Capitalizing on Language: The Political and Economic (Re)Circulation of a National Imaginary

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CAPITALIZING ON LANGUAGE

CAPITALIZING ON LANGUAGE: THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC (RE)CIRCULATION OF A NATIONAL IMAGINARY

by

JOSEPH LAWRENCE FLORES

B.A., Communication Studies, The University of Texas at El Paso, 2011

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my family, friends, loved ones here and gone, and to all who believed in me when it mattered most. To my grandparents, parents and siblings: I could have never done this without you - you are the reason I strive to be the best that I can be. Without you, none of this would have been possible.

To all who weathered the storm by my side, near and far: thank you for patience, your love, your encouragement, and your inspiration. I will forever be indebted to those that fed me, clothed me, and nourished me with friendship and support.

Lower valley kids never die – they go get their Ph.Ds.
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Though I leave here with more questions than answers, and with more curiosity than assurance, I am thankful to every individual who, in their own way, supported me in my academic dreams. This would have never been made possible without any of you.
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Abstract

In interrogating a political propaganda campaign carried out on social media platforms, I argue that the political economic practices of platforms, fueled by an (inter)action of human networks and technological networks, underscore the significance of communicative tactics, the strategic use of language, and user labor that drive political and economic projects. In an analysis that focuses on the discourse of memes used to support a Trump national imaginary, the dissemination of its content and the construction of meaning via user labor on social media platforms, intensifies, strengthens, and emboldens political projects and platform logics that affectively buttress political propaganda.

The analytical moments in question focus on memes that were propagated via social media platforms that communicated a hard preference for Donald Trump. With Trump as the center of attention and as a signifier of political possibilities, I interrogate a relationship between a sentiment of technological utopianism that is built into the rhetoric of social media platforms as a supposed space of open communication against the strategic use of language that encourages user labor via user participation in order to propagate content. As such, language is always a sight
of meaning construction via human networks that exploits their existential economic structural properties via their technological networks. These fluid moments of communication blur the boundaries between language as social act, language as foundational to the economic mechanism of platforms, and language as part of a political project that drives it all. Therefore, the examination of language presents the ability to argue for how ideology is (re)produced at two distinct levels: 1) strategically, in the discourse conveyed by the memes; and 2) structurally by the inherent capitalist logic propelling those platforms.

In paying attention to who says what, to whom, and for what purposes, memes present an ample opportunity to analyze how the discursive and symbolic construction on Internet content influences the way in which it circulates across the (inter)acting networks of networks. Moreover, in paying attention to how language is used to describe an ideological worldview, while also paying attention to how it encourages users to act upon that worldview, social media platforms connect social interaction as an action of propagation that exacerbates and expands the commodification of diverse social processes and spheres of life. The collection, use, and storage of data that is crucial to platform logics is contingent on the ability of users to contribute to the imaginative possibilities through an age of distributed media.
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Chapter 1 Introduction

In a book entitled *The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia* (1997), its author, Aleksandr Dugin, advocates for an increasingly more active Russia in global geopolitics by way of annexation, alliance building, and in focused efforts to destabilize the West (Clover, 2016). Incredibly popular, the book, “sold out in four editions, and continues to be assigned as a textbook at the General Staff Academy and other military universities in Russia” (Clover, 2016, para. 14). As underscored by recent Russian geopolitical actions (the annexation of the Ukrainian territory Crimea in 2014 and in giving aid to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to fight U.S. backed groups in the Syrian Civil War since 2011), one move to destabilize the West came by way of interjecting in the 2016 United States presidential election. One specific form of this interjection actualized in the Russian government’s use of its technological and Internet capabilities by circulating politically charged social media content from Russian social media accounts.

Further, Alexander Klimburg of the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, notes that the former Soviet Union envisioned that a war could be waged and won without the other side knowing that war had been declared. The weapons involved in such a conquest included strategic psychological operations designed to dominate “an adversary’s decision-making process through various tools, including…semantics and the choice of terms in the public discourse” (2017, p. 19). Analyzing Russian efforts to affect voters in the United States, Klimburg explains that “[i]n every case, the goal is to deliver information to the target to incline it to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action” (p. 20). Though authors like Klimburg (2017) and Jamieson (2017) are interested in the use of the Internet in cyber warfare, authors such as Benkler, Farris, and Roberts (2018),
O’Neil (2016), and Fuchs (2018b) take interest in the relationship between for-profit social media platforms and information circulation and consumption. Sitting in the camp of the latter, I take interest in contemplating how the strive for capital influences the circulation of propaganda during a heavily politicized time in which for-profit, advertisement-based, user-generated content platforms take center stage in the practices of political communication.

As an attempt to understand how the information was disseminated across social media platforms, the Kremlin’s Internet Research Agency (IRA) was identified as the responsible party for distributing content across platforms before, during and after the 2016 election (Meyer, 2017). The IRA was deemed responsible for disseminating 80,000 pieces of content, reaching over 29 million people on Facebook, with the final estimate peaking at 129 million users. Moreover, the IRA was responsible for putting out over 131,000 messages on Twitter and 1,100 messages on YouTube (Isaac and Wakabayashi, 2017). As a result, Twitter “identified and suspended over 2,700 Internet Research Agency-linked accounts…and also identified another 36,000 Russia-linked bots that pumped out 1.4 million tweets over the same period—tweets that were viewed around 288 million times” (Meyer, 2017). In a 2017 Intelligence Community Assessment Report (ICA), the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation stated, “with high confidence,” that the Russian government conducted a “sophisticated campaign to influence the recent election” …[and] “developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump” (p. ii).

On February 16, 2018, the Department of Justice and the Special Counsel’s Office, headed by Robert Mueller, indicted thirteen Russians and three Russian organizations with conspiracy to defraud the United States, conspiracy to commit wire and bank fraud, and aggravated identity theft. The charges to commit conspiracy included “impairing,
obstructing, and defeating the lawful governmental functions of the United States by dishonest means in order to enable the Defendants to interfere with U.S. political and electoral processes, including the 2016 U.S. presidential election” (United States v. Internet Research Agency, 2018, p. 3). According to the brief presented by the DOJ, the conspirators’ efforts were designed to “promote discord in the United States and undermine public confidence in democracy,” while showing support for candidate Trump and disparage that of Hillary Clinton (United States v. Internet Research Agency, 2018, p. 6). A joint statement on October 7, 2016 by the Department of Homeland Security and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the aforementioned Intelligence Community Assessment Report, and the indictment issued by the Special Counsel’s Office confirmed a working relationship between Russian intelligence offices and WikiLeaks to distribute Kremlin authorized social media content designed specifically to discredit Hillary Clinton and favor Donald Trump.

In July 2016 the New Yorker’s Adrian Chen reported that the IRA’s “troll farm” in St. Petersburg was producing “blog posts, comments, infographics, and viral videos that pushed the Kremlin’s narrative on both the Russian and English Internet” (para. 1). The Wall Street Journal (Wells & Seetharaman, 2017) reports that some of the Russian Twitter accounts with more than 10,000 followers were created in late 2015, coincidentally as the presidential primaries were in full swing. An NBC News (Popken, 2017) analysis of a database of 202,973 tweets sent by known Russian trolls found that “Russian Twitter troll volume increased significantly on July 21 [2016], two days after Trump became the official Republican nominee, and continued at the same intensity or higher for the rest of the year” (para. 9). Beyond these reported accounts of Russian Internet action, Russian discourse actors strategically crafted and placed ads on U.S. social media platforms, organized rallies
that would showcase cultural and social divisions, created imposter sites, and strategically
crafted messages geared towards millions of users on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter,
YouTube, Tumblr, and Reddit (Jamieson, 2017). With a concerted effort on reaching
constituencies whom Donald Trump needed to mobilize, Russian messages fixated on the ills
of a multicultural, multiracial culture that the Democrats, and Clinton specifically,
championed as part of her campaign messaging. With hashtags such as #TrumpTrain,
#MAGA, #IWontProtectHillary, #BlacksAgainstHillary, and #Hillary4Prison, the Twitter
account “March for Trump,” and Facebook accounts including “Clinton FRAUDation” and
“Trumpsters United” (Jamieson, 2017), the Russian strategy centered on and exacerbated the
structural properties of social media platforms with a goal of amplifying messages and
creating meaning as much as possible.

As various facets of the U.S. government were investigating Russian election
meddling, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter took center stage in the attempt
to understand the magnitude of the interference and the role of the platforms. What makes
this situation particularly interesting is that social media platforms have had to publicly
define their existential purpose and simultaneously advocate for the quality of information
shared on their platforms. As put by Colin Stretch, Facebook’s Vice President & General
Council during a 2017 testimony for the Russia Investigative Task Force Hearing to the
Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence in the U.S. House of Representatives, “…people
should believe content on Facebook is authentic, and should not have to worry that they’re
being exploited in a cynical effort to prey on painful fault lines in our society in order to
inflame discourse in this country [emphasis added].” In September 2016, then candidate-
Trump, at a town hall, famously told the now-indicted General Michael Flynn that “cyber is
becoming so big today…it’s becoming something that a number of years ago, short number of years ago, wasn’t even a word” (Hongo, 2016, para. 3). Though then candidate Trump’s awareness of the influence of cyber in the world of warfare is one thing, the weaponization of for-profit, privately owned, supposed champions of a revitalization of the public sphere has proven to be a completely different issue in and of itself.

At its fundamental core, this project centers, then problematizes, how social media platforms are contingent and dependent on its economic functions and capitalist logics that can propel, buttress and reproduce ideological perspectives and worldviews. Often celebrated as tools of democratization which aide in the supposed construction of a political utopia with open communication and built on a narrative of technological utopianism (Bennett, 2003; Dahlgren, 2009; Papacharissi, 2010), this project questions how social media platforms construct and (re)present politically motivated projects founded in a media environment continuously seeking economic expansion. By utilizing political memes that were disseminated across social media platforms during and after the 2016 United States presidential election, I engage with how a rendition of a national imaginary was (re)constructed and disseminated to promote specific types of values and beliefs that centered around Donald Trump. As will be explored in detail, social media’s core ecosystem, comprised of algorithms and propelled by user-generated actions such as sharing and Liking, presents a tension between political and communicative utopianism and capital driven media dependent on individual user-engagement.

In the following chapters, I seek to demonstrate the necessity of focusing on language as social, economic, and political act mediated by social media platforms. I contend that through this consideration, the (re)construction of a national imaginary built around Donald
Trump simultaneously disseminates certain values, beliefs and morals and implicates the user through the presence and labor. By liking, sharing, and engaging in content, the propaganda in questions activates and materializes the (inter)acting networks of networks through affective and effective pieces of Internet content.

**Social Media and a National Imaginary**

Through honed capitalistic practices on platforms, the (re)construction and (re)circulation of a Trump national imaginary built through user-engagement creates a backdrop that puts the intricacies of social media platforms at the forefront of political communicative practices. The collection, storing, and monetization of data, data as raw material, has profoundly changed the way for-profit social media companies deliver information for consumption and dissemination. Set within this media context, I focus precisely on the type of content shared, underscoring the specificities of the language used to create user engagement and political narratives, and the role of the United States national imaginary in a politically contentious time. In highlighting linguistic and communicative strategies which materialize language as a social act, language as an economic endeavor, and the construction of meaning mediated via the platforms, a focus on language allows me to make the argument that it’s not just how social media platforms are constructed that influences how a user receives or interacts with Internet content, but it is language mediates the political and the economic.

While there are several narratives that can be explored within the content, I choose to examine how a Trumpian national imaginary is (re)constructed because of the highly politicized time of a presidential election in the United States. Where millions of dollars are
spent on campaigns, social media platforms, which deploy a level of political engagement on behalf of individual users, are unique because of their apparent openness to political participation by all. As will be explored in detail later, it suffices to say that I am highlighting how language on social media platforms is not only political in that users are recipients of political messages, but users circulate political messages through networks that can ultimately generate further engagement. The following section provides a short backdrop on the role of the Internet in political deliberation and political communication while also peering into how online echo chambers have been studied. Though my project does not make an argument about echo chambers, they are considered here because I believe previous research has forgotten one important aspect to deliberate.

Here, the memes that are shared on social media platforms are important because of their politically polarized/polarizing content and in that dissemination of them across platforms was inherently dependent on economic practices. On the one hand, political messaging and communication tactics capitalizing on social media platforms is a fitting evolutionary move representative of the inclusion of online advertising and marketing alongside more traditional newspaper and television strategies. On the other hand, because data and user-generated information are fundamentally demographic, political messaging is now, more than ever, demographically specific. Thus, socially, culturally and politically relevant media strategies, even those created by other countries, must be taken seriously when the content propagated relies on geopolitical, sociocultural, and sociopolitical demographic breakdowns. For many, the power of the Internet, and social media platforms, was in hoping for a revitalized public sphere where, due to the technical specification of new communication channels, civil society could organize better, communicate better, and
deliberation would be more inclusive and effective (Castells, 2008). However, the question of whether citizens, and more specifically voters, avoid engaging with opinions that contradict their own has been debated by media and communication scholars for decades.

