" (Quoted in Sabbagh, Harding, and Roth 2020). Moreover, it is hard to say that the actions of Cambridge Analytica and AIQ decisively led to the Brexit outcome.

This, however, brings us back to the idea of stochastic influence. Recall that in the previous section, I discussed the idea of stochastic terrorism, to explain how a particular speech act can be said to have probably played a role in a terrorist action, despite the lack of an explicit and definitive causal connection. Stochastic influencing seems to be an ideal way of capturing the sense that psychographic profiles can contribute to perspecticide: through the use of big data and AI, a significant enough proportion of a target population can be influenced to cause political outcomes through the exploitation of cognitive biases relating to political beliefs, motivations, and behaviours.

Zeitgeist and Zersetzung

Brexit was the first of two major political shocks to liberal democracies in 2016, with the second being the unlikely election of Trump as US President on 8 November. Just like the Brexit vote, information and communication technologies, and Russian actions overshadowed the campaign and his ultimate win. More than this, we see Cambridge Analytica and Bannon playing central roles in Trump's campaign and probably contributing to his win.

On 16 June 2015, Trump announced his candidacy to seek nomination for the Republican representative in the 2016 campaign. Immediately, he received massive media attention around the world for making statements that were divisive and shocking.

> When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. . . . They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with [them]. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.
>
> (Trump 2015)

Statements like this marked the tenor not just of Trump's communications but also of the overall campaign. Trump's communications strategy was to receive widespread and free media coverage by saying shocking, offensive, and unexpected things. Not only did this garner him free press, it also allowed him to present himself as a 'non-politician politician.' And while his campaign was certainly unconventional and, by some accounts, largely uncoordinated compared to the Democrats, this does not mean it lacked vision, strategy, or tactics. These were supplied in part by Bannon and Cambridge Analytica. Bannon became the chief executive of his campaign in August 2016, and Cambridge Analytica identified that a significant cross section of the US community were interested in "term limits, the deep state, draining the swamp, guns and the concept of walls to keep out immigrants. [These] were all explored in 2014, several years before the Trump campaign" (Wylie 2020, 119). Importantly, the campaign's messaging, which had its origins well before Trump started his campaign, was designed to appeal to particular sets of voters who would either not normally vote at all, or would not vote for an establishment politician. A number of people that Cambridge Analytica "were targeting were those who typically didn't vote republican or didn't vote at all. They were trying to expand the electorate through this" (Wylie 2020, 178).

While we ought to remain critical about claims that Cambridge Analytica and Bannon single-handedly engineered the Trump win, we can understand how the strategy and tactics may have played a probabilistic role in the outcome. And essential to this stochastic influence is the idea that Trump and Bannon both recognised the zeitgeist, that many voters were fed up with politics as usual. Particularly when campaigning against a highly disliked candidate like Hillary Clinton who was seen not simply as the arch Democrat but also as the epitome of a career politician, Trump's strategy captured the spirit of the time. Bannon had seen this through his earlier connections to the gaming community, with the so-called Gamergate scandal. Here he "saw that angry, lonely white men could become incredibly mobilised when they felt that their way of life was threatened" (Wylie 2020, 62). Through the psychographic profiling that Cambridge Analytica had been doing, they were

able to target the anger and sense of threat that many people in the United States felt when confronted with social change.

> Straight white men, particularly ones who were older, had grown up with a value set that granted them certain social privileges. . . . As social norms in America evolved, these privileges began to erode . . . and they did not like the feeling of having to change who they felt they were in order to 'pass' in society. . . . They had to hide their true selves to please society – and they were pissed about it.
>
> (Wylie 2020, 116–17)

Trump's unorthodox campaign was custom built to appeal to this widespread sense of anger, fear, and frustration.

At the same time as Bannon and Cambridge Analytica were developing the psychographic tools to target and motivate future Trump supporters, in Russia, a parallel strategy was developing that sought to use information and communication technologies. They used the internet and social media to exploit the social tensions and rifts that were increasing throughout the United States. In 2013, in St Petersburg, Russia, the Internet Research Agency (IRA)[1] was incorporated, funded by Yevgeny Prigozhin (Rid 2020, 399). The basic idea of the IRA was to cultivate a 'troll farm,' where staff would engage in pushing out a range of messages on social media. Starting with commentary on Russian domestic matters in 2013, moving to Ukrainian content in 2014, and then adding the United States to their focus in mid-2014 (Rid 2020, 399–400), the IRA mounted a widespread and persistent propaganda campaign that has also been credited and blamed for ushering Trump into the Whitehouse.

Much like the Brexit campaign, connections between Trump himself, the Trump campaign and Russia are complex, convoluted, and contested. Claims and counter-claims are themselves are part of cognitive warfare. The story of Russian involvement in the Trump campaign is itself a muddy affair and neatly shows the grey matters where different states, actors, and actions are involved. In this case, the former Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer, who was Australian High Commissioner to London in 2016, met with George Papadopoulos in London. Papadopoulos was at the time a foreign policy advisor on the Trump campaign. During this meeting, "Papadopoulos claimed that the Russian government was said to have obtained material on Hillary Clinton . . . and indicated that it could release it anonymously to damage her campaign" (Kerbaj 2022, 269). Downer reported this back to the Australian government in Canberra. Following the public release of emails relating to Clinton, Downer sought a meeting with his US counterpart in London, which served as a "tipping point," prompting the FBI to "open an investigation into Russia's attempts to interfere with the 2016 election" (Lipson and Olson 2019). So here, we have an Australian diplomat

in England, talking to an American about Russian involvement in the United States election due in part to the actions of the international whistleblowing/leaking website, WikiLeaks.

The US intelligence community began to investigate Russian efforts, and this rapidly escalated, culminating with a joint statement from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) on 7 October 2016. This statement was clear, unequivocal, and unprecedented. They stated:

> The U.S. Intelligence Community (USIC) is confident that the Russian Government directed the recent compromises of e-mails from US persons and institutions, including from US political organizations. . . . These thefts and disclosures are intended to interfere with the US election process . . . We believe, based on the scope and sensitivity of these efforts, that only Russia's senior-most officials could have authorized these activities.
>
> (Quoted in Clapper and Brown 2019, 352)

Such a declaration by the USIC, a month out from an election, was astonishing and, in normal circumstances, would have been the most shocking event in an election. However, "within an hour of its being published" (Clapper and Brown 2019, 352), it was eclipsed by two other stories.

> [First,] WikiLeaks dumped a massive and controversial collection of emails belonging to Clinton campaign chief of staff, John Podesta, and the *Washington Post* released a leaked video from 2005 of Donald Trump bragging about sexual assaults to *Access Hollywood* host Billy Bush.
>
> (Clapper and Brown 2019, 352)

Had Trump been a typical candidate, it is likely that the Access Hollywood tape would have been the end of his campaign. But, as mentioned, under Bannon's guidance, he had been deliberately cast as the anti-politician politician. While these revelations were widely resoundingly rejected by many across the political spectrum, his base stayed with him.

The Podesta emails were a completely different problem and posed an existential risk to the Clinton campaign. Throughout the next month, WikiLeaks released a range of emails detailing internal emails from the Democratic National Committee (DNC), the primary body that organised and ran the Democratic election campaign. In these emails, it became apparent that high-level members of the DNC had a preference for Clinton and were somewhat opposed to her main rival Bernie Sanders getting the nomination. For many Sanders supporters, they saw this as a betrayal of their interests, and for many more, it confirmed the idea that Clinton was an elite politician, unfairly getting support from establishment politics. "The intent of the leak

was clear – split the Bernie Sanders faction from the Democrats and damage Hillary Clinton among independent and progressive voters" (Nance 2018, 12). This was a godsend to the Trump campaign as it fed into their narrative that all establishment politics was corrupt and that Trump was in fact the only candidate who represented the people, rather than established and elite interests. "To Trump supporters it validated everything they ever suspected about Hillary Clinton – she hid emails, which meant she was a liar" (Nance 2018, 8). Beyond this, the emails detailed mostly mundane things like standard campaign logistics, internal communications, and pizza orders – a fact that would play a role in subsequent conspiracies (see below).

In terms of Russian involvement, it is well documented that Russian intelligence were behind the hack of Podesta's emails.[2] Rid outlines the development of Unit 26165, a Russian defence team specialising in cyberattacks (Rid 2020, 377–79). In a sophisticated and well-orchestrated attack, they gained access to Podesta's emails through a targeted spearphishing campaign that tricked one of Podesta's staff into using a malicious link to change his password. This gave Unit 26165 access to "more than fifty thousand emails, more than five gigabytes of data, from Podesta's inbox" (Rid 2020, 380). Then, in April, Unit 26165 hacked into the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), which allowed them to install malicious software X-Agent, which "would allow them to record and intercept all activity on a workstation, including everything a user typed and saw over an entire workday" (Rid 2020, 382). They exploited these vulnerabilities to put the DNC's email and even their telephone systems under surveillance (Rid 2020, 383). However, this information alone was not enough to stop the Clinton campaign, and so Unit 26165 passed the information onto Unit 74455, who specialised in propaganda, with Unit 74455 trying to get the information out using websites like DCLeaks.com and fake Facebook accounts (Rid 2020, 384).

Even this, however, was not sufficient to garner much interest in the United States, and they contacted WikiLeaks directly (Rid 2020, 385). By June 10, the DNC recognised their security had been breached and used a cybersecurity company, Crowdstrike, to assess the damage and seek to remove the malicious code. In an effort to get on the front foot, the DNC and Crowdstrike told the *Washington Post* about the hacks and leaks and blamed Russia for it (Rid 2020, 386). After a few more weeks, WikiLeaks finally accepted the information from Unit 74455, and the public became interested. On July 14, WikiLeaks released a large amount of Podesta's emails, and American journalists found email evidence of "DNC officials taking sides in the political conflict between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton," forcing the chair of the DNC Debbie Wasserman Shultz to resign (Rid 2020, 394). As mentioned, an hour after the DHS and ODNI made their announcement about Russian election interference, WikiLeaks' leader Julian "Assange started to publish the Podesta inbox. The leaks came in thirty-four tranches, about one every day until Election Day" (Rid 2020, 395). Not only did this distract people's

attention from the DHS and ODNI letter, it "put significant public and psychological pressure on the Clinton campaign in a critical period" (Rid 2020, 395). This is a perfect encapsulation of the ways that information and communication technologies have helped to shape modern cognitive warfare; remote attackers hacking emails and communication systems, exfiltration of data, which is then passed onto internationally accessible websites like WikiLeaks, to destabilise and delegitimise a political campaign. Moreover, like any good propaganda campaign, it drew from true and largely accurate documents[3] to exploit existing beliefs, divisions, and suspicions about Clinton.

As was later disclosed, Russian efforts did not end with the DNC hacks. In May 2017, Robert Mueller Jr was appointed as special counsel "to oversee the investigation into Russian tampering in the 2016 presidential election" (Rosenstein 2017). This investigation uncovered another sophisticated information operation by the Russians, and itself, was used as part of the ongoing cognitive warfare between Trump and the US national security community. In his investigations, Mueller uncovered a highly sophisticated set of operations that involved sending Russian agents to the United States, having them set up companies and identities in the United States, and then using the physical location and local knowledge to undermine the Clinton campaign, to support almost any non-Clinton candidates up until Trump became the Republican nominee, and to then give as much support to the Trump campaign as possible.

The[4] operation included efforts to actively locate computer hardware – servers and the like – in the United States.[5] This combination of social, legal, and physical deception allowed the agents to not simply appear as if they were legitimate Americans but to fund and direct funds towards a range of political activities that seemed to most legitimate participants as originating from real Americans. Having established the fiction that they were Americans,[6] the agents were then engaged in running a range of 'sock puppets' online. 'Sock puppets' means when a single person runs a series of fake identities on social media. This operation used Facebook and Instagram[7] and Twitter[8] in a range of ways. They utilised the advertising functions of social media to push out propaganda.[9] Given the appearance of the accounts as legitimate Americans, they were in contact with a range of legitimate American political actors, such as the real chair of the Trump Campaign in one Florida County,[10] and other Trump-affiliated campaigners in Florida.[11] They increasingly became engaged in levering their social media presence to influence[12] and orchestrate[13] actual political rallies. They coupled their social media presence with advertising to promote these political rallies.[14]

While these United States-located operations were in action, there was a series of Russian-affiliated 'troll farms' producing and distributing active misinformation as part of the overall propaganda campaign. As early as 2015, these troll farms were known to be actively targeting sectors of the US population. One such troll account, 'Spread Your Wings,'

posted photos of American flags and memes about how great it was to be an American. . . . The posts churned out every day by this network of pages were commented on and shared by the same group of trolls, a virtual Potemkin village of disaffected Americans.

(Chen 2015)

This strategy was tightened and improved through to 2016, with the identity theft and localisation of actors described earlier. The investigative journalist who identified these troll farms was saying in July 2016 that they thought the strategy had shifted from general pro-Russian and anti-Obama activities to a more concerted political effort, with a particular preference for Donald Trump.

I don't know what's going on, but they're all tweeting about Donald Trump and stuff . . . I feel like it's some kind of really opaque strategy of electing Donald Trump to undermine the US or something. Like false-flag kind of thing.

(Bertrand 2016)

Again, we see here how information and communication technologies were used to exploit existing beliefs and social tensions for political ends.