As part of the exploration to see how the structural constraints of the Internet has affected political communication and debate, Internet scholars have focused on the polarizing effects throughout different eras of the Internet. For example, in the pre-Web 2.0 era, Sunstein (2000) examined online responses to Bill Clinton’s impeachment and found that users are more likely to expose themselves to online information that reinforces their existing views. Ultimately, Sunstein (2018) argues that political Web discourse (a cumulative approach taken from his research in 2000 to his research in 2018) resembles an echo chamber—an enclosed room used for producing reverberating sounds—because people selectively choose online forums that reinforce their existing views. More recently, the Web 2.0 era has continued the trend of users being attracted to like-minded bloggers and ideas. Adamic and Glance’s (2005) study, which measured the extent of interactions between 2004 liberal and conservative blogs, found that conservative blogs linked to each other more frequently, creating a dense web of interlinks more so than liberal blogs, providing evidence of more closed knit communities in the Republican blogosphere.

Moreover, using a behavior tracking study, Garrett (2009) found that conservatives consistently seek online support for their political positions online. Gilbert, Bergstrom, and Karahalios (2009) analyzed over 1,000 comments on 33 leading blogs and found that agreement outnumbered disagreement in blog comments by more than 3 to 1. Boutyline and Willer (2011) tested a dataset of 237,244 personal networks of U.S. American Twitter users and found that conservatives are highly connected to each other in Twitter groups. For
Himelboim, McCreery and Smith (2013), birds of a feather flock together on Twitter, and through a network and content analyses, found that echo chambers are formed around the 10 most controversial political topics. Further, Cameron and Geidner’s (2014) study found that some users avoid discussions of conflicting issues, strongly indicating that conversations reflect some level of conformism.

Particularly interesting, however, is the investigation of the political effects of social media platforms in respect to right-wing or fascist groups. Though definitions of fascism are contested, especially among historians who reject abstracting from historical cases to create an analytical concept, Griffin (2003) argues that generic fascism is a “political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism” (para. 9). Due to the current rise of fascist and right-wing groups in different countries, there has been an increased attempt to understand how they use the Internet (Caiani & Kröll, 2015; Caiani & Parenti, 2013; Froio & Gattinara, 2015). Whereas social media platforms and all of their democratic possibilities are revered when used to oppose oppressive contexts (Etling, Faris, & Palfrey, 2010; Laer & Aelst, 2010), the same features appear to be more pernicious when it comes to right-wing mobilization. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that scholars have increasingly invested efforts to understand these phenomena in relation to its social and political implications (e.g., Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015; Giglietto & Selva, 2014).

Admittedly, it is out of the scope of this project to ascertain how and under what circumstances echo chambers manifest on social media platforms. Further, it is out of the scope of this project to determine what the political party lines of echo chambers may look like, and the subject matters in which they develop around. However, my contribution to this
research must consider the effects of echo chambers on political communicative practices and the circulation of ideas because of the supposed democratic possibilities brought to political deliberation by way of these social media platforms. The importance of echo chambers, political homophily, far-right conservative use, and even the rise of fascism, matter on social media platforms due to the underlying use of social media platforms for these discussions to take place. Importantly, however, my contribution to this literature contemplates how the content circulates through a focus on language and the affective media structures in which they exist.

Though the studies on echo chambers and political homophily on social media platforms reveal a faction-based nature of political deliberation, the studies mentioned only focus on the aftereffects of social media platforms on political communicative practices. Put differently, the studies do not necessarily contemplate how or why these sects gather, but instead focus on the topics that are discussed, the political denomination of such groups, and the areas of interest for them. Comparatively, my interest lies in attempting to analyze the foundational key mechanisms of how content circulation could, theoretically, play into the formation of these types of closed-off groups. A focus on language, particularly language which encourages user-based interactions and language which ignites a specific rendition of a national imaginary, allows me to center two key components at play that may seem to operate separately but that are which paramount to the existences of these platforms: language and capitalism. Through foundational understandings of language and a distinct form of capitalism, supplemented with a focus on labor, I interrogate how the weaving of the economic and of the political mediate the social, the political, the economic, the discursive, as well as the relationship between media and society.
In the centering of language and its role on social media platforms as capitalistic and in the construction of meaning, I take seriously the role of politics in the economics and the economics of the political. In investigating how the political nature of the memes drive the economic foundations of platforms, while also investigating how the economic nature of the content drives the political discourse, social media platforms, though long dethroned from its political utopic hopes, continue to prove that they deserve the attention they receive. As such, my project focuses on furthering the understanding of how capitalizing on the very act of communication continues to effect the systemic (re)production of ideological worldviews, on how the ideological nature of the content in question serves as a link between production and consumption, and on how ideology (re)materializes as a social act on behalf of a national imaginary. I seek to continue prodding at a fundamental problem of social media platforms and their effect on mediating political discourse through language and capital accumulation.

Why Propaganda, a Trump National Imaginary and Social Media?

Through an interrogation of the dialectical tension between technological utopianism proclaiming democratic revival, and a critical political economic approach to understanding the goal for capital through media platforms, I focus on how memes built a national imaginary through language used to encourage user-interaction. In exploring the use of language, I focus on how ideology is (re)produced at two distinct levels: 1) social media platforms (re)producing ideologically loaded discourses on national imaginaries while 2) encouraging user interaction into their strategic capitalist goals. I am interested in how, first, language, in the context of building a national imaginary is used to (re)produce political ideologies through the construction of a national imaginary; and secondly, in how language
functions at the level of economic reproduction, i.e. the mediating role of language in the (re)production of specific economic interests at a structural level. As such, I argue that language on social media platforms is not only a social act, a political act or an economic act, but a fluid materialization of all three simultaneously.

Ultimately, I interrogate the use of, and capitalization of, language as mediated through social media platforms. Due to the social nature of the platforms, a focus on language, with an understanding of language as a social act, then provides a unique avenue of investigation. In the studies concerning echo chambers, actual language use is often an after-thought or a taken-for-granted aspect of political communication. Further, in studies that focus on how capital accumulation functions on social media platforms (Fuchs, 2010b, 2012, 2014, 2017b; Fuchs & Mosco, 2016), language use is often an abstract concept, or again, a taken-for-granted feature of social media activity. Though I do not condemn these studies for their lack of attention to language or instantiations of language use in the accumulation of capital, my intervention aims at specifying acts of political discourse, which encourage user-engagement through strategic linguistic cues (for example, to like or share on behalf of a national imaginary), and which operate on an economic foundation. This specification of language presents a unique opportunity of study to underline a political moment in which abstractions manifest concretely.

Though political campaigns and social movements have long taken advantage of the Internet to reach voters, mobilize individuals, and create change, the 2016 U.S. presidential general election provides a unique opportunity to investigate how for-profit social media companies continue to influence the evolution of political communicative practices. I investigate how memes that (re)circulated a national imaginary exploited the U.S. American
liberal fantasy of protecting free speech and the press; the free-market disposition not to regulate forms of expression and channels of political communication; platform’s capacities, and frankly, their existential need, to harvest personal data, facilitate sharing, and micro-targeting advertising; and the U.S. American tendency to spectacularize a political election with horse-race headlines tactics and click-bait practices that serve to generate revenue for journalistic outlets of all types. By making it possible for users to not only consume but also create, share, and comment on content with those in their networked community, platforms revolutionized communication long ago. Unfortunately, with a ready-made architecture that would allow for the circulation of content on a massive scale (Jamieson, 2017), propaganda’s circulation through an affective media structure remains a point of concern.

I organize this study as follows: chapter two lays out the theoretical assumptions that situate social media platforms as sociotechnical tools that engage in prosumptive practices that capitalize on language as a social act. Chapter three presents a methodological overview and outlines the research design. I describe the methods used to gather data and justify the use of critical discourse analysis as an entry way to how platforms mediate and disseminate meaning. In the analysis chapters, chapter three interrogates how the construction of meaning is relayed in the memes that are analyzed and also mediated by the structural components of social media platforms. Specifically, this chapter investigates what the memes were attempting to articulate in a rendition of a Trump national imaginary and how liking, sharing and hashtags are formidable areas of meaning construction.

Chapter four implements the deliberation of user labor. User labor is conceived of as potential user engagement and user presence, a necessary existential requirement of social media platforms. By tying the values, beliefs, and morals of a Trump national imaginary to
the structural tools of dissemination by way of user engagement, I focus on how the propaganda in question is strategically contingent on platform affordability. Chapter five focuses on the affective qualities of social media platforms and social media content. I argue that memes are not only a particularly effective piece of propaganda but that they are vital pieces of computational propaganda.

The final chapter of analysis presents a deliberation on why social media platforms necessitate further deliberation in the relationship between politics and media. I argue that in their ability to stroke utopic and dystopic sentiments about social and political change, they represent a larger history of the relationship between media and society. I close with a consideration on how the politicization of media communication technology and the politicization of media continues to evolve and why social media platforms must remain an area of concern.

I conclude with a discussion on the role of technological affects, structurally and in the Internet content, and how the social, political and cultural properties of memes are not separate aspects of their effectiveness. Instead, the structural and constructed properties that memes are comprised of provide a dialectical moment of fetish and potential for political change. The circulation of political memes, comprised of the values and beliefs that mediate a particular version of the Trump national imaginary, and which incite and encourage user labor to (re)circulate it, affirm a political discourse through the affective possibilities that incite affect as a political logic.
Chapter 2 Theoretical Assumptions and Literature Review

In the age of “social media platforms,” it is crucial to note and contextualize any theoretical or conceptual differences between “social media,” “platforms,” “social networking sites” and/or a combination of the three. Though sometimes used interchangeably, these terms carry different conceptual weight when discussing or debating their implications with how Internet companies operate and pursue capital. As such, this review of literature proceeds in a way that initially aims to tease out how the structural makeup of social media and social networking companies influence theorizations of user labor and the structuring of social relations. Specifically, I do this by contemplating the aim to accumulate capital through the valorization of information and in contemplating how differences in theorizing the “social” of social media materialize in my project. I then discuss the role of language in two parts: first, on the role of language and ideology, then secondly, on media studies’ attempt to grapple with media’s role in the (re)production of ideology. This review of language matters because of the centrality of language in this project. Lastly, I review communicative capitalism, argue for conceiving it conjointly with user labor. I review how the role of the national imaginary adds a distinctive feature to these long-standing debates in media studies while also serving as a driving force in my project. I also provide a conceptual model for studying propaganda in the age of social media, and provide a working definition of propaganda.

“Social” Media & Platforms

Highlighted by the consumption of information, the pre-and post-Web 2.0 changeover reflects a macroeconomic shift to a post-industrialist economy with an emphasis on a service-
based economic structure. Though part of a broader argument about labor in the often
criticized dichotomous framework of Fordist/“post-Fordist” capitalism, Lazzarrato (1996)
contends that immaterial labor - comprised of two aspects: the information content of the
commodity (or computer work) and the cultural content of the commodity (objects such as
fashions, tastes, and public opinion) – does not replace material labor but only extends it. The
concept of immaterial labor is an attempt to characterize the way the Internet and technology
influence labor and how the structuring of the Internet affects capital and the strive for
control particularly with an emphasis on the technological structure and an ever-growing
dependency on labor (Galloway, 2004). As such, the Web 2.0’s changeover, characterized by
a shift of Internet experience in which user-generated content came to dominate the web, did
not happen in a vacuum. Accordingly, this change is the impetus of different theorizations
about labor, capitalism, the collection, storage, and consumption of information and the
overall role of the Internet and computing on the structuring of social relations.

In 2007, boyd and Ellison offered a definition of Web 2.0 sites, including social
networking sites, contending that they share three main characteristics: 1) users construct
public or semi-public profiles within a bounded system; 2) Web 2.0 sites articulate a list of
other users with whom they share a connection with; and 3) Web 2.0 sites view and traverse
their list of connections and those made by others within this bounded system. In the pursuit
of capital accumulation, Internet companies, including but not limited to social media
platforms, tactfully refine information collected from users who “spontaneously” provide
data about personal tastes, preferences and desires, all with the intention of providing
advertisers with more accurate target audiences (Bolaño and Vieira, 2015, p. 56). Fuchs
(2012b) argues that platforms exploit its users in two ways: first, companies mine user
produced content as raw material for its search engine’s cataloging system; and secondly, companies surveil user browsing habits in either the search engine or via platforms based on tacit permissions to track, stockpile, and manipulate the information derived from usage.

As will be detailed later, it suffices to say for now that though the valorization process of social media platforms has been theorized in diverse ways, there are two in which I focus on. First, is the user’s level of prosumption. Prosumption involves the interrelationship between production and consumption (Ritzer, 2015) and is a crucial component in theorizing how users actively participate in an ecology of sharing, liking, and content creation. For Ritzer, not only are consumption and production always interrelated and intertwined but prosumption is a “hybrid that always involves a mix of production and consumption” (p. 414). As such, data is understood as raw material, which is then commodified by media corporations, and is always dependent on the work of social media users. Though it is out of the scope of this project to consider the level of each individual user in driving a Trump national imaginary, prosumption nonetheless remains a crucial component because of how language encourages user labor in driving user interaction. Secondly, some scholars argue that value derives from the ability to exploit communication practices as labor-time where, ultimately, time spent on social media platforms is paramount in the process of prosumer commodification transformed into economic capital (Fuchs, 2012).