An important point to note is the contentiousness regarding the efficacy of the IRA's efforts. Thomas Rid writes that the "IRA was the least effective component of the overall Russian disinformation effort in 2016 . . . *It is indeed unlikely that the IRA had any discernible effect on the voting behaviour of American citizens*" (my emphasis, Rid 2020, 409). While this may be true in a narrow sense, we need also return to the idea of *zersetzung* to put the work of the IRA in context. Zersetzung is when malicious forces disintegrate a political community (Rid 2020, 197). While it might either be true to say that efforts by groups like the IRA and Cambridge Analytica either had no discernible effect on individual's voting habits, or that it is largely impossible to verify if those social media campaigns had any effect, we should also bear in mind that both Bannon and the Russians had a wider agenda. Both sought to unleash deeper mistrust of politicians and political institutions, and for a wider social chaos to emerge. Bannon "wanted to bring about chaos to end the tyranny of certainty within the administrative state. . . . He wanted to liberate the people from a controlling administrative state that made choices for them and thus removed purpose from their lives" (Wylie 2020, 132). Likewise, in an influential description of Russian military strategy from 2013, Colonel S.G. Chekinov and Lieutenant General S.A. Bogdanov wrote that

heavy propaganda is designed to spark discontent among the defender's population and armed forces personnel at the current government agencies' activities . . . *The onset of chaos, loss of control, and demoralization among the population* and the defending army's personnel must

give the aggressor and his allies an opportunity to fulfill their political, military, and economic objectives in the campaign within a short space of time without significant loss of life.

<div align="right">(my emphasis, Chekinov and Bogdanov 2013, 19)</div>

While Chekinov and Bogdanov are writing about military strategy, they point out the importance of chaos as a desired end state of cognitive warfare. Whether the information operations by Cambridge Analytica, the IRA, or others can confidently be said to have brought about Trump's win, on the stochastic analysis, they had a profound effect in disintegrating the political community in the US. By recognising and exploiting the zeitgeist, cognitive warfare that was used in part and alongside Trump's campaigns had the effect of causing zersetzung.

COVID-19 and Conspiranoia

While much can be said about disinformation and cognitive warfare during the Trump presidency, one particular set of events stand out, and expand our focus beyond US domestic politics to show how information and communication technologies effectively exploded grey matters around the world. In early 2020, as people started getting sick and dying from an unknown respiratory illness in China, the global COVID-19 pandemic saw how isolation and information formed the perfect conditions for a new front in cognitive warfare.

The near ubiquitous integration of information and communication technologies into our lives was a major feature of this pandemic and also significantly impacted people's efforts to understand the pandemic and our responses. Arguably, the co-incidence of COVID-19 with pervasive information and communication technologies has meant that this pandemic has been experienced in a way that is fundamentally different to any pandemic in history. In part, because of these technologies, people all over the world were able to share experiences of the pandemic in real time. These information and communication technologies have also meant that many people used these technologies to try to understand what was happening to them, and why.

The COVID-19 pandemic killed millions around the world, and traumatised many millions more. Parallel with this, a number of people have suggested that there was a matching 'infodemic.' In the early stages of the pandemic, World Health Organization Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said "[w]e're not just fighting a pandemic; we're fighting an infodemic" (quoted in The Lancet Infectious Diseases 2020). This infodemic has two contributing factors, first is the quantity of the information itself. "An infodemic may be defined as an excessive amount of information concerning a problem such that the solution is made more difficult. The end result is that an anxious public finds it difficult to distinguish between evidence-based information and a broad range of unreliable misinformation" (Naeem

and Bhatti 2020). A second aspect of an infodemic is that the quality of the information is problematic, and leads to problematic beliefs. "Misinformation confuses by diluting the pool of legitimate information. Conspiracy theories work because they provide the comfort of an explanation in times of uncertainty and anxiety. Their messaging revolves around core emotions and values and hijacks the mental cues that we use to decide whether the source is legitimate and thus trustworthy" (The Lancet Infectious Diseases 2020).

These two phenomena, pandemic and infodemic, interacted and influenced each other. As the pandemic raged, people's stress and anxiety rose. And as lockdowns were imposed around the world, more and more people spent more and more time online, both seeking to make sense of what was happening, and also exposing them to more information and disinformation. The pandemic saw "propagandists, conspiracy theorists, and speculators, exploiting the scarce knowledge about the disease and humans' susceptibility to false information . . . [they] massively contributed to the spread of misleading narratives relative to the Covid-19 . . . undermining the veracity of online information and the health of those who, unaware of the malicious nature of the information, believed it" (Nogara et al. 2022, 348). The pandemic drove the infodemic. At the same time, the infodemic allowed a large range of inaccurate and untrue information to rise and spread, convincing many people that the virus didn't exist, or wasn't worse than a common cold, that vaccines were dangerous, that alternative cures like Ivermectin were being suppressed, and that masks and other social control measures were part of an elite conspiracy to disempower citizens for nefarious political motives. The infodemic thus convinced significant portions of communities around the world to ignore various public health measures, helping drive and perpetuate the pandemic.

If Cambridge Analytica's research is accurate, we ought to expect an increase in beliefs that are epistemically dubious in times of high stress like the COVID-19 pandemic. People "who were high in neuroticism and [narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy] . . . were more impulsive and more susceptible to conspiratorial thinking, and, with the right kind of nudges, they could be lured into extreme thoughts or behaviour" (Wylie 2020, 138–39). The basic idea here is that "neuroticism can make a person more prone to paranoid ideation . . . [placing] more reliance on intuitive rather than deliberative thinking. People high on the narcissism scale are susceptible [to nudges] because they are more prone to feelings of envy and entitlement," which often predates and predicts a willingness to break rules and social norms (Wylie 2020, 49). The stress of COVID-19 made people more susceptible to problematic information.

This paranoia and conspiratorial thinking obviously predates COVID-19, but we can see how social media is parasitic on paranoia and other psychological states. 'Pizzagate' is "a theory that emerged shortly before the 2016 election that suggested a cabal of Democratic Party leaders including Hillary Clinton and campaign manager John Podesta were involved in ritual Satanic

abuse of children at a pizza parlour in Washington, DC" (Bleakley 2021, 2). As discussed earlier, in the weeks before the 2016 US presidential election, WikiLeaks facilitated the release of large amounts of information from DNC internal communications. Included in these were a series of emails detailing pizza orders from a restaurant in Washington DC called Comet Ping Pong Pizza. In the months following the release of Podesta's emails,

> a theory developed that emails sent by Podesta in which he appeared to be making dinner plans to get pizza were reinterpreted by the alt-right as coded messages referring to child sex trafficking, which early proponents of Pizzagate believed was being carried out at Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington, DC, owned by Podesta associate James Alefantis.
>
> (Bleakley 2021, 8)

While this might seem innocuous enough, in December 2016, "the pizzeria was targeted in a shooting by . . . a Pizzagate believer who fired at the restaurant in a misguided attempt to 'save' child victims he believed were being held there" (Bleakley 2021, 8). We see here the ways that online theories and beliefs coalesce around a particular theory, bringing those beliefs into the real world.

With the COVID-19 pandemic causing significant anxiety and fear around the world, and public health measures necessitating lockdowns, school and business closures, and forcing many people to limit their social interactions to online activities, the exposure to, belief in, and spreading of conspiratorial ideas increased significantly. For people all around the world, this was an incredibly stressful time, and the lockdowns and social distancing meant that many of us spent increasing amounts of time online, exposed to vast amounts of information of limited quality. People frequently differ in their acceptance of public health measures to these emergencies.

While many people accept the public health measures such as lockdowns, mask wearing, and vaccination programs, many others chafe at such restrictions seeing them either as unnecessary or even part of government plots to subjugate us and kill us. COVID-19 was not unique here. During the 1917 influenza pandemic in San Francisco, as a second wave flared up the "city reinstated the mask law on Jan. 17, even though there was increasing evidence that masks didn't work . . . By now, however, the city was fed up. The business community complained, as did private citizens. An 'Anti-Mask League,' which included doctors and several supervisors, held a public meeting attended by 2,000 people" (Kamiya 2015). Just over one hundred years later, we saw people all over the world again protesting masks and the other public health measures.

What was different this time, however, is the role that social media played in fuelling beliefs, motivating opposition, and organising protests. In 2021, the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) released a report that analysed

anti-vaccine content on Facebook and Twitter, showing "that 65 percent of anti-vaccine content is attributable to the Disinformation Dozen" (Center for Countering Digital Hate 2021, 5). Basically, 12 people were responsible for 65% of disinformation relating to COVID-19 vaccines. Unlike the past, where national and global communication was limited to very very few people who would be in positions of power – political leaders, media owners, high profile journalists and the like, information and communication technologies mean that people from outside those elite groups now have the ability to reach and influence millions around the world. This is the oligopolisation of informational power I spoke of in Chapter 4. On one analysis, the Disinformation Dozen

> aimed at increasing uncertainty and promoting distrust in health and pharmaceutical organizations by constantly pointing to the involvement of these organizations in a global conspiracy. . . . [They relied] on proprietary websites and YouTube videos to spread pieces of information and conspiracies.
>
> (Nogara et al. 2022, 356)

Not only were whole populations stuck at home, in anxious, fearful, and angry states, but also many were spending large amounts of time online, and this made them perfect recipients for problematic information.

The normal fear and suspicion surrounding vaccines reached new levels of attention during the COVID-19 pandemic. Again, people were primed to accept information due to the background conditions of stress and anxiety, and vaccines have often attracted conspiracies. Given the threat to life and welfare around the world, a series of vaccines was released that went through a hastened testing process. While the safety and efficacy were still essential features prior to public release, many felt concerned about the speed of this process. Coupled with this was the fact that for the first time, a particular sort of vaccines using mRNA technology was being rolled out at a population level.

> Adding to already existing uncertainties, a new type of vaccine was introduced – a vaccine using messenger RNA (mRNA). As this was a new method, it was likely to raise uncertainties and, thus, constituted a perfect breeding ground for conspiracy theories.
>
> (Pummerer, Winter, and Sassenberg 2022, 2)

Some early poor scientific communication about the mechanisms of mRNA vaccines contributed to the fear, with one company stating that they "set out to create an mRNA technology platform that functions very much like an operating system on a computer . . . the 'program' . . . is our mRNA drug" (Quoted in Larson and Broniatowski 2021, 1059). Though this was a metaphor and did not actually describe the way the vaccine worked, if "one takes

seriously the idea that mRNA is the software of the human body, then the vaccine can easily be misconstrued as an attempt to 'program' vaccinated individuals: to rob them of their autonomy" (Larson and Broniatowski 2021, 1059).

The COVID-19 pandemic coincided not just with the new mRNA vaccines but also with the roll out of new technologies such as the 5G mobile phone infrastructure and the use of mRNA vaccines to fight the disease. For some, they saw connections between all three, with people setting fire to "at least 77 mobile towers in the UK alone" (Flaherty, Sturm, and Farries 2022, 2). This was linked to

> an internet conspiracy theory that links the spread of the coronavirus to an ultrafast wireless technology known as 5G. Under the false idea, which has gained momentum in Facebook groups, WhatsApp messages and YouTube videos, radio waves sent by 5G technology are causing small changes to people's bodies that make them succumb to the virus.
> (Satariano and Alba 2020)

This theory then morphed with the global vaccination programs, with one theory claiming "that Covid-19 vaccines contain microchips that the government or global elites like Bill Gates would use to track citizens" (Tarasov 2021). Social media was central to the rise and spread of these beliefs.

State actors sought to harness this, with both Russia and China accused of pushing disinformation about Western vaccines. For instance, in March 2021, the US State Department warned that "Russian intelligence agencies have mounted a campaign to undermine confidence in Pfizer Inc.'s and other Western vaccines, using online publications that . . . questioned the vaccines' development" (Gordon and Volz 2021). As Julian Barnes notes, these Russian efforts soon evolved to be as much about using vaccine mandates to criticise the Biden regime as undermine confidence in the vaccines themselves (Barnes 2021). Notably, the IRA was linked to these disinformation campaigns. Similarly, in early 2021, Chinese scientists were warning people away from vaccines, saying that "Europe and Australia should reject the 'hasty' American vaccines linked to elderly deaths" (Shih 2021). This has to be seen against the backdrop of research that suggested that Chinese developed vaccines were less efficacious than Western ones and a spate of deaths associated with vaccines in Norway. "The nationalist Global Times newspaper ran stories that seized on the deaths of 23 elderly Norwegians who had taken the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, and quoted Chinese experts who urged countries from Norway to Australia to halt its use" (Shih 2021). This should come as no surprise as public health measures and pandemics have frequently been the source of propaganda campaigns; Russian disinformation had sought to convince people that the US government was behind AIDS/HIV (Rid 2020, 301–11).

Likewise, the origins of COVID-19 were significant sources of disagreement and disinformation. There is now strong evidence to suggest that the virus was a naturally occurring variant that arose in bat populations in the

Wuhan region of China. In two studies released in July 2022, one "shows that the earliest known cases were clustered around" Wuhan's Huanan seafood and wildlife market, and

> [t]he other uses genetic information to track the timing of the outbreak . . . Together, the researchers say this evidence paints a picture that Sars-Cov-2 was present in live mammals that were sold at Huanan market in late 2019. They say it was transmitted into people who were working or shopping there in two separate 'spillover events,' where a human contracted the virus from an animal.
>
> (Gill 2022)

Given the scale of the impact and the location of the outbreak near to the Wuhan Institute of Virology led many to suspect either that the outbreak was an accidental leak of the virus or that the virus itself was a deliberate bioweapon. Some more extreme views suggested "that the virus had not just been deliberately made (using controversial gain-of-function research) but also intended as a bioweapon" (Shepherd 2021). This was done in order to remove President Trump from office and/or to reduce the world's population. This drew from and fed into existing anti-Chinese sentiment, with "[t]he perceived risks surrounding 5G were buoyed initially by real US-Chinese geopolitical tensions, centred on the perceived security risks of Huawei devices and communications technologies" (Flaherty, Sturm, and Farries 2022, 2). Much more can be said about COVID-19, but as this brief discussion shows, there was a huge amount of information being distributed around the world, with a near captive global audience consuming it, feeding off, and feeding into their fears.