Social networking sites like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are distinct because they are integrated platforms that combine an amalgamation of media, information and communication technologies. This amalgamation of information enables the convergence of cognition, communication and cooperation and not only integrate a level of sociality but encourage the display of integrated roles (Fuchs, 2017b). With data on social media
platforms existing as text, videos, images, Likes, shares, posts, the use of emoticons, and commenting, these platforms inherently depend on user-based interactions (Cohen, 2008; Lee, 2011) and the commodification of user labor on social media requires sophisticated techniques of collecting, analyzing and manipulating these kinds of data (Beer, 2009; Kang and McAllister, 2011; McStay, 2011). Accordingly, there are distinct characteristics of platforms that must be accounted for. Since I aim to interrogate the economic functions of social media and its impacts on political communication, platforms that are capitalistic in nature present specific perturbations to any definition of social media that chronicles or centers community, communication, and cognition (Fuchs, 2017b).

On the one hand, authors like Fuchs (2017b) argue that all media are social. For these scholars, media are always part of society because aspects of society are always present in the technological artifacts that are used. For example, Fuchs argues that the building of a computer does not happen in a vacuum outside of social relations, therefore the ideas, thoughts, and writings that happen on a computer must be considered as part of society. Moreover, software programs that computer applications are built on, and the hardware components that process them, are also the result of social relations and are therefore social products (Berry, 2014). Importantly, then, this broad understanding of sociality implies that social media sites are not only social in that they host social interactions between individuals and groups, but that they are social because they are products of social relations like the television, radio, posters, books, wall paintings and “all other forms of information” before them (Fuchs, 2017b, p. 10).

On the other hand, other scholars note that media are only social when they support communication that enable social actions and sociality. Contingent on a definition of
communication that conceives of communication as a reciprocal process between at least two humans, the exchange of symbols creates a sense of meaning to the communicative acts and to the platforms that host them. As a kind of screen essentialism (Berry, 2014), this understanding of social activity fronts communication and symbolic interaction and notes that media only become social in the interactions between individuals that can evolve to create social community. Though it is true that this definition of social media centers the ability to communicate and construct community through communicative interactions in order to be considered social, it essentializes the construction of the screens and platforms where interactions take place while disregarding the material necessities (and social relations) required to assemble the technological products. Though I aim to avoid screen essentialism, I agree that social media platforms nonetheless provide the place through which the cognition, community and communication actualize.

As such, I take the consideration of social seriously in this project. Indeed, as Marx (1990) argues, “technology reveals the active relation of man to nature, the direct process of the production of his life, and thereby it also lays bare the process of production of the social relations of his life, and of the mental conceptions that flow from these conceptions” (p. 493). Additionally, Web 2.0’s Internet capabilities, including but not limited to, coding, software and hardware production, and algorithm production and performativity, are all historically specific and socially embedded in broader networks of social relations and institutional ensembles (Berry, 2014). In the age of computing and social media platforms, all computing systems, and all web applications, should be considered social because they store and transmit human knowledge that originate in the social relations of society (Fuchs, 2017b).
Put differently, I, too, take media to be techno-social components through which information and communication technologies enable and constrain human activities while also always being a site where knowledge is produced, distributed and consumed (Fuchs, 2017b). Existing in a “dynamic and reflexive process that connects technological structures and human agency,” social media are not just a network of computer networks but are always a network that interconnects social networks and technological networks of computer networks (Fuchs, 2017b, p. 52) making them (inter)acting networks of networks. Consequently, not only are media and computing systems objectifications of society and human relations, but the actual use of a computing system or application is based on objectified knowledge that is the product of social relations comprised of a technological infrastructure and (inter)acting humans (Fuchs, 2017b).

Though Fuchs acknowledges that the phrase “social media” often conceptualizes social networking sites and social media platforms, Srnicek’s (2017) concerns are much more specific to the types of platforms that are capitalistic in nature, a concern that I share. Srnicek contends that the economy of today is dominated by a new class that does not own the means of production but that has ownership over information. For Srnicek, 21st Century’s advanced capitalism has come to be centered upon extracting and using data as raw material. Since the collection of data is contingent on the construction and use of a vast infrastructure to sense, record, and analyze data, data’s extraction is based on the activities of users who are thus the producers of this natural source of raw material. Therefore, in the construction – and evolution – of platforms, data has come to serve crucial capitalist functions:

“they educate and give competitive advantage to algorithms; they enable the coordination and outsourcing of workers; they allow for the optimization and
flexibility of productive processes; they make possible the transformation of low-
margin goods into high-margin services; and data analysis is itself generative of data,
in a virtuous cycle” (p. 41).

Hence, at the most basic level, platforms are digital infrastructures that enable two or more
groups to interact. Platforms position themselves as intermediaries that bring customers,
advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and physical objects together and rather
than having to build a marketplace, platforms provide a basic infrastructure to mediate
between different groups (Srnicek, 2017). Though Srnicek highlights several platform
characteristics, I focus on three. First, and most fundamentally, platforms position themselves
between users and are the grounds on which user activities occur, giving platform owners
privileged access to record them and act upon that information, therefore positioning
platforms as “far more than internet companies or tech companies” because they can operate
“wherever digital interaction takes place” (p. 43).

Secondly, platforms produce, and are reliant upon, a network effect. For Srnicek, this
means that platforms are not only contingent upon getting users to engage with the platform
but that the value of the platform derives from how many users continuously use the platform
over time. With the goal of users begetting more users, platforms develop a dynamic of ever-
increasing access to more activities and more data through more users. And lastly, platforms
are designed in a way that makes them attractive to a variety of users. Though they often
present themselves as empty spaces to create interaction, they embody a politics where the
rules of product and service development, as well as marketplace interactions, are set by the
platform owners. With this premiere access to user data, platforms owners’ control and
govern the rules of the game.
In sum, I take the social of social media seriously in that I agree that the social aspect of social networking sites relies on cognition, community and communication. However, because cognition, community, and communication are important to the (re)production, dissemination, and proliferation of national imaginaries, I foreground the capitalistic nature of platforms in order to avoid a deliberation of social networking sites and social media platforms as separate from a material world. Similarly, in considering the economic goals of platforms, I remain cognizant of the structural capabilities and in how the memes in question uses the structural tendencies to its advantage. Therefore, in centering the role of the user as part consumer and producer of such a national imaginary, the memes illuminate a relationship between media, society and politics that highlights the use of social media in the construction of political projects which relies on communicative capitalism and a recognition of social complexities which originate in social relations.

**Ideology and Social Media Platforms: The Role of Language**

As part of the argument that I make, I aim to connect the use of language, both as part of a political project and on social media platforms, to its role in the (re)materialization of ideology. Since the data that I look at is contingent upon the use of language (and images and representations), my argument rests on extrapolating a relationship between language use, meaning making, sociality, labor, the construction of national imaginaries, and its operationalization both in how language is used in the memes and through the reliance of user labor. As Fisher (2016) points out, in the forming of networks of associations, users are producing webs of meaning, symbolic universes, and semantic fields, and when concerned with the collection, storage, and networking of these webs of meaning and symbolic
universes, network associations, and the circulation of content through network associations, matter when language is recognized as part of sociality and as part of an economic driving force.

As such, I approach this section in two ways: first, I consider the role of language and ideology; and second, I consider the role of language in media studies broadly, and communicative capitalism, specifically. As a result, I argue that not only does communicative capitalism capitalize on the fetish of the message, but communicative capitalism is inherently contingent on the use of language as practical consciousness, on user labor, and on sociality in order to benefit the economic goals of the platform. Thus, language is not only material in that it is a social practice contingent on social interaction but language is material in that it drives the economic engine.

Broadly, I argue that by commenting, liking, and/or sharing pieces of content on social media, the (re)distribution and (re)production of ideological content exists as a communicative act contingent on the prosumption of the worldview embedded in the material a user interacts with. Thus, if communicative capitalism relies on user interactions, user engagement on all levels assumes a capitalistic value and an ideological value. I argue that platforms are not only a place that can be used to disseminate and (re)produce discourses and understandings of the world, but due to the sociality of platforms as part of techno-social systems that are used to store and transmit human knowledge that originates in the social relations of society, they are similarly ideological. Ideological worldviews in the content in question emphasize and highlight the notion that media and information technologies not only shape how individuals think but are a way to shape the thinking of others (Fuchs, 2017). By challenging the notion of social media reviving the public sphere, users, through the
content that they see and engage with, are prosumers of ideological worldviews and national imaginaries which illuminate the economic goals of social media platforms. Here, linguistic cues that encourage the process of engaging with content, assumes value in that it implicates communication, community, cognition, capitalism, prosumer labor, and ideology as part of the construction of a national imaginary.

First, I understand a relationship between language and ideology as activity being distinctively human, or as Williams (1977) argues, constitutively human. For Marx and Engels (1970), language is practical consciousness that from the beginning is always also a social relationship (Williams, 1977). Citing Volosinov, Williams agrees that meaning is necessarily a social action, dependent on a social relationship where “consciousness takes shape in the material of signs created by an organized group in the process of its social intercourse” (p. 36). On a social media platform, however, this social practice is not only social in that meaning comes from the use of language on the platform, but that the use of language is always an economic practice, as well. Therefore, language, and language use, is seen both as practical consciousness (Marx, 1845), used as part of communicative capitalism (Dean, 2008), and always a part of a social action, dependent on social relationships ultimately exploited by social media platforms.

Terry Eagleton (2007) argues that ideology is less a matter of inherent linguistic properties of a pronouncement “than a question of who is saying what to who for what purposes” (p. 9). In its purposeful use, Eagleton contends that ideology concerns the actual uses of language between human subjects to produce special effects. Here, I mark a combination of how to conceive a relationship between the economic practices of social media platforms and its role in buttressing a systemic and systematic (re)production of
ideological worldviews. If the relationship between language and ideology centers on the role of the social creation of meaning, it is crucial to push this relationship into considering the role of language, labor, and communicative capitalism in constructing national imaginaries. As promoted by Fuchs and Mosco (2016), a theory of communication should center and demonstrate how communication and culture are material practices. Importantly, they maintain that this must also forefront how labor and language are mutually constituted, and how communication and information are dialectical instances of the same social activity – the social construction of meaning.

Secondly, Hardt (1996) argues that the use of a specific language by media, and the experience of its presentation of reality, are significant events in constructing dominant worldviews. Of course, on social media platforms, the making of dominant worldviews must be able to contemplate the technological infrastructure that have evolved since Hardt’s formulation of language use and media. As such, this second consideration of language and ideology focuses on the role of the technological infrastructure, and the labor necessary to use it, to explain the platform’s goal for economic prosperity through politically motivated content and its ideological consequences.

Citing Adorno, Fuchs (2016) maintains that the crucial aspect of ideology is in its ability to encompass strategies that attempt to make human subjects instrumental in the reproduction of domination and exploitation. McGuigan (2014) argues that means of communication, as entire social projects that serve social needs, are themselves means of productions that include forms of language and advanced forms of communication technology that are always socially and materially reproduced. With platforms that existentially need users to interact with them in order to beget more capital, the social
construction of meaning, and the communicative technological infrastructures through which this meaning circulates, distributes ideology with a political motive and as part of domination and exploitation fundamentally and always through the use of language.

Here, the consideration of language and communication technology as part of the means of production is significant because it relies on recognizing that language and communication technology are intrinsic to all forms of labor and social organizational patterns that constitute essential elements of the productive force and the social relations of production (McGuigan, 2014). Crucially, this outlook posited by McGuigan underscores the historical significance of language and its relationship with communication technology and media. First, he takes notice of the fact that the means of communication have a productive history which is always more or less directly related to general historical phases of productive and technical capacity.

Secondly, he iterates that the historically changing means of communication have historical variable relations to the general complex of productive forces, to the general social relationships which are produced by them, and which the general productive forces both produce and reproduce. My focus on McGuigan’s argument is to center the role of communication technology to produce exploitation through the use of the platforms by the users while also (re)producing ideological worldviews that continue their exploitation. This two-fold form of recognition thereby not only focuses on what the memes of a Trump national imaginary perpetuate as part of ideological worldviews but also focuses on how communicative capitalism and user labor supplement and support the role of social media in political projects.
Citing Lukács, Fuchs (2016) notes that the relationship between the social itself (relations, intentions, experiences, knowledge) and the course of society’s development has incorporated information work as also part of the objects, tools and products of work. Specifically, Lukács argues that language and communication are constitutive moments in the social reproduction of society that depend on active, social, languaging beings inside systems that are (re)produced through interaction with nature and interaction between themselves (Fuchs, 2016). Not only does this implicate users within the reproduction of their own exploitation in the use of the social media platforms, it also implicates the outcome of that work as the cultural production and consumptions of symbols that have meaning in society (Nixon, 2016). Here, the creation of symbols that have meaning in society, and the communication of such meanings via language and via media channels, must also be recognized as a process of labor, acknowledging that the activities of users, or cultural consumers, are contained within a technological infrastructure which always further the exploitative tendencies (Nixon, 2014; Berry, 2014).

**Communicative Capitalism**

In contemplating the role of social media in the construction of national imaginaries with economic consequences, I focus on two theorizations of capitalism on these platforms: first, communicative capitalism (Dean, 2008) and second, user prosumer labor. In conjunction with theorizing social media platforms as techno-social systems that exploit communication, cognition and community, I argue that communicative capitalism is useful in considering the consequences of economic gain coming from a proliferation of political activity on social media. However, I claim that communicative capitalism fails to consider
the role of the user in the (re)production and dissemination of the national imaginary because it fails to evaluate user interactions materialized as user prosumer labor in political projects. Though for Dean communicative capitalism is a way of explaining the volatile impacts of social media (and technology more broadly) on the political process, I argue that communicative capitalism, combined with user prosumer labor, provides a more robust, comprehensive view of the relationship between political projects and the supposed benefits of social media to democratic institutions.