As with Pizzagate, COVID-19 was not the only conspiracy theory that evolved and gained traction through online communities. One of the more outlandish set of conspiracies is the QAnon theory. While there are a range of beliefs associated with QAnon, it has a

> main pillar alleging a cabal of deep state Satan-worshipping and paedophile politicians is taking over the government. . . . Followers believe that QAnon is not one singular individual, but a small group of high-ranking military and intelligence officials with Q-level security clearances working directly with former President Trump.
>
> (Garry et al. 2021, 156)

The beliefs that drove the attack on Comet Ping Pong Pizza are the same that underpin QAnon. Originally linked to cryptic posts by an anonymous person with 'Q' level access to the most secret of government documents, the QAnon theory revolved around three main ideas:

> (1) Donald Trump was working with the American military to combat the 'deep state'; (2) Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation

into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election was, in fact, a top-secret collaborative investigation with Donald Trump to indict Hillary Clinton for a number of crimes; and (3) many high ranking Democrats and 'Hollywood elites' are secretly under arrest for creating and maintaining an international paedophilia ring.

<div align="right">(Kużelewska and Tomaszuk 2022, 2376)</div>

Much like the spread of COVID disinformation and conspiracy, the "development of the QAnon narrative, and its effects on shaping the beliefs of those in the network, were driven by a few key users" (Kużelewska and Tomaszuk 2022, 2378). And similarly, what we see with QAnon is the global spread of these beliefs.

In terms of the content of the QAnon theories, we can also see similar connections between social media, percepticide, and zersetzung described earlier. QAnon's narrative deliberately attempted

> to discredit the current democratic institutions and leaders [suggesting] that disinformation online would manifest as propaganda similar to that used by terrorist organizations, increasing the rate of conspiracy-based radicalization, while delegitimizing the current United States democratic institutions . . . the authors conclude that the intersection of social media and the rampant disinformation it allows for has been a large, if not the largest, contributing factor to QAnon's unprecedented reach.

<div align="right">(Garry et al. 2021, 163)</div>

Similarly, QAnon largely recycles and reifies existing conspiracies and prejudices, finding fertile ground in people's existing networks of belief. In particular, QAnon mirrors long standing conspiracies about Jewish people secretly running the world and kidnapping children (Langer 2022). And perhaps unsurprisingly, one study showed that "anti-semitism is a strong positive predictor of . . . support for QAnon" (Levin, Filindra, and Kopstein 2022, 794). Importantly for this chapter, and for the following section, central to QAnon was that President Trump was largely predicted and expected to win the 2020 election and reveal himself as a protector and leader of those who had tapped into the truth.

Insurrection and Intervention

In the final debate of the 2016 US presidential election, the then candidate Trump offered this response on whether he would accept the outcome if he lost: "I will look at it at the time . . . I will keep you in suspense" (Healy and Martin 2016). Despite his win being highly unexpected, President Trump held the belief that he must have won by a greater margin. Given that this was not reflected in the actual voting outcomes, President Trump created the 'Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity' to explore voter fraud.

> The Commission was created in the wake of President Trump's repeated assertions that millions voted illegally in the 2016 election . . . Election experts [were] concerned the Commission will highlight isolated incidents of fraud, which constitute a tiny fraction of ballots cast, as a maneuver to recommend suppressive laws at the state and federal level.
> (Brennan Centre for Justice 2017)

This commission was disbanded in January 2018, finding no evidence of voter fraud.

Infamously, on the day of President Trump's inauguration, the White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer declared that President Trump's crowd size was larger than Barack Obama's inauguration, despite photographic evidence showing vastly smaller numbers in 2016 (Hunt 2017). Following the criticism of Spicer over what was clearly a misrepresentation of the truth about crowd size, "Kellyanne Conway, counselor to President Trump, said the White House press secretary gave 'alternative facts' when he inaccurately described the inauguration crowd as 'the largest ever' during his first appearance before the press" (Jaffe 2017). These events all presaged the 2020 election and indicate the worrying rise of cognitive warfare being used by political leadership against their own democratic institutions. In this section, I will explore the 2020 US election, the lead up to the attempted insurrection on 6 January 2021, and the ways that institutions responded. While it is beyond the scope of this book to speak to people's explicit intentions regarding the 2020 election and its fallout, these examples were a prelude to sustained attacks on the US institutions of liberal democracy.

Much like in 2016, when President Trump was asked if he would accept the outcome of the 2020 election, he refused to give a clear answer. By mid-July, 2020, President Trump was already casting doubts on the legitimacy of the November outcome. Given the ongoing pandemic and the need for social distancing, many US states were expanding the opportunity for citizens to vote early and by mail. For President Trump, this was going to undermine the outcome. "I think mail-in voting is going to rig the election . . . I really do" (quoted in Feuer 2020). Following his pattern in 2016, he again refused to be drawn on whether he would accept the outcome. "I have to see. Look, you – I have to see . . . No, I'm not going to just say yes. I'm not going to say no" (Quoted in Feuer 2020). Throughout the campaign, President Trump repeatedly pushed the notion that the election outcome would be invalid if he lost. Between May and October, he

> posted online at least 40 times and retweeted dozens of messages about what he claims will be a fraudulent election, 'rigged' by a rotating cast of enemies: foreign state actors, corrupt politicians, cheating election officials, shifty poll workers, mail deliverers, Democratic voters and more.
>
> (Zadrozny 2020)

He repeated this message at his rallies in the final months of the campaign, again refusing to say if he would

> accept the results of the election in the event that he loses . . . Trump said the polls that show him trailing the Democratic nominee Joe Biden are 'fake,' drawing boos from the crowd and raising their expectations of victory. He also said he feared voter fraud.
>
> <div align="right">(Kapur 2020)</div>

Again, there is a clear pattern here, in which the sitting President repeatedly cast doubt on and actively sought to undermine people's trust in the outcome of the election.

The COVID-19 pandemic helped set the stage for people to be more receptive to such efforts. As mentioned, many states and counties in the United States sought to expand early voting and mail in ballots, as a way of social distancing. By allowing people to vote early and to vote using secured public ballot boxes, public election and health officials hoped that this would lessen the risk of people being exposed to COVID-19. In their advice on *COVID-19 Health and Safety Measures for Elections*, The National Governors Association, for instance, included "alternatives to in-person voting such as extending early voting periods, providing access to absentee and mail-in ballots, increasing voting equipment, and creating additional polling locations" (National Governors Association 2020). With President Trump and other Republican leaders repeating the message that methods like mail in ballots were not to be trusted, it was widely expected that supporters of Democratic candidate Joe Biden would use these alternatives at higher rates than the Republican supporters. Importantly, many states also had to delay the counting and reporting on those votes received before voting ended. This was expected to produce a 'blue shift/red mirage,' in which President Trump would be ahead on early counts, only for Biden's support to increase as counting went on. Given the increase in alternatives to in person voting due to COVID-19 measures, the blue shift/red mirage were predicted months before the election (Cohen 2020).

> Way more Democrats will vote by mail than Republicans, due to fears of the coronavirus, and it will take days if not weeks to tally these. This means Trump, thanks to Republicans doing almost all of their voting in person, could hold big electoral college and popular vote leads on election night.
>
> <div align="right">(Talev 2020)</div>

Some commentators predicted as early as September that this would pose significant challenges for belief in the ultimate outcome. "Trump being Trump, it doesn't take much imagination to envision him claiming victory on Election Night and then attacking subsequent Democratic-leaning mail ballots as

fraudulent" (Kilgore 2020). With many people stressed, isolated, and relying on social media and traditional media for basic social engagement during lockdowns, people were perhaps more vulnerable to disinformation regarding the election outcomes.

As voting closed on 3 November, early results were promising for President Trump and the Republicans. Florida, once a swing state, went early for President Trump, giving him and his team rising confidence in the outcome. Before 9 pm, President Trump's son-in law Jared Kushner "called upstairs to the Executive Residence and told his father-in-law that the Florida numbers meant fantastic news across the country" (Wolff 2021, 44). More early figures were positive for President Trump, putting him ahead of Biden. Importantly, at this stage, the "only information flowing to the president was positive information. And as he reported it to others, it become only more positive" (Wolff 2021, 51). At this point, the result for the Republicans was looking good; however, the red mirage was about to be blown away by Fox News. At 11:15 pm, with the Trump party into early celebrations, they received news that Fox's election anchors were about to call Arizona for Biden. This call was made at 11:20 pm. "All certainty and belief [within the Trump party] seemed to crumble in a second" (Wolff 2021, 54). At this point, President Trump seemingly decided that the top management at Fox were making this up and doing it out of spite to punish him. On his view, he "had won Arizona, everybody said. But Fox and the Murdochs, for perfidious, disloyal, and very mean reasons were trying to steal it from him" (Wolff 2021, 57). As the night continued, more votes were coming in for Biden, and President Trump sought to refute this.

At 2:30 am, President Trump launched into a speech that set the tone for the weeks, months, and years that followed. Referring to many states that had him leading early on, as predicted by the red mirage, they started reporting for Biden.

> And all of a sudden everything just stopped. This is a fraud on the American public. This is an embarrassment to our country. We were getting ready to win this election. Frankly, we did win this election. We did win this election. So, our goal now is to ensure the integrity for the good of this nation. This is a very big moment. This is a major fraud in our nation. We want the law to be used in a proper manner. So, we'll be going to the U.S. Supreme Court. We want all voting to stop. We don't want them to find any ballots at four o'clock in the morning and add them to the list. Okay? It's a very sad moment. To me this is a very sad moment, and we will win this. And as far as I am concerned, we already have won it.
>
> (Quoted in Wolff 2021, 62)

The main media declared Joe Biden the winner on 7 November, with the head of the General Services Administration formally acknowledging Biden as the

winner on 23 November. However, from election night onwards, this idea that somehow the election was stolen from President Trump and his supporters continued.

This disinformation met with reality in a violent attempt at insurrection on the 6 January 2021. In the interim between losing the election and Incumbent Biden's impending inauguration, the outgoing President, his surrogates, and supporters pushed an increasingly deranged set of fantasies about how he could have lost. Rudy Guiliani, one of President Trump's most vociferous supporters, pushed theories that votes were deliberately miscounted. At one press conference in Philadelphia, he declared that

> the people you see behind me are just a few of about, I'd say, fifty to sixty poll watchers, who will all testify that they were uniformly deprived of their rights to inspect any single part of the mail-in ballots . . . the mail-in ballots were . . . innately prone to fraud.
>
> (Quoted in Wolff 2021, 88)

Sidney Powell, a lawyer and former federal prosecutor, was at the vanguard of the more unbelievable theories. These theories proposed that

> computer systems had been programmed to switch Trump votes to Biden votes, with the CIA in on it . . . [Further] Trump's landslide victory was upended by an international plot. Former Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez (dead since 2013), George Soros, the Clinton Foundation, and the Chinese had masterminded the plot to steal the election from him. Oh, and the vetting software routed the results through Germany, exposing the tabulation to nefarious elements there!
>
> (Wolff 2021, 114)

President Trump subsequently distanced himself from Powell, but there is evidence that he and others in the outgoing administration were receptive to even more ludicrous theories, such as 'Italygate.' "Essentially, it holds that people connected to the Italian defense firm Leonardo used satellites to [remotely] change the votes cast in the 2020 election from Trump to Biden" (Blake 2021). This conspiracy included in a series of emails from White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows "asking the Justice Department to look into specific matters, including claims by the New Mexico Republican Party chairman and other theories that had been debunked and rejected in court" (Blake 2021). President Trump, his friends and aides, and senior White House staff entertained, embraced, and espoused all manner of theories and conspiracies that denied the outcome of the election. Importantly, while the details of the narrative were wild and largely incoherent – that COVID-19 was a biological weapon released to permit mail in voting which allowed fraudulent votes (Reuters Staff 2020), an evacuation following a burst water pipe (Sadeghi 2020) allowed vote counters to use suitcases

full of fake ballots to help swing the vote for President Biden in Georgia (Szep and So 2021), companies engaged in electronic voting infrastructure like Dominion and Smartmatic were actively involved in creating a win for President Biden, or Hugo Chavez and Italian satellites were somehow also involved – the larger narrative being pushed was consistent: There was a concerted effort to sow doubt in voting and wider election infrastructure and to undermine democratic infrastructure in the process. Given the repeated evidence of Biden's win, this sustained information operation was an act of cognitive warfare.

With two months of constant pronouncements that President Trump had really won, a rally was staged on 6 January in Washington DC. This rally was attended by approximately 30,000–60,000 people (Wolff 2021, 222) and featured speakers like Republican Representative Mo Brooks, Guiliani, and President Trump. While President Trump was speaking, a number of protestors had started moving towards the Capitol Building. The day and time were important, as on 6 January, the final step in the election was playing out, where each state's representatives would publicly declare if their state went to President Trump or President Biden, with the Vice President holding a ceremonial role in formally recognising each state's vote. Protesters at the Capitol became increasingly violent, clashing with police at around 1:00 pm. At approximately 1:50 pm, protesters breached the Capitol doors, with up to 10,000 rioters on the Capitol grounds and more than 800 managed to breach the Capitol Building itself (Demirjian 2021). Chanting threats like 'Hang Mike Pence,' breaching the Capitol Building, led to congress people being evacuated to safe zones and the official count being delayed until later that evening.