First, for Dean (2008), communicative capitalism aims to account for the proliferation, distribution, acceleration, and intensification of communicative access and opportunity that exists in a dense network of global communication and which is hailed for its political contributive character. Ultimately however, citing Žižek, Dean argues that this proliferation and intensification leads to a postpolitical form of communication where real antagonism or dissent is foreclosed because the postpolitical assumes that “matters previously thought to require debate and struggle are now addressed as personal issues or technical concerns” (p. 107). In accentuating communicative capitalism to capture a merging of democracy and capitalism, Dean emphasizes that this merging is brought together by way of networked communications. Instead of enhancing democratic governance or large acts of resistance, the extensive proliferation of media messages acts more as mere contributions to the circulation of content instead of existing as a political message in and of itself. Therefore, existing as a fantasy of abundance, a shift is created in the basic unit of communication, from message to contribution, ultimately aggravating a fantasy of activity or participation. This fantasy of activity or participation, what can more accurately be portrayed as technological utopianism, then works to prevent actual political action by depoliticizing communication
because political involvement on social media empowers those who it is supposed to resist the most.

In attempting to answer why the expansions and intensifications of communication networks has coincided with a collapse of democratic deliberation, Dean suggests that communicative capitalism aims to conceptualize the idea that the market is the site of democratic aspiration, “the mechanism by which even where the demos manifests itself” (p. 104). As such, Dean insinuating that the popularity of messages fuels a depoliticization of messages and that this form of communication and capitalism underscores a substantial part of democratic practices. Here, democracy, and ultimately capitalism itself, are constantly merging into communication technologies and media structures, undermining political opportunity and efficacy. Therefore, the continuous commodification of communication leads to more domains of life being reformatted into terms of market and spectacle while also detaching communication itself from political potential only to function as the basic elements of capitalist production wherein user activity, i.e. user labor, also serves capital accumulation.

In discussing communicative capitalism being related to technological fetishism, Dean argues people believe that they are active, “maybe even that they are making a difference” by clicking a button, signing a petition, or commenting on a blog or social media post and that these acts are in some way interpreted as political (p. 109). Though I agree with Dean’s critique, I aim to take the notion of communicative capitalism literally where instead of considering communicative capitalism as creating a lack of response or an excess of messages, communicative capitalism is used as a way to imagine the interplay between the proliferation of messages into the construction of a national labor through user prosumption.
In both platform capitalism and communicative capitalism, communication itself functions as the fundamental part of the market. Therefore, linking communicative capitalism in an era of proliferated messages aimed at creating or insinuating a sense of democratic participation with user prosumer labor, cognition, communication, and community are fundamentally economic and fundamentally exist as social knowledge needed to propel political projects.

Situated between user labor and political communicative practices, communicative capitalism not only functions as a proliferation of voices but furthers the (re)production of ideological worldviews. My aim in using this argument is not to disagree or to discredit Dean’s notion of communicative capitalism. Instead, I intend to take the premises of communicative capitalism and contextualize them as part of user’s prosumer work and as a form of message circulation that enhances the (re)production of a specific kind of national imaginary. Since part of Dean’s argument rests on the idea that communicative capitalism has hindered any revitalization of the public sphere through the Internet and social media, I argue that communicative capitalism not only hinders a revitalization of the public sphere, but fundamentally alters it through labor. Through user’s labor, and through an exploration of language as part of the motivating factor for user engagement, communicative capitalism functions as part of a political practice that both continuously capitalizes on communication as an economic form while also enhancing specific types of political messaging practices that prompt user interactions.

**Communicative Capitalism, Labor and a Political Project**

In order to understand communicative capitalism’s impact on the marketization of all aspects of life, as Dean argues, it is important to deliberate the result of those capitalistic
practices – i.e., the participation in those capitalistic and communicative practices that users engage in – under political pretenses. Here, I aim to converge three crucial components to this part of my argument: the intensification of content circulation through user engagement and labor, the proliferation of these messages under politically motivated pretenses where political messaging and the economic structure of platforms meet (in other words, the importance of the kind of language used to encourage user interaction), and the continued positioning of platforms as the ground upon which user activities occur (Srnicek, 2017). On the one hand, communicative capitalism has commodified facets of life that have led to further commodification of life practices, thus highlighting the important role of data as raw material. On the other hand, the political nature of the content in question also highlights how communicative capitalism, including the political economic ends of the platforms themselves, continuously evolve to further politicize the accumulation of user data. The point here is to consider the merging of both ends of communicative capitalism (messaging and engaging) as an integration of digital capitalism that overcomes a sense of depoliticization because participating in specific forms of political messaging in the name of political projects is inherently always political and always economic through the construction of data relations (Couldry & Mejia, 2019).

In the Trump national imaginary, data relations are a crucial part of how user engagement and a political project materialize on social media platforms. In the broad scope of things, social relationships made, kept, and described through social media platforms is inherently contingent on a general range of types of sociability. In the instance of a political project and propaganda campaign, a Trump national imaginary, and the type of relationships established between, outside, and beyond user networks. Couldry and Mejias argue that data
relations, in time, “are likely to become as naturalized as labor relations” (2019, p. 27) and not only enable data extraction, but incentivize data as a resource that must be extracted by strategically encouraging user’s to act upon the structural possibilities. The point of considering data relations is to underscore how the merging of data, data extraction, user labor, and capitalism fundamentally operate in a simultaneous moment that are disguised, and in fact mediated, by a simple act of sharing and or liking a content that favors the Trump national imaginary. By positing that data relations are in fact an important part of this technological phenomena, user labor exists as a form of data relations wherein the conceptualization of data relations demystifies the invisible consequences of user labor.

Importantly, then, prosumer labor needs to be considered in order to properly extrapolate how my argument can proceed. First, by favoring neither the moment of consumption nor the moment of production, I maintain that a presence on social media platforms, as well as any engagement on it, is both inherently work of the prosumer and a part of communicative capitalism. For Fuchs (2014), “online platforms... have in common that they make intensive use of contributions from (content) producing consumers – ‘prosumers’” (p. 98). Since prosumption on social media platforms combines the process of production and consumption, users are often thought of as doubly controlled, more alienated, and “infinitely” exploited (Fuchs, 2010a). However, recognizing that prosumption is not confined to just social media platforms is important in recognizing the depth and breadth of digital capitalism. From purchasing online to using social media platforms, to the use of self-tracking devices that record physical and mental activities, it is the appropriation and commodification of how lives transformed into data that fuels the exploitation of user-generated data (Charitsis, Zwick & Bradshaw, 2018).
Citing David Harvey, Dean argues that neoliberalism’s goal to marketize all human action fundamentally requires the creation of technologies of information with the capacities to accumulate, store, transfer, analyze and use massive databases to guide decisions in the global marketplace. Concerned about the role of technology and capitalism more than two decades ago, Schiller contends that “digital capitalism” exists because “networks are directly generalizing the social and cultural range of the capitalist economy as never before” (1999, p. 14) and the Internet, along with other technological advancements, aid capital in subsuming labor by extending productive labor into leisure time. For Dean (2016), the main characteristic of communicative capitalism is to pull web-users into the “circuit of exploitation…in which most of us can’t avoid producing for capitalism and where our basic communicative activities are enclosed in circuits as raw materials for capital accumulation” (p. 17-18). On social media platforms like Google and Facebook, surveillance capitalism is not only part of the capitalization of user-generated content, it represents capital’s totalizing aspiration to not just know reality, but to make and own reality (Zuboff, 2015). In extending the relationship between communicative capitalism and the commodification of communicative practices, prosumer labor is the labor in which the collection and storage of data is used.

The focus on labor emphasizes the role of users and which must include a larger focus on ideology. Not only is language taken as a central component to the reproduction of national imaginaries, it is taken as a central component to the reproduction of social relations that engender and continuously support the functions of social media platforms and digital capitalism. For Fuchs (2010b), the focus on labor and new media is on what media extract from audiences rather than what media put into messages. Viewed from this perspective,
value from the audience pertains to the valorization of user engagement, including, but not limited to communication in general on platforms, the building of community, the production of messages, and content production where “just as industrial capitalism relied on appropriating physical labor, digital communicative or surveillance capitalism thrives on appropriating users’ digital labor” (Charitsis, et. al., p. 822).

Precisely because capital accumulation is created by users (inter)acting with content, establishing and maintaining relations with others, and updating their profiles, all of the accumulated time spent on the platforms on the user’s behalf is considered labor. Significantly, work time, i.e. time that users are on social media platforms, results in a prosumer commodity that is bought and sold to advertisers and is always based on demographic data and interests (Fuchs, 2012). In centering Bourdieu’s social, cultural, and symbolic capital, Fuchs (2012) argues that the economic value production is connected to digital media use where users employ social media to accumulate social relations (social capital), accumulation of qualification, education and knowledge (cultural capital) and an accumulation of reputation (symbolic capital). Though Dean’s argument rests on the notion that communicative capitalism operates to commodify life in all forms, I argue that this commodification of all life forms into the market not only subsumes political activity as part of the capitalistic venture but are crucial tenets in circulating a national imaginary.

Since Facebook constantly monitors interests, usage behavior, browsing behavior, demographic data, user-generated content, and social relations, these instances of information become individual, affective, social, economic, political and cultural data about users (Fuchs, 2012). Consequently, exploitation happens with the amount of time a user spends on Facebook generating data and the more data that is created, the more the user can be sold,
and the more advertisements can be presented to them. Fuchs argues that all hours spent online by users of corporate social media constitute work time and potential time for profit realization and thus the maximum time a single user participates in productive work is “100% of the time spent online” (2012, p. 640). The objectification and use of this data collection, along with the creation of user data assemblages, exist as a collection of choices made by individual users that then become associated with a number of other users related in some way to those choices (Zwick & Knott, 2009; Ritzer, Dean, & Jurgenson, 2012).

For scholars like PJ Rey (2012), there is a question as to whether or not social media users can be considered alienated and/or exploited because the labor that they provide is contingent on their own happiness and users are ultimately not disconnected from the content that they produce on the site and are free to create what they choose. Rey argues that in the instance of the factory, workers are coerced into accepting exploitative conditions whereas social media platforms are unable to exploit users because the content users provide is not a result of overt coercion. The point in my project is not to determine whether or not happiness is contingent on producing national imaginaries, but to acknowledge the role of ideological work on behalf of users participating in the platform logic. Here, the desire of sociability, and specifically, the desire of participating in a political project contingent on political communicative messages, must not only push back against an idealist approach to ideology that prefers reducing ideology as a concept related to representation or how media texts signify but of the ideological significance in the platform itself (Briziarrelli, 2014).

The (Re)Construction and (Re)Circulation of a National Imaginary
In this project, I use the (re)construction of a national imaginary to deliberate how the political economic practices of social media platforms systematically and systemically (re)produce ideological worldviews. More specifically, I contemplate how the memes in question (re)construct and (re)circulate a national imaginary built around Donald Trump. Though there are many types of national imaginaries that could be articulated from the memes collected, I use the memes to discern how Trump was advantageously used to circulate particular values, beliefs, and morals. I use a rendition of a Trump national imaginary to make sense of how social media users taking part in the (re)production and distribution within the technological constraints of social media platforms, and as part of a political project.

Though it is true that a propaganda campaign on social media platforms may blend into the larger narratives of a presidential campaign, media systems, and a media platform, that fundamentally expands capital via political and social networks nonetheless rely on a mediated system of values, morals and beliefs as part of the circulation coined on capital expansion. In centering a relationship between media, society, and political communication, I argue that a transmission and a ritual view of communication (Carey, 1988) helps explain the circulation of content via platforms as well as the construction of meanings on its behalf. Carey’s cultural focus not only underscores the kinds of content being (re)produced and (re)distributed but also how that content disseminates across networks. Specifically, the use of Carey’s concepts reflects the (re)distribution of sending, broadcasting and giving information to other users about a specific national imaginary while accounting for its values, beliefs, morals, associations, community, cognition and communion through it. Precisely because of the user labor that is needed in order to distribute that meanings of a national
imaginary and the data relations that it creates, transmission and ritual communication on social media platforms

“can be defined as a sort of upward sedimentation, rising up from an ocean of talk to congeal into the substance that is sociality and are of crucial import because they create the forms of relations that ground the social order…this chain of determinations demonstrates that communication as ritual is constitutive of human society” (Sen, 2017, p. 474).

In relying on the types of values, morals, and beliefs that are (re)constructed into a national imaginary via Trump as a symbol, the national imaginary imagines itself to be of a certain body politic, with certain roles in the geopolitical landscape, and with a specific type of leader. For scholars like Weiss (1998), the role of the nation-state is often conceived of as being obsolete as an organizing principle. On the one hand, there is a large sentiment which argues that the role of the nation-state has dramatically decreased in an era of globalization with a supposed lapse in national autonomy. With a sense of government powerlessness in the face of transnational capital, largely built around the growing influence of telecommunication technologies, continued globalization emphasizes the empowerment of market players that has rapidly eroded the power of the nation-state to deal with the flow of capital, finance and technological flows across borders.