One might perhaps take it that these election critics and protesters were operating on good faith: election outcomes are vitally important and we must be very careful to ensure that they are conducted with the utmost security and integrity. On this view, perhaps President Trump, his surrogates, and supporters had good reason to be concerned. However, this overlooks the facts of the election. Not only are there extremely low incidents of voter fraud in the United States – a fact recognised by President Trump's own Commission on Election Integrity – but this election in particular was perhaps the most investigated and challenged election in US history. On 1 December 2020, Bill Barr, the then Attorney General and a stalwart supporter of President Trump throughout earlier investigations, declared that the Department of Justice had no evidence of fraud (Lucas 2020), a point he subsequently reinforced saying in June 2021 that "if there was evidence of fraud, I had no motive to suppress it. But my suspicion all the way along was that there was nothing there. It was all bullsh*t" (Axios 2021). Further to this, President Trump's surrogates and supporters launched and lost an unprecedented campaign of legal challenges to the outcome in the period between Election Day and President Biden's inauguration. More than 60 cases were attempted, and none of them were successful.

> Out of the 62 lawsuits filed challenging the presidential election, 61 have failed . . . Some cases were dismissed for lack of standing and others based on the merits of the voter fraud allegations. The decisions have came [sic] from both Democratic-appointed and Republican-appointed judges – including federal judges appointed by Trump.
>
> (Cummings, Garrison, and Sergent 2021)

Subsequent to this, a number of President Trump's advisors have since shifted their positions, offering statements in court that President Trump and his team knew they had lost and that they could do nothing about that (Rubin and Steakin 2023). In short, not only was there little to no reason to doubt the election outcome in the first instance, the near total failure of any subsequent efforts to find any reason to believe that the election was stolen from President Trump should convince any good-faith actors as to the integrity of the outcome.

In further evidence that the election outcome was widely known, but that an alternative narrative was being promoted, in April 2022, Fox News and Dominion Voting Systems agreed to a settlement, where Fox are to pay Dominion US\$787,500,000 to stave off a defamation trial (Timm 2023). As part of the discovery process, numerous emails and text messages between Fox News hosts and management showed that many within Fox disbelieved the stories about election fraud, yet aligned their stories with the narrative being pushed by President Trump in order to win back viewers who had traded Fox for more extreme news channels like One America News and Newsmax (Barr 2020; Maddaus 2023). Again, what is relevant here is that there was a clear and deliberate narrative to actively disinform their viewers that President Trump had unfairly lost to President Biden. I would hope that the intention at Fox was not to destroy US democracy; as part of his deposition in the Dominion defamation case, Fox agreed with the statement that "it is not red or blue, it is green" (Blake 2023), indicating that their motives were perhaps economic and not political. However, it is abundantly clear that in their pursuit for viewers, they were happy to push a narrative that was wholly dangerous to the institutions of liberal democracy. Moreover, they knew throughout that this narrative was simply wrong. The point is that those pushing the election disinformation were not acting in good faith. And while many supporters of this narrative might have sincerely believed it, there was overwhelming evidence that the narrative was flawed. Moreover, that those leading and promoting the narrative knew that this was wrong. To maintain such a belief involved active ignorance, and active efforts to exploit and manipulate their audience.

This leads us to the interventions that arose in response to the failed insurrection. In terms of those engaged in the violence on 6 January, nearly 1,000 people have been "charged and arrested with multiple crimes related to the attack" (Johnson 2023).[15] High-profile defendants like key leaders in the 'Proud Boys' group were found guilty of seditious conspiracy (Feuer and

Montague 2023). President Trump himself was impeached in February 2021, though the Republican House voted in a majority of 57–43 to acquit him. The House January 6 Committee's investigation of the insurrection chose to refer President Trump and the lawyer John Eastman to the Department of Justice for their roles in the violence (Broadwater 2022). As I write, President Trump has been indicted for his role in the insurrection and is under investigation by Special Counsel Jack Smith for his role, and he is under investigation for election interference in Georgia (Gardner and Dawsey 2023). It will stand to history if he is found guilty of any of these crimes, and it is even harder to predict just what this will mean for US democracy in the longer term. At this stage, however, it is clear that there have been efforts by legal and political actors to try to hold President Trump, his surrogates, and supporters to account for perpetuating and acting upon the disinformation about the election.

A second set of interventions occurred much more rapidly following the insurrection. By 7 January, President Trump received long running bans from the most popular social media. The President infamously used Twitter as a vital tool of his presidency, leading some to refer to his time as The Twitter Presidency (Ott and Dickinson 2019).[16] He received a lifetime ban from Twitter (now X), only to have it subsequently lifted on 20 November 2022 (BBC News 2022). Facebook's (now Meta) ban was not said to be permanent, was revisited, and in early January 2023, they announced he would be free to return to Facebook and Instagram as long as he kept to community standards. Meta's president of Global Affairs stated that "[i]n the event that Mr Trump posts further violating content, the content will be removed and he will be suspended for between one month and two years, depending on the severity of the violation" (Quoted in Paul 2023). Likewise, YouTube had banned him but lifted the ban in mid-March 2023 (BBC News 2023). The justification offered by the Twitter/X owner, and effectively echoed by others, was that denying President Trump access to these social media channels was too great a violation of free speech.

Bringing us back to grey matters in technology and cognitive warfare, one final point must be made about the 2020 US election and its aftermath. Not only were President Trump, his surrogates, and supporters pushing a narrative built on disinformation but also the denial of this disinformation and the legal and social efforts to intervene were fed into the disinformation. That people, political leaders, mainstream media, and investigative institutions like the US Department of Justice actively and repeatedly refuted the claims about election fraud feeds into the narrative itself. Prior to the election, Donald Trump repeatedly accused the government, the FBI, the media, and social media as being part of the 'deep state,' who were all out to get him. Likewise, the arrest and incarceration of rioters, the numerous ongoing investigations of President Trump, banning of him and supporters from social media, the fact that Fox News declared Arizona for President Biden, all feed into the larger conspiratorial narrative of an elite deep state seeking to

destroy Donald Trump and his supporters. This is modern cognitive warfare at its most explicit – conscious efforts to use information and communications technology to reach out to, and to motivate supporters to, doubt, reject, and at times, violently attack the institutions of liberal democracy.

At the same time, this is also an example of grey matters par excellence. The lines between government and citizens are blurred almost into incomprehensibility: The government (the sitting then former US President) is saying that the government (FBI) are out to get him, because the what the people (the majority of voters) want is not what the people (his supporters) want, and private actors (the media) are acting on behalf of the government (the Biden Administration) to stop private actors (Trump) from discussing this with the people. We must also recognise the high likelihood that foreign actors are playing active roles in pushing and promoting internal confusion and anger to drive up US domestic instability.

Further to this, we see a blurring between speech and action. It is undeniable that President Trump, his surrogates, and supporters were, and potentially still are, seeking to upend key elements of liberal democracy in the United States. Speech and individual and collective action feed into each other here, with public communications driving actions and reactions, giving content to the ongoing narrative about the deep state seeking to control President Trump and his supporters. We must also recognise that President Trump was setting this narrative up already in 2016 – regardless of whether it is because he is psychologically unable to accept the truth that he can and did lose the presidential election or because he sees this as a viable way to propel his personal interests into future – he has relentlessly pushed the belief that he won, no matter the facts. Even in 2016, he refused to accept that he lost the popular vote and that his inauguration crowd was dwarfed by his predecessor President Obama. In 2021, that narrative exploded in violence and has left an ongoing trail of destruction in its wake. This was anticipated not just by President Trump's own public statements, nor even by those who were in fear of the outcomes of the blue shift/red mirage, but also by close associates of the President. Roger Stone, a long-time friend of Trump, was recorded on 1 November proposing a strategy to fight the outcome. "I really do suspect it'll still be up in the air. When that happens, the key thing to do is to claim victory. Possession is nine tenths of the law, no we won . . . F**k the voting, let's get right to the violence" (Cohen, Lybrand, and Grigsby 2022). I note here that Stone has accused the filmmakers who recorded this to have manipulated the footage.

> I challenge the accuracy and the authenticity of these videos and believe they have been manipulated and selectively edited. I also point out that the filmmakers do not have the legal right to use them. How ironic that Kim Kardashian and I are both subjected to computer manipulated videos on the same day.
>
> (Cohen, Lybrand, and Grigsby 2022)

Regardless of Stone's comments and responses, the wider point remains: the 2020 US presidential election clearly displays how complicated and contested cognitive warfare is when modern technologies are involved.

To be explicitly clear here, I am not saying that President Trump is singularly responsible for something like the failed insurrection on 6 January. What I am instead saying is that President Trump, his surrogates, and supporters became active members in the cognitive warfare against the institutions of democracy in the United States. On my definition of cognitive warfare from Chapter 1, this is both a paradigm example as well as a precedent setting case.

Conclusion

The point of this chapter has been to show the ways that modern information and communications technologies both drive and are mediums of cognitive warfare. Modern terrorism – its capacity to radicalise and recruit supporters and fighters – is emblematic of the ways that modern cognitive warfare operates. Exposure to information campaigns is neither guaranteed to bring about a specific outcome nor can we explicitly hold a specific social media post to blame for a particular act of political violence. Instead, we ought to see this stochastically; cognitive warfare works at a general level. Likewise, I argued that social media, its use of big data to drive psychographic profiling and perspecticide, shows just how powerful modern information can be. I then looked to the 2016 Brexit and US presidential campaigns, framed by recognition that Brexiteers and Trump (with help from Cambridge Analytica) captured the zeitgeist of the time, to bring about significant shifts to political institutions in the United Kingdom and the United States. Stress and anxiety are thought to make people more susceptible to information operations. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting stress and increased time spent online created a perfect storm, increasing susceptibility to cognitive warfare operations. I finished the chapter by arguing that the events following President Biden's win in the 2020 US election have all the hallmarks of a cognitive warfare operation. Moreover, given that such efforts are ongoing, the stress on, and threat to, political and social institutions in liberal democracies like the United States is only increasing.

This leaves us with a question: given the roles played by liberal democracies internationally and domestically, and given how thoroughly suffused liberal democratic societies are with information, what should be done with cognitive warfare? Is there any clear space by which liberal democracies can point to, to say this cognitive warfare is permissible, whereas this cognitive warfare is impermissible? The final section of the book, Chapters 8–10, gives reasons why we can answer in the affirmative. Having clarified more of the grey matters around cognitive warfare, we will be able to identify if and when cognitive warfare can be used and when it is impermissible.

Notes

1 I note here that I will be using the abbreviation IRA throughout this chapter for the Internet Research Agency, not the Irish Republican Army.
2 See also Nance and Snyder for more discussion on this Russian strategy and the larger historical context of Russian activity (Nance 2018; Snyder 2018).
3 Though I note here that Rid points out that the GRU did alter some of the earlier files that they released, upgrading "four out of five documents to CONFIDENTIAL and one of them to SECRET, just to make them appear more interesting" (Rid 2020, 389).
4 This paragraph and the next are largely taken from my chapter "Information as an Evolving National Security Concern" (Henschke, Adam 2021).
5 (Mueller 2018, 15–16 §39).
6 (Mueller 2018, 14 §32).
7

Defendants and their co-conspirators also created thematic group pages on social media sites, particularly on the social media platforms Facebook and Instagram. ORGANIZATION-controlled pages addressed a range of issues, including: immigration (with group names including 'Secured Borders'); the Black Lives Matter movement (with group names including 'Blacktivist'); religion (with group names including 'United Muslims of America' and 'Army of Jesus'); and certain geographic regions within the United States (with group names including 'South United' and 'Heart of Texas'). By 2016, the size of many ORGANIZATION-controlled groups had grown to hundreds of thousands of online followers.

(Mueller 2018, 14 §34)

8 "Defendants and their co-conspirators also created and controlled numerous Twitter accounts designed to appear as if U.S. persons or groups controlled them" (Mueller 2018, 16 §36).
9 (Mueller 2018, 14 §35).
10

On or about August 15, 2016, Defendants and their co-conspirators received an email at one of their false U.S. persona accounts from a real U.S. person, a Florida-based political activist identified as the 'Chair for the Trump Campaign' in a particular Florida county. The activist identified two additional sites in Florida for possible rallies. Defendants and their co-conspirators subsequently used their false U.S. persona accounts to communicate with the activist about logistics and an additional rally in Florida.

(Mueller 2018, 27 §74)

11

On or about August 18, 2016, the real 'Florida for Trump' Facebook account responded to the false U.S. persona 'Matt Skiber' account with instructions to contact a member of the Trump Campaign ('Campaign Official 1') involved in the campaign's Florida operations and provided . . . Campaign Official 1's email address at the campaign domain donaldtrump.com. On approximately the same day, Defendants and their co-conspirators used the email address of a false U.S. persona, joshmilton024@gmail.com, to send an email to Campaign Official 1 at that donaldtrump.com email account.

(Mueller 2018, 27–28 §76)

12

On or about August 19, 2016, Defendants and their co-conspirators used the false U.S. persona 'Matt Skiber' account to write to the real U.S. person

affiliated with a Texas-based grassroots organization who previously had advised the false persona to focus on 'purple states like Colorado, Virginia & Florida.' . . . Defendants and their co-conspirators then sent a link to the Facebook event page for the Florida rallies and asked that person to send the information to Tea Party members in Florida. The real U.S. person stated that he/she would share among his/her own social media contacts, who would pass on the information.

(Mueller 2018, 29 §80)

13

To conceal the fact that they were based in Russia, Defendants and their co-conspirators promoted . . . rallies while pretending to be U.S. grassroots activists who were located in the United States but unable to meet or participate in person.

(Mueller 2018, 20 §51)

14 (Mueller 2018, 21 §52).
15 For more on the breakdown of charges and outcomes, see Anderson and McMillan (2023).
16 For more on this, see Ott and Dickinson (2019).

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