On the other hand, Weiss notes that the endist view in the role of the nation-state is short sighted and that scholars should instead consider the specific capabilities in the management of the industrial economy within specific nation-state boundaries. As such, delving into how the memes used in this campaign of imaginative powers positioned the United States as a global actor underpins how the national imaginary of a particular kind
fueled the circulation of content on social media platforms via its values, morals, and beliefs. The insistence on centering the role of the national imaginary in this project has to do with discerning how the propaganda accompanied the rise of nationalistic sentiments in the United States. Greenfeld (1992) notes that nationalism evokes a sense of dignity amongst individuals who are members of a nation and since the dignity of the individual identity is derived from the membership in the nation, individuals become invested in the collective dignity of the nation, and importantly, sensitive to the nation’s standing among other nations.

As a result, Greenfeld argues, national populations are sensitive to mobilization for a collective effort and in many instances, people can identify themselves as members of the national community and act on its behalf without ever being directly instructed or called to do so (Petrovic, 2013). However, I argue that these collective efforts, as carried out on social media platforms, are of concern when users are encouraged to interact with content on these platforms because of linguistic techniques embedded into them which encourage users to like, share, and/or comment. In emphasizing the platform’s economic practices that work to buttress and systematically share specific renditions of patriotic values and belief systems, narratives, national discourses, and political policies amplify a relationship between media and nation that are always already conducive to economic profit. Moreover, the affective qualities of the media structure, and the media content, amplify the identity building processes both in user engagement and in the types of memes shared.

**Affect and Connectivity: Why Memes Matter**

In a celebratory sense of affect and connectivity that arises from the political possibility of open communication and democracy, one major contradiction that results is the
political and contingent nature of affective media technologies and the role of antagonism in political identity. Jutel (2017) argues that there is an important distinction in the phenomenological understanding of affective connectivity. First, the notion of affective connectivity is seen as politically productive as the space of production and communication. Secondly, the role of antagonism, which can be viewed as an ontological necessity for political identity. Though I do not aim to consider any perceived real emancipatory possibilities of affective media structures, nor do I contend that the Trump presidency was/is a direct result of political memes, I maintain that at the intersection of the content and discourse of an imagination, and the teleologies of affective connectivity, lies a tension and a reliance on individual participation. The user engagement that is encouraged is thus not only a sharing of information which acts as the (re)circulation of imagination but also the affective, necessary, identity producing qualities that (re)circulate on the platforms. The teleology of individual participation, whether by identifying with content or in the strategic use of language that encourages participation, is what creates the merging of the demos and of the economy, but also, what creates the affective tension in memes.

Affective media are not simply those that circulate the affects of online culture and the intimate details of users. They are also always a space of production, performance and the quantification of affect (Jutel, 2017; Fuchs, 2012). In this instance, there is a convergence of political economies as the “pleasures of communication” that further embroil the lives of users and emphasize ceaseless circuits of capital (Terranova, 2004, p. 91). The potential and promise of user empowerments and of new social worlds is what drives the affective labor (Dean, 2009, 2014; Jutel, 2017; Fuchs, 2018). There are two main theoretical perspectives in which affective media theory arises from. First, there is the theoretical perspective that rests
upon Lacanian Marxism arising from Žižek (1997, 2006, 2008) and Dean (2009, 2010, 2016) that views “affect [as] inherently political.” Second, there is a Deleuzian formulation of affect theory, which predominates scholarly accounts of new media and enjoys saliency in a kind of cyber-utopian discourse (Jutel, 2017) that is marked by a teleology that sees affect as a prelude to a radical democratic becoming.

Though the meme is a highly researched product of Internet culture, I situate them as pieces of propaganda caught within a political project and that carry their own consequences for identity construction and performances of in group/out group knowledge. As Philips (2017) and Philips and Milner (2017) argue, engagement with memes can be associated with the need to create and perform a political identity with already existing worldviews. Therefore, memes that call upon certain identity markers are relevant in the grand scheme of a propaganda campaign by reinforcing a type of national imaginary while generating interaction. Further, I situate them as affective pieces of content within an affective media structure. Again, with a focus on how user engagement is recruited, I note that the form propaganda via memes is particularly crucial in the (re)circulation of a Trump national imaginary. Moreover, I contend that they represent a fundamental tension of utopic/dystopic political and social change brought about by media technologies.

In an information ecosystem that is contingent on decentralized networks of people that leverage networked tools to affectively and effectively play into the attention economy, information manipulation in this way is unfolding in a political, global, and populist nature (boyd, 2017). In part, the aim to share and engage with and share memetic content can be associated with the need to both create and perform a political identity where people are more often memetically, and not empirically, situated due to a tendency to believe things that
align with existing worldviews (Phillips, 2017; Philips & Milner, 2017). Since the engagement and sharing of memes often occurs in situations in which thoughts and ideas are told to us by individuals that are trusted, there is a compulsion to believe things that may or may not have been independently verified (Phillips & Milner, 2017). Memes represent the kind of digital propaganda that circulates due to the ideological and political performance of identity and exemplify the kind of propaganda that thrives on an ecosystem which amplifies the supposed tacit and dormant political possibilities of ever-changing media ecosystems.

**The Complexities of Studying Propaganda**

In 1988, Herman and Chomsky released their book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* that developed a model of propaganda apt for the times. In their own words, Herman and Chomsky describe a propaganda model as:

“The essential ingredients of our propaganda model, or set of news ‘filters’, fall under the following headings: (1) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; (3) the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and ‘experts’ funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power; (4) ‘flak’ as a means of disciplining the media; and (5) ‘anticommunism’ as a national religion and control mechanism. These elements interact with and reinforce one another. The raw material of news must pass through successive filters, leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print. They fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first
place, and they explain the basis and operations of what amount to propaganda campaigns” (1988, p.2).

Built around the differentiations between the Soviet Union and the United States, Herman and Chomsky argued that the key aspect of a propaganda model is that wealth and power inequalities shape what is considered newsworthy, what gets reported as news, what is heard, read and watched. As Fuchs (2018) argues, a propaganda model is not a theory of propaganda. For Fuchs, any theory of propaganda and ideology requires a systematic theory of society and capitalism where culture, ideology and propaganda are clearly defined. Notably, constructed for a different era of communicative technologies, Herman and Chomsky’s model of propaganda does not clearly define why their five elements are theoretically justified and neglects the entertainment and spectacle as a filler that “displaces and colonises [sic] political communication” (Fuchs, 2018, p.72).

With the rise of the intensification of neoliberalism, financialization, the role of information technologies existing as fundamental sites of the economy, the 2008 world economic crisis that afflicted vast amounts of structural change to the way news agencies operate, as well as the extension and intensification of nationalism, racism, and xenophobia (Fuchs, 2018; Mullen, 2018; Sierra Caballero, 2018) any model of propaganda must evolve. Moreover, news media, and entertainment media for that matter, has vastly changed. The advertising drive from print to targeted online ads has influenced the financial make up of companies that rely on the Internet, mobile phones, and Big Data. Social media sites, like Facebook, Instagram, and Google for example, are not just important means of information and communication, but primary drivers of the economic practices between Big Data and platforms. Habermas (1992) argues that entertainment is part of the process of the
depoliticization of the public sphere where the reporting of facts as human-interest stories, mixed as information and entertainment and which breaks down complex relationships into smaller fragments, depoliticizes public communication. Fuchs (2018) is quick to remind us that it is best not to view any propaganda model as a complete list of elements that are ideologically influencing factors on the agenda of the news media. For as Herman (2000) argues, “the system is not all-powerful” and there are “uncertain and variable effects” and “contesting forces” (p. 122 – 127).

As such, Fuchs (2018) provides a comprehensive, and useful, model for the online media ecosystem. Though on one hand, the propaganda model of Herman and Chomsky is relevant to the online world because society is still shaped by class and domination, on the other, the model needs to be adapted and extended because of the particular features of digital capitalism and digital media. For example, the role algorithms play in ranking search results or news material is novel. More broadly, with computer networks and social networks, the production, diffusion and consumption of information converges. As such, using the same five criteria of the Herman and Chomsky model, Fuchs argues that the dimensions of: 1) size, ownership, profit orientation; 2) advertising; 3) sourcing; 4) flak, mediated lobbying; and 5) ideologies influence the online propaganda model in specific ways.

First, the size, ownership and profit orientation of companies play a role in how propaganda can work online. For example, concentrated social media markets and concentrated ownership are primary considerations. With the wide use of social media platforms and Internet platforms, how companies use algorithms to generate search results or to create sociality influence how social relations and data relations mediate experiences
online. The centralized ownership of these companies, combined with the huge market share of users few companies hold, results in the circumstance that ownership means control over algorithms that determine online experiences. Being that algorithms are private property, social media’s ownership matters in highly concentrated markets.

Secondly, for advertising, transnational corporations are able to confront users with targeted ads and content. Fuchs (2018) argues that native online advertising and branded online content threaten news media’s independence because online advertising acts as a filter in several ways. Most prominently, regular content becomes ever more difficult to discern from advertising where there is no clear temporal or spatial differentiation. Secondly, corporations are interested in native online advertising and branded online content because it provides opportunity for them to deceive users and to act like news media, efficiently undermining the independence of reporting. Notably, companies can increase reach via social media. Third, Herman and Chomsky do not discuss the notion that advertising means exploitation of audience labor. On social media, users’ digital labour produces a data commodity and is exploited by the platforms for selling targeted ad spaces.

Further, the sourcing of information and news works differently online. With a larger number of producers, the difference between computer networks and broadcasting is that the networks are a universal machine, a technology for production, distribution and consumption. Therefore, sourcing is different online because of its decentralized and global architecture. Through user-generated content, a key question arises about how the power shifts from the control of production towards the control of attention and visibility. Therefore, attention and visibility also need to be produced and are consequently aspects of production. Gaining online attention and visibility requires money, time and labor-force. Though in theory,
everyone can produce content online, in a capitalist society only a minority attracts online visibility and attention.

Fourth, bots and other tools used for automated lobbying of policy positions and politicians, for example, influence circulation of information. The point here is to note that the automated features of social media platforms (bots, hackers, automated actors) ultimately influence and shape the discourse of contentious talking points. Since social media is used by politicians, political parties, and social movements, bots and other tools for automated lobbying influence the structural aspects of dissemination. This can impact the circulation of conspiracy theories and online hate speech.

Lastly, Fuchs (2018) consider the role of ideology. As a definition, Fuchs offers:

“Ideology can in a critical manner be understood as a semiotic process in which humans practice the production and spreading of information, meanings, ideas, belief, systems, artefacts, systems, and institutions that justify or naturalise [sic] domination and exploitation. Ideology is the semiotic level of domination and exploitation” (p. 83).

Further, there are ideologies of the Internet and ideologies on the Internet. Ideologies of the Internet are a form of public communication that fetishizes instrumental control of online communication. Neoliberal ideologies of the Internet present the online world as a frontier of investments that create a better world. Ideology on the Internet can exist in a plurality of forms: fascism, racism, right-wing extremism, etc. Ideology on the Internet tends to make use of visual means of tabloidization (simplification, using few words, emotionalization, polarization, etc.). User generated ideology is the phenomenon that ideology production is no longer confined to professional ideologues but has become possible on the level of everyday
life. Ideologies are sensational, populist, simplistic, emotional, and speak directly to particular subjects (Fuchs, 2018).

Ultimately, the propaganda model remains relevant for the study of the Internet, social media, data relations, and Big Data. Given the “dialectical and historical character of both communications and society,” the conceptualization of “subjects, processes, objects, contradictions, the economy, politics, and culture, as well as the interaction of these dimensions, when analyzing [sic] power in class societies” (p. 88) is still needed.

As such, Caraña, Broudy and Klaehn (2018) argue that the most effective way to control media is not through direct control of totalitarian systems. Instead, media that are subject to less visible, market and political mechanisms, where it is possible to filter the information that is fit to print in a non-conspiratorial way, prove to be formidable ways of controlling media content. With the ever-evolving media environment of today, marked by rapid shifts in technology, underpinned by techno-centric, techno-utopian, and technocratic discourses, its origins as a collaborative tool for the free exchange of information and ideas have established a system of massive surveillance and elite influence. The internet is shaped by the intentional actions of media owners and platform conglomerates while online interactions are managed by the algorithms of digital communications that are far from neutral. A critical, political economic approach, Caraña, Broudy and Klaehn (2018) argue, to the study of new media is necessary to understand how the internet is shaped by larger structures that limit political possibilities and that contribute to the accumulation of capital.

The Propaganda of a Trump National Imaginary
The study of propaganda has always been interdisciplinary, ranging from history, journalism, political science, sociology, psychology, and media studies, to name a few. Cultural studies, for example, approaches propaganda as a purveyor of ideology and largely concerns itself with how dominant ideological meanings are constructed and interpreted by individuals (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2019). This approach, however, effectively requires ethnographic research. Similarly, the study of propaganda can be approached as a type of communication. Jowett and O’Donnell (2019) note that propaganda and persuasion have been used interchangeably in the literature of propaganda. Specifically, they contend that propaganda employs persuasive strategies but it differs from its purposeful use.

A communicative approach to propaganda is advantageous and useful because it enables researchers to isolate particular communicative variables, determine the relationship of message to context, examine intentionality, possibly (and if necessary) examine the responses and responsibilities of the audience, and trace the development of propagandistic communication as a process (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2019). Put simply, propaganda means to disseminate or to promote ideas, “to propagate” or to “sow” (Doherty, 1993; Jowett & O’Donnell, 2019). When the use of propaganda is associated with unethical, harmful, and unfair tactics, it is commonly defined as “organized persuasion” (DeVito, 1986, p. 239). When the use of propaganda emphasizes purpose, the term is associated with control and is regarded as a deliberate attempt to alter or maintain a balance of power that is advantageous to the propagandist (DeVito, 1986; Doherty, 1993; Jowett & O’Donnell, 2019).

Early on, Leonard Doob (1948) defined propaganda as the “attempt to affect the personalities and to control the behavior of individuals towards ends considered unscientific or of doubtful value at a particular time” (p. 390). However, Doob (1989) later argues that
there is no clear-cut definition of propaganda that was desirable or possible. Jacques Ellul (1965) focused on propaganda as a technique itself. For Ellul, the concern was psychological manipulation, and contended that propaganda was a sociological phenomenon. Further, Ellul argues that all biased messages in society were propagandistic, even when the biases were unconscious. Ellul was adamant that propaganda enabled individuals in society to participate in important events such as elections, celebrations, and memorials.

In 2001, Pratkanis and Aronson (2001) claim that propaganda is the abuse of persuasion and recognized that propaganda is more than clever deception. In a series of case studies, they illustrated propaganda tactics such as withholding information, invoking heuristic devices, using meaningless association. They defined propaganda as “mass ‘suggestion’ or influence through the manipulation of symbols and the psychology of the individual” (p. 11). O’Shaughnessy (2004) attempts to provide some clarity to the term and argues that propaganda is a “co-production in which we are willing participants, it articulates the things that are half whispered internally” (p. 4), “generally involves the unambiguous transmission of message, and is a complex conveyer of simple solutions” (p. 16). With the idea that propaganda is acted upon, Qualter (1962) emphasizes the necessity of audience adaptation and “to be effective, [propaganda] must be seen, remembered, understood, and acted upon” (p. xii). Of course, influencing attitudes, anticipating audience reception, adapting to the situation and audience, and being seen, remembered, understood, and acted upon are important elements of the communication process.

The Internet and social media have not only increased the volume of propaganda that circulates, it has made needing to have a definition of propaganda that much more pertinent. As such, when I speak of propaganda in this project, I am aligning myself with the definition
of propaganda provided by Jowett & O’Donnell (2019). With the goal of understanding propaganda through its characteristics and an attempt to study it as a phenomenon of communication, the context of sender, intent, message, channel, audience, and response matter. Therefore, for them, propaganda is the “deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (p. 6). Here, deliberate is used to indicate how a propaganda campaign is willful, intentional, and premediated. Systematic, is the precise and methodical carrying out of something with organized regularity.

Since the ultimate goal of propaganda is the attempt to create a certain state in an audience, propaganda is the attempt at directive communication with an objective that has been established a priori. Jowett & O’Donnell (2019) argue that the desired state may be perceptual, cognitive, behavioral or all three. The shaping of perceptions is, first, attempted through language and images but can even be attempted through the architectural structures that are developed during resistance movements and wartime.

As such, this definition of propaganda, as well as a consideration of why a critical political economic approach to propaganda matters, positions the memes of a Trump national imaginary as mediated pieces of Internet content that exemplify propaganda by definition and the political economic logics at work. The memes of a Trump national imaginary are thus not only mediated by the algorithms or the platform logics that create the sociality that users experience, they are the mediated form through which users act upon the platform to as a form of mediated expression. Though I do not attempt to understand user effects, the specificities in the language of the memes are thus not only instructive as to how a propaganda campaign can work to shape perceptions or direct behavior, but in bringing to
focus the interrelationship between media as sociotechnical tools that shape users where the propaganda attempts to do the same.
Chapter 3 Methodology

Language as a Central Focal Point

This project looks at memes (re)circulated and (re)distributed with a focus on the construction of meaning, the encouraging of user labor, and the affective tendencies of the media platforms and content. As such, I use critical discourse analysis in order to extrapolate how the meaning of a national imaginary was mediated, (re)circulated and (re)distributed on social media platforms. In order to carry out the analysis, I strategically separate the memes and their (re)circulation on the platforms into three separate instances.

First, I focus on what messages are embedded in the memes, what kind of national imaginary they aim to (re)construct, and how the platforms structural capabilities (such as user interaction and hashtags) mediate the possibilities of meaning. With an understanding that (social) media are sociotechnical tools that shape the minds of users, any inquiry into how the memes foreground a Trump national imaginary must also consider how the platforms aide in the construction of meaning. While Trump is used to symbolize a particular national imaginary, the platforms are situated between meaning and political communicative practices and thus not only (re)circulate and disseminate meaning but play a crucial role in constructing it. As such, I focus on what the memes are saying, what kind of practices afforded by the platforms aide in that meaning, and the interweaving of the two. Therefore, the first research question is: What kind of national imaginary do the memes (re)construct and how is that meaning mediated through social media platforms?

Second, I focus on how the memes explicitly attempt to generate user labor by encouraging users to like and share the national imaginary. In this section, I consider the platforms as situated between meaning making and user labor and how the memes intensify
the need for it by implementing strategic language. Actions such as liking and sharing are thus not just tools of dissemination but also ways to implement the consideration of user labor. Therefore, the interweaving of the tools of dissemination and the (re)circulation of meaning making invigorates a moment of transmission and ritualization contingent on user presence and user interaction. The second research question is thus: How does user labor contribute to the (re)circulation of meaning and the political economic structure of social media platforms that buttress the systemic, and systematic, (re)production of a Trump national imaginary?

Lastly, I consider the convergence of these independent aspects into a singular moment of conjunction that implicates an ideological worldview, a political project and user labor into an instant in which communication technology and communicative practices materialize with economic consequences via the affective tendencies they provide. Here, I direct my attention to how media scholars theorize affect through the social media platforms, as a political necessity and through the Internet memes used in the campaign. I understand affect and affective media as dual process that comes to the fore because of the (inter)acting networks of networks and the discursive construction of the Trump national imaginary in the memes. Therefore, my last research question is: What role does an affective media structure and affective Internet media content play in the (re)circulation of politically charged memes during a politically contentious time?

**Critical Discourse Analysis: A Philosophical Grounding**

First, in laying out a philosophical grounding for critical discourse analysis (CDA), I stress the recognition of 1) language as a social act that is 2) always situated in context and 3)
which is always part of a social process. These three elements of language are the focal points of this project because they build upon the assumption that language is socially constituted and socially constitutive, meaning that language use is the fundamental act in the construction of social meaning and the structural apparatus through which sociality is experienced. On social media platforms this is central because communication - language and meaning – operate as fundamental, key commodities. Hence, not only is language crucial in the (re)production of ideological worldviews, language is fundamental in the (re)production of economic structures. In outlining the context of my study, I not only assume that a U.S. presidential election is typically an already charged political spectacle carried out on all types of media channels, but that this spectacle seeks to exploit the spectacular value of politics for economic gain through user-engagement. In approaching language as a social process, carried out on social media platforms, and as the driving force of capital, I seek to accentuate language as a practice of creating representations of the world, of signifying the world, and of constituting and constructing the world in meaning (Fairclough, 1992).

In the attempt to understand the representations, significations, and meanings of the world, I argue that the analytical focus of language in my project emphasizes the value CDA brings to understand the phenomena in question. Generally, CDA has been defined as a method of discourse analysis that aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events, and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes (Fairclough, 1993). Further, it seeks to investigate how such practices, events, and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power. Lastly, it also explores how the
opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony (Fairclough, 1993). In Fairclough’s words, discourse is “not only a site of power struggle, but also a stake in power struggle” (2012, p. 67). As Rear points out, this means that the study of texts is not just an exercise in abstract lexico-grammatical description but an “analysis of a key tool in the reproduction or reformation of the wider social world” (2013, p. 14).

Discourse analysis is the study of texts —oral, written, audiovisual, performed, or web-based— to comprehend the relations between the use of language and social practices. A noncritical or interpretative approach to discourse analysis tends to focus solely on social practices that regard social interaction (Gee, 2004). This approach emphasizes utterances in relation to situated meaning-making, task driven speech, and function. A crucial approach to discourse views discourse as a social practice that is constitutive of and constituted by structures embedded in a web of unbalanced power relations and competing ideologies that reproduce hegemonic systems of oppression and domination (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2008; Wodak, 2001).

Discourse is a social practice that fixes meaning within an area or field and which produces both closure and possibilities of change. There are two common and interweaving theoretical threads connecting the array of critical approaches to discourse analysis (James Paul Gee, 2004; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Tracy, Martínez Guillem, Robles, & Casteline, 2011). First, influenced by post-structural theories, scholars using CDA assume that social and cultural structures are partially linguistic. Language is neither a fixed, nor a uniform social structure/fabric because it is constantly (re)created through interactions.
Second, influenced by Marxism, critical approaches criticize the idea of the autonomous individual. Williams (1977) stresses the need to avoid the trap of structural determinism and advocates for approaches to discourse that favor structure over agency. However, there is a spectrum of the analysis of discourse and critical views vary in their approach. As such, some focus on the structural forces and other focus on the possibility of agency (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In line with the critical tradition of discourse analysis, I approach language in the memes that (re)create a national imaginary and the encourage (re)circulation on behalf of users to understand how Internet content work through the ideological forces of digital capitalism and political worldviews.

As such, there are some common features that characterize the approach of CDA that make it relevant for my project (taken from Rear, 2013). First, discourse, as one aspect of social practice, actively contributes to the construction of social reality on a variety of levels. Namely, this includes objects of knowledge, social subjects and identities, social relations, and conceptual frameworks. Secondly, discourse has a dialectical relationship with other social dimensions. It is both constitutive of and constituted by social reality, both reflecting and shaping social structures. Third, discourses are historical and cannot be fully understood outside of their social and historical context. Fourth, discourses are subject to diachronic change because at the same time social actors are positioned and interpellated by discourses, social actors also have the power to transform and hybridize them through agency. Fifth, discourse functions ideologically: it contributes to the creation and reproduction of unequal power relations within society where a principal purpose of CDA is to expose how this is achieved through the detailed examination of texts.
Briziarelli and Martínez-Guillem (2016) approach the normative aspect of language from both a functional and political point of view. Thus, language can be conceived of as “a mechanism of disciplinization and oppression of linguistic communities/groups/classes over others, but also an essential aspect of social organization that coordinates, organizes, and can even, to a certain extent, emancipate” (p. 49). As such, I approach language as a mode of action that is always in a dialectical relationship with other facets of the social and that mediates the social organization and social relations in the social media environment. The dialectical nature of language, that it is socially shaped and also socially shaping, is engaged through approaching language as it appears in a moment of discourse knowing that language on social media platforms is always economic, (re)produces the structural limits and capabilities that which they exist on, and operate in circulating and (re)producing ideological worldviews.

As both methodology and method, CDA has contributed to illuminate how texts (re)produce representations and identities, relationships, and practices of both humans and nonhuman (Stibbe, 2014). Fairclough (2008) argues that, “we can see social life as interconnected networks of social practices of diverse sorts (economic, political, cultural, family, etc.)” where elements are different but not discrete and never fully separated from other related elements (p. 231). Fairclough further notes that CDA “oscillates…between a focus on structures [emphasis in original] (especially the intermediate level of structuring of social practices) and a focus on the strategies [emphasis in original] of social agents, i.e. how they try to achieve outcomes or objectives within existing structures and practices, or to change them in particular ways” (2008, p. 4). With attention on social media platforms, this oscillating focus between structures and strategies highlights the specificities of language in
the context of the 2016 presidential election and in investigating how language encourages user-interaction in order to circulate politically motivated content.

Fairclough (1992) identified three aspects of the constructive effects of discourse: first, discourse contributes to the construction of social identities and subject positions, which interpellate social actors in a certain way. Second, discourse helps to construct social relationships between people. Lastly, discourse contributes to the construction of systems of knowledge and belief. Defining these as the identity, relational, and ideational functions of language, Fairclough argues that the identity function relates to how social identities are set up in discourse, the relational functions to describe how social relationships between discourse participants are enacted and negotiated, and the ideational function to identify how texts signify the world and its processes, entities and relations (Fairclough, 1992). In a media and technological environment inherently social and inherently dependent on an understanding of the social, discourse on social media platforms circulate the social mode of discourse and the relations in which discourse represent the world.

**The Variety of Discourse Analysis and Why It Matters**

Critical approaches and investigations of discourse use theory in several ways. Primarily, I focus on these differences by focusing on two approaches. Primarily, discourse theory represented by Chantel Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. Second, critical discourse analysis as championed by Norman Fairclough. Though in this project I focus on memes that produce discourse about a national imaginary, the construction and degree of agency granted to the subject and the possibility of social change manifest through the political project.
Althusser contends that there are two ways of interpreting the production of the subject. On the one hand, a subject is a “free subjectivity, a center of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions” (Hall, 2004, p. 86). Alternatively, a subject can be a “subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and it is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his [sic] submission” (ibid). Discourse Theory accepts the second view in which “the ‘subject before subjectivation’ is always in danger of being swallowed by a ‘discursive identity’ on the one hand, and by the ‘subjectivity of the agent’ by the other” (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. 289). Briziarelli (2017) argues that Laclau and Mouffe’s hyper-discursivity could be a kind of “vulgar historicism” that “inevitably liquefies [history] into a relativistic and structurally undecidable flux of events…so there is no a priori foundation on which all knowledge and action – qua philosophy of praxis – can be based” (p. 14). Therefore, articulations between knowledge and discourse are oversaturated with power, leaving no room for subversive stands or alternatives of resistance.

CDA, conversely, conceives the subject as a foundation of initiatives and capable of action. Fairclough opposes discourse theory’s hyper-discursivity by recognizing the presence of non-discursive elements and by paying attention to the material elements of the social realm. For Fairclough (2012), the possibilities of agency are contingent on the possibility of changing the discourse and the material conditions in which discursive practices occur. Second, social change is conceived differently depending on the discursive approach. Discursive theory scholars rely on Foucault’s subjectivation, a concept that demotes the subject from constitutive to constituted (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Cepek, 2011). Subjectivation thus constrains agency by incorporating the processes of producing
subjectivity the appearance of change (Martínez Guillem, 2013). Laclau and Mouffe figure that change occurs in the antagonism ever present in discursive formations. Crucially, antagonism creates ambiguities that reveal the intrinsic ideological aspects of discourse.

Contrary to discourse theory, CDA conceptualizes ideology as distinct from discourse. In investigating how ideology works through discourse, is it possible to grapple with how certain discourses become more acceptable than others, thus making them normalized, uncontested, and universal/global. For example, encouraging user engagement in a political project is an example of unchallenged ideological discourses. To like and share pieces of Internet content represents both the (re)production of a national imaginary within a political project and are some of the core ways exploitation and capitalism (re)produce current social relations. Though the notion of political change is something that the memes call for, it is outside the scope of this study to ascertain how, and to what effect, memes had on individual users. Instead, the scope of this project lies in understanding the interweaving of discourse and economic hegemonic practices that merge via social intercourse carried out on social media platforms.

**Discourse, User Engagement and a National Imaginary**

First, taken from Fairclough (1995), I understand discourse to be all activity which produces meaning. Fairclough’s focus on semiotic activity, be it written and/or spoken, however, is not necessarily equipped to deal with all types of meaning production and the economic consequences of meaning production on social media platforms. Therefore, communicative acts, a conceptualization that I use to highlight meaning production on social media platforms, fronts an understanding of social activity in which communication and
symbolic interaction circulate because of the structural possibilities on platforms with specific attention to user engagement. Explicitly, here, I am dealing with user engagement that creates data, facilitates data relations, and, presumably, activates algorithms. For example, the liking, sharing, commenting on and the use of emoticons to indicate laughter, anger, sadness, and frustration on individual pieces of content and news are all how users can interact via the platforms. Liking, sharing, and the use of emoticons, for example, is not language written out or spoken, but which nonetheless produce meaning in the context of social media platforms. As such, these communicative acts mediate the economic and political functions of language in this environment.

Second, I focus on the concept of national imaginary. Though deliberately broad, I maintain a disposition that fronts theorizations and formulations of collective representations of societies. Due to the politically charged nature of a presidential election, I use national imaginary to describe how the memes represent a nation’s values, culture, institutions, laws and symbols that allow people to imagine their social whole. For example, Durkheim (1930) famously defines collective conscious as the body of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society where the totality of beliefs and sentiments act as a denominator to everyday average citizens of the same society.

Another possible conception of national imaginary can be related to a society’s culture. Stuart Hall’s (1997) definition of culture emphasizes the notion of meaning and the process that comes with the production and exchange of meaning within a society. Importantly, Hall’s definition concerns how meaning is shared as a core component of any culture and how social actors reproduce a sense of meaning within a culture. As already above, Carey’s (1988) cultural focus on the relationship between media, society and political
communication is a particularly productive formulation of the national imaginary when media is at the center of its (re)construction. Carey’s focus on how the national imaginary can be transmitted and ritualized is contingent on beliefs and values and the construction of meaning behind those beliefs and values.

Within this frame of national imaginary, I broadly consider how the memes (re)construct a rendition of the national imaginary through the presence of Donald Trump. Values, identifiable markers of difference between other countries, geopolitical actions that are championed for, and political actors that act on behalf of the nation fall within this frame. Moreover, I define national imaginary in a way that allows for an interrelated correlation between language that constructs a nation and language that encourages users to act for a nation, or on behalf of a nation, through interactions with social media platforms. Therefore, this actualization of language use, here a communicative act, embodies language as an economic foci and language as a political mode of action.

By paying specific attention to how a national imaginary encourages users to interact with the platform for the sake of the nation, acts of nation, or nationalism more broadly, serves a literal economic function. Petrovic (2013) argues that individuals within a nation can identify as members of the national community and act on its behalf without ever being directly instructed or called to do so. However, on social media platforms, a frame of national imaginary delineates and intensifies the importance of paying attention to how language calls for the user to identify and act for/on behalf of a nation, stir the economic gears through it, and relay meanings and representations of the world while doing so.

A Comprehensive View of Language Through Memes
In the analytical approach taken here, the central focal point of analysis is language that, stated again, operates 1) as a social act that is 2) always situated in context and 3) which is always part of a social process. Serving as the fundamental vehicle of capital and as a politically motivated project in the (re)production of ideological worldviews, language materializes as a communicative event (Fairclough, 1992;1995) in the context of a political spectacle and always as a part of capital. Ultimately, the goal of my project is not to assess or assert how nationalism or the nation is portrayed. Rather, I aim to address how an economic foundation on which user-interactions serve to circulate content of a specific type motivated by specific instances of language. The blending of language use calls for carefully approaching Internet content as analytical moments of interest with a recognition that the boundaries between a communicative event/language use as a social act, language as an economic function, and language with political intent are ultimately fluid. Not only do the analytical moments that I focus on serve as instances in which what constitutes as the political and what constitutes as economic are analyzed, but the moments that I underline are analytical moments with fluid boundaries in which all three instances of language are constantly in motion.

At the level of discourse as a social act, Fairclough’s own framework for the analysis of texts within a CDA tradition operates under a three-dimensional framework employed to relate micro instances of language use to wider aspects of social practice. Social practices are analyzed using the construct of orders of discourse, which refer to the sum of all genres and discourses that are used within a specific domain or institution (Rear, 2013). Fairclough argues that every communicative event consists of three dimensions: text, discursive practice and social practice, and should be analyzed accordingly. First, text refers to the linguistic
features of the text, including lexicalization, grammar, cohesion, and text structure. Second, discursive practices are the processes related to the production and consumption of the text, including the ‘force’ of utterances, coherence, intertextuality and interdiscursivity. Lastly, social practice are the institutional and organizational circumstances of the discursive event and the constitutive effects of discourse (Janks, 1997).

Fairclough’s model argues that each of these dimensions require a different kind of analysis that deals with a text analysis (description), a processing analysis (interpretation) and a social analysis (explanation) (1995). In line with Janks, I too believe that what is useful about this approach is that it enables a researcher to focus on the signifiers that make up the text, the specific linguistic selections, any juxtapositions, forms of sequencing, and a text’s layout. Not only does this suggest that textual and linguistic events choices are tied to socio-historical conditions but “texts are instantiations of socially regulated discourses and that the processes of production and reception are socially constrained” (Janks, 1997, p. 329). This level of analysis mediates the relationship between text and social practice, showing how texts both shape and are shaped by social practices. The dimension of social practice itself examines how texts reproduce or challenge wider aspects of society, particularly how they relate to the ‘production, reproduction, or transformation of relations of domination’ (Fairclough, 1992, p. 87).

Secondly, at a structural level, I aim to interrogate the way language is used in order to encourage user-engagement. This consideration lies in explicitly examining how language actualizes the economic foundations of social media platforms. Moreover, this also allows for a view into contemplating how affective media and media content drive content (re)circulation. Here, taking the assumption of “language in use” literally is pertinent (Rear,
Noting that language in use or language as situated text and talk suggests that language moves from a macro perspective of language use to a more micro perspective. The notion that discourse is a key part of the (re)production of power within a linguistic unit is also taken literally in a structural sense. In the micro instance, “little d” discourses draw on “big D” discourses to produce talk, writing and interaction. As such, one of the aims of CDA is to connect the micro to the macro with the goal of uncovering how societal level knowledge, assumptions and ideologies affect the detailed way we talk, write and interact (and vice versa) (Rear, 2013). In the structural sense, I do this by paying attention to language that encourages users to interact with social media platforms.

In this instance, then, a platformed, structural critique of language through a CDA driven perspective is indicative, and is used to account for, the structural constraints of the social media platforms that rely upon language use as part of the (re)production of knowledge, social subjects and identities, social relations and conceptual frameworks. Thus, through the data selected for analysis in this dissertation, not only am I deliberating on how language is used to encourage user-engagement, but I am also interested in how this user-engagement manifests itself through the political economic concerns I have laid out. Here, I entertain notions of how the structure of social media platforms enable certain kinds of discourses and ideological worldviews while also contemplating how those discourses reinforce the structural constraints.

Though I aim to avoid a technologically deterministic notion of social media and political outcomes, I nonetheless aim to consider how platforms, and the dialogue used within them for political purposes, gravitate around the language used with political intent. Instances in which users are encouraged to like, share and/or comment are not only
motivated to secure political motivated communication, but are nonetheless the impetus for the economic gain of the platforms. As such, “big D” discourses that motivate “little d” discourse is not just talk in the instance that a user engages with the platform but are discourses that motivate the economic sensibilities built into platforms.

Finally, on a micro level, I am interested in the use of political language, or language as a process to create political meaning, due to the ideological nature of the memes in question. Because the content in question is relational, and the construction of social media platforms is inherently social and relational, the use of them are thus relational in a two-fold sense. Linguistically, discourse helps construct social relationships between people while also contributing to the construction of systems of beliefs and knowledge. The relational and ideational aspects of this micro level of discourse matter because social actors rely upon collective frames of perceptions, or social representations, which are shared amongst members of a social group, thus forming a core of their social identity (Rear, 2013). Here, I am not interested in the subject that is portrayed or how a user might project themselves into the memes. Albeit an important component, my aim is instead to assess how the language used to construct specific political subjectivities motivates users to engage with the social media platforms. More succinctly, the aims in this perspective is to consider how language is used to interpellate a user to participate in projects of a national imaginary and the acts that are carried out on the platform (through liking and sharing, for example).

Data Collection: Memes from Facebook, Instagram, and the @UsHardons archive

It must be clear from the beginning that the sheer number of pieces of Internet content that (re)circulated across social media platforms at the time of the 2016 U.S. presidential
election is enormous. Not only was the volume of content high, it (re)circulated across multiple media platforms, with multiple renditions of the same meme, and with endless iterations of meanings embedded into them. In order to discern how a national imaginary was (re)constructed via memes that favored Trump and that built a rendition of a national imaginary, I chose memes that were identified by researchers and intelligence agencies as being part of the larger Russian propaganda campaign, specifically ones that circulated between 2015-2017. As such, I use two main sources.

First, I use Internet content collected by United States government investigative communities like the FBI, the CIA, and the DOJ. These memes are memes that were presented to the United States Congress in various congressional hearings and that are archived on the United States House Intelligence Committee (USHIC) website. These memes are important to the analysis because they are recognized as being content that were disseminated on behalf of the Russian profiles. Moreover, they are memes that were explicitly identified via profile names and addresses.

Secondly, I use memes that were collected by anonymous researchers and later stored on the profile @UsHardons on the website Medium. Though the researchers and archivers choose to remain anonymous, the Russian profiles that content was collected from are identified on the public list provided by the USHIC. In being able to cross reference the memes that were collected by the anonymous researchers to the information provided by the House Intelligence Committee, the memes provide a more succinct and less convoluted area of data. Further, this archive provides a large amount of content ranging from various social media platforms. The interweaving between content collected by intelligence agencies and content stored by research provides an ample, diverse, and robust amount of data.
In total, I analyzed about 200 memes collected from both archive sources. By first attempting to discern what kind of national imaginary was (re)constructed, and second, how they call for user labor. Additionally, I examine them according to the theorizations of media studies that include media as sociotechnical systems and media as affective places of Internet and political contingencies. In the movement between discourse and language, I situate the memes as intermediaries pieces of content that fluctuate between platforms mediating meaning and platforms mediating user labor.
Chapter 4 The Symbols and Contours of a Nation(al) Imaginary: (Re)Circulated

Content

In this chapter, I examine a total of twenty-two images taken from the archive of Internet content that is unapologetically pro-Trump. The analytical aims of this chapter are two-fold in order to answer my first research question. First, I aim to discern what kind of national imaginary is established in the memes, and secondly, how that national imaginary is intimately tied to the tools of circulation brought about by social media platforms in order to extend the possibilities of meaning. In order to do this, I first describe and detail what kind of imagery, symbols, and discourse is used to construct the national imaginary and why Trump’s presence plays an active role in constructing its ideological relevance. This thick description between symbols and discourse relays and connects back to certain aspects of Trump’s own campaign rhetoric that invigorates the role of social media as a tool to bypass traditional media outlets, as well as the larger discursive construction of Republicanism and conservativism in the United States.

Secondly, I make the discursive connections that directly correlate and identify the role of the platforms in the dissemination of the national imaginary on how the national imaginary implements the tools of the platforms into it. In laying out the connections between the national imaginary to platform capabilities (hashtags, likes, and shares), I contend that the symbols, contours, and descriptions that use Trump as a signifier of political possibilities not only mediate the political but engender its circulation and propagation. Consequently, the organization of signs that propel a national imaginary and that compel and encourage user interaction signal the first layer of analysis that is crucial to a propaganda campaign carried out on social media.
The investigation into what kind of linguistic, textual, and symbolic tactics used to center Donald Trump reveal a considerably crucial advantage given to social media platforms and political campaigns. On the one hand, the memes in question relay and provide complex ideological worldviews that simultaneously encourage user-based interaction, while on the other, necessitate that user-based interaction in order to relay complex ideological worldviews. Though this moment of interaction is obvious to the circulation of content on social media platforms, and Web 2.0 platforms generally, it is a cause for analytical review because it puts a special emphasis on the discourse between the political and social worlds and the technological and mediated possibilities. I take both the discursive construction of a national imaginary and the way it is signaled on social media platforms through hashtags, comments, and descriptions, to analyze the use of language within the platform logics.

According to Rear (2013), the aim of discourse analysis, in general, is not to discover a truth of reality, but to describe how a discursive struggle constructs a reality so that it appears natural and neutral. Hence, memes are not simply pieces of Internet content that just contribute to the circulation of information. Memes that encourage user-based interactions further problematize the notion of innocent sharing because they contribute to, emphasize, muddle, and blur the line between already accepted discourses and any notion of a discursive struggle. Content that propagates certain worldviews, and that call upon users to disseminate it, are not just reinforcing and capitalizing on the notion of open communication. Candidly, they are simultaneously attempting to capitalize on this supposed space of open communication in order to further maintain the discursive descriptive power of unequal power relations, at least as mediated in the described national imaginary. In CDA, ideology is linked to the maintenance of unequal power relations and thus it is not possible to distinguish
between discourses that are ideological and those that are not. On social media platforms, this inability to distinguish between ideological discourse and non-ideological discourses is further blurred in instantaneous moments of user-generated circulation.

Consequently, approaches in CDA that view discourse in a top-down, producer-receiver environment contend that analyzing any ideology as a system of ideas, values, and beliefs inherently aims to explain how a given political order legitimizes existing hierarchies and power relations that also preserve group identities (Fairclough, 1995). On social media, however, this top-down, producer-receiver context shifts to a many-to-many context, thus underscoring the relevance and necessity of explaining how social actors are provoked to disseminate the social representations that are shared amongst members of a social group.

In part, the aim to share and engage with memetic content can be associated with the need to both create and perform a political identity (Phillips, 2017). More broadly, on social media platforms, people are more apt to believe things that align with existing worldviews (Philips & Milner, 2017). Since the engagement and sharing of memes often occurs in situations in which thoughts and ideas are told to us by individuals that are trusted, there is a compulsion to believe things that may or may not have been independently verified (Phillips & Milner, 2017). Therefore, social media platforms have shifted the ability to mediate and (re)circulate the imaginative power relations and social relations of a national imaginary. As I contend, the communicative events, conceptualized as the ability to like, share, and be collected through hashtags, are significantly modified and made more complex due to the use of social media platforms. Micro instances of language use deemed necessary to participate in wider aspects of social practice manifests as a user engaging with a piece of content that
carries the social practice of disseminating a worldview and all of its necessary social representations, as well as the capitalist endeavors of platform logics.

In order to do this, I delve into how the memes, mediated via the platforms, construct a fluid discourse of a national imaginary that is continuously (re)produced because of their possibilities of dissemination and how hashtags add to the potential meaning construction. More specifically, I examine how this rendition of a mediated national imaginary centers Trump and fixates on certain attributes, values, morals, and beliefs about the kind of national imaginary it claims to be. As such, I critically analyze and note that the relationship between the national imaginary that is (re)produced through the content’s discourse and the potential distribution possibilities provided by social media platforms is of critical importance because the structural components of the platform (potentially) amplify, (potentially) further aggregate, and (potentially) further engulf a user base within this national imaginary.

As such, I interrogate the relationship between platform and politics in three different contexts. First, I draw on how this relationship constructs and (re)produces a national imaginary via its accepted citizenry, its demarcated space (both real and imagined), and idealizations of who belongs and who does not. Second, I focus on centering the role of the platforms by drawing on the hashtags that are used in the propaganda and their connection to the images and symbols in the memes. One the one hand, hashtags serve as a political statement, while on the other, they serve critical platform affordability’s. In short, their ability to aggregate that worldview of information on the platform thus serving a political purpose as well as a technological one. Lastly, I examine how these aspects come to the fore with a review on how these separate aspects of the propaganda coalesce into a national imaginary that imagines its citizens and its own superiority via Trump’s presence. For now,
the importance here is in considering the kind of nation and national imaginary that is possible in this historical event.

As I contend, hashtags are communicative events that serve both a political purpose and a technological one. In a media ecosystem contingent on communicative processes located in the connection between the transmissive dynamics of the mass media and the associative dynamics of social networks (Castells, 2012), sociopolitical projects and events that were once reliant on the traditional media to gain exposure are now also recorded and disseminated by ordinary users (Gomes Bicalho, 2018). As such, content that is accompanied with the use of hashtags is recorded and organized into large files in programmable environments under the influence of algorithms that design the network dynamics. From the perspective of the platforms, this favors the social media environment because it can be used to show the relevance of a particular topic by generating large amounts of content generated in a given period of time (Groshek & Groshek, 2013). Further than that, however, hashtags play a major role in setting the boundaries of common positioning (on beliefs and values, in this case) inside and outside the digital environment (Gomez Bicalho, 2018).

This version of a Trump national imaginary, outlined here as a sociopolitical project with specific values and beliefs, uses hashtags to gain engagement on social media, to group and monitor content, and which play a major role in the production of meaning. Their function extrapolates from their digital environment to signifiers that fulfill a mediating function in the creation (or extension) of new meanings (Groshek & Groshek, 2013). The use of hashtags on social media platforms are one way in which platforms, as sociotechnical tools, mediate the communicative sign to the construction of meaning (Müller, 2010). As such, hashtags are initially linked by the sociotechnical action of their index trail that expand
content across platforms and that indicate a construction of thought (Gomez Bicalho, 2018; Müller, 2010). Hashtags become signs that seek determination in how they are catalogued on platforms and representation of meaning by existing as part of the communicative acts within the digital environment that they exist in (Alzamore & Andrade, 2016). Thus, the narrative of any kind of Trump national imaginary that arises from the content, and that is complemented using hashtags, is useful in strengthening new channels of information production, propagating a political project, and becoming fundamental tools of meaning construction.

This analysis moves forward with an interplay between content in the memes and the use of hashtags. The discursive creation of a Trump national imaginary in the content functions to disseminate and capitalize on specific values that are associated with Trump in a multitude of ways. However, the discursive function between this rendition of the Trump national imaginary and the accompanying hashtags point to a tool of organizing, indexing, content creation and the construction of meaning. Therefore, the linguistic and technical communicative acts that function to outline and propagate a political project operate simultaneously as outlining the specific values and beliefs of this version of the Trump national imaginary and extend the construction of meaning specific to this media environment. The discursive connection between what a meme (re)constructs as a political project and how its content is organized provide a more robust reading of how the Trump national imaginary is (re)constructed to be and social media platforms play a specific role in this instance.

The National Imaginary, Its (Apparent) Nation, and its (Re)Creation
The point here is to note that any concept of a national imaginary, and inevitably the idea of a nation, is fundamentally blurred and difficult to pin down. In this chapter, I do not delve into the rhetorical effectiveness of the propaganda (as in, the effects on the user). I do, however, consider how the national imaginary emerges out of the content and how it relies on the mediated, and possibilities of circulation, that are specific to social media platforms. As such, though the concept of a national imaginary and nation may be difficult and fleeting, the construction of a mediated national imaginary in this instance uses certain imagery to effectively imagine itself with Trump as a main symbol and signifier. Thus, the communicative acts that arise out of calling on users to share and like pieces of content is equally relevant to the analysis because it succumbs to a recognition of simultaneously the worldview and the possibilities of distribution.

In this instance, then, the concept, and ultimate differentiation, between national imaginary, nation, and the role of media and mediated discourse in constructing them, must be accounted for. The concept of a nation is complicated and, generally, there is no accepted definition (Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl & Liebhart, 2009; Miller, 2009). According to Wodak, et. al (2009), scholarly discussion of the nation tends to revolve around two conceptions. First, the notion that the nation is a political actor and created by an act of will and, secondly, the nation as defined by culture, often linguistically and ethnically. Renan (1995) described a nation as a soul, a mental principle, that is determined by the common possession of a rich heritage of memories where a group of individuals have a present desire to live together and to preserve some kind of historical heritage. Ultimately, Renan points to the idea that the nation is a great community of solidarity.
Some scholars argue that the notion of identifying a nation through language groups rests on the improper premise that language is an independent variable (Wodak, et. al, 2009). To argue against a linguistic construction of a nation is to also argue that a population’s linguistic characteristics are not homogenous and can be the result of random interventions or, in many cases, state borders not coinciding with linguistic ones. More pragmatically, Rudolf Burger argues that a nation can have certain identifiable characteristics that help conceive of what a nation can comprise itself of:

“Every nation is the [contrived] construction of a certain pathos [Pathetisierung] performed by selectively historiographic means in the service of [identifiable] interests and the emotive charging [Aufladung] of an existing or targeted sovereign, political large-scale organization, a mystifying formula of pathos for the state itself; and every empirical observation of a ‘national consciousness’ only tests the effect of propaganda” (1994, p. 168).

In a type of national consciousness, Benedict Anderson (1983) argues that every nation can be described as an imagined community. The imagined community argues that nations are invented where they did not exist before. Nations, Anderson argues, as well as all other communities that are conceived of being larger than ‘face-to-face’ groups, should be distinguished from one another “not by their authenticity but by the way in which they are imagined” (1983, p. 15). Essentially, nations are imagined because the members of even the smallest nations will “never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them; yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion…The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, … has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations” (1983, p. 15-16).
For Anderson, one of the fundamental developments of nations comes from the perceptions of the world by way of mediated communication and communication technologies, primarily through the development of the printed press. Wodak, et. al. (2009) emphasize the connection between capitalist production methods and book printing in the sixteenth century. Moreover, Wodak et. al. (2009) stress that the rise of large-scaled printing presented a situation in which the different varieties of written languages formed new circles of readers that could be mobilized for political and religious purposes. Eventually, this mobilization was later used for political and national purposes (Woodak, et. al, 2009; Anderson, 1983). The written languages disseminated by printing “made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways,” wherein, later, the written language invented nationalism (Anderson 1983, p. 40, 122).

Likewise, Stuart Hall (1996) describes nations as not just political formations but also as systems of cultural representations through which an imagined community is interpreted. For Hall, people “are not only legal citizens of a nation; they participate in the idea of the nation as represented in its national culture…a nation is a symbolic community…” where a national culture exists in its discourse (1996, p. 612). The construction of meanings influences and organizes both our actions and our conceptions of ourselves and national cultures construct identities by producing meanings about “the nation” with which we can identify (Hall, 1996). The meanings about the nation are contained in the stories which are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past, and images which are constructed of it (Hall 1996). For Wodak et. al. (2009), they observe that the discursive construction of a national identity, through the mental construction of the nation, revolves
around the three temporal axis points consisting of the past, the present, and the future. As such, a nation’s origin revolves around important ordering criteria: origin, continuity/tradition, transformation, (essentialist) timelessness and anticipation. The process of national identification is promoted by the emphasis on “national uniqueness,” by raising individuality to the national level where the governing representatives of a political system mostly conceal a process of homogenization and erasure of differences (Wodak, et. al, 2009).

Though I rely heavily on the notion of the national imaginary and, more vaguely, the construction of a corresponding nation, the social imaginary, i.e. how individuals imagine themselves within a particular society, carries significant weight in delineating how a national makeup can be imagined. For example, Charles Taylor (2004) defines the social imaginary as “the way people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (p. 23). For Taylor, these set the common sense “background” of lived social experience.

Steger and Jones (2013) focus on a definition of the social imaginary that considers the patterned convocations of the lived social whole. For them, the notion of convocation is important since it is the calling together – “the gathering…of an assemblage of meanings, ideas, sensibilities” (p. 31) – that is taken to be self-evident. In this posturing, then, the concept of the “social whole” points to how certain simple terms such as “our society,” “we,” and “the market” carry taken-for-granted and interconnected meanings, and allows for a definition of the imaginary as something broader than any dominant notion of community.

Though I do not consider the rhetorical effectiveness of the content, nor the reasons why individual users were compelled to participate in the (re)construction of this national
imaginary, I recognize that there is a connection between the national imaginary, Trump, and the platforms as a way of relaying a past and present. More poignantly, I argue that Trump’s presence acts as a signifier or rhetorical tool in the propaganda and remains one crucial component in the construction of one type of national imaginary because of how he positioned himself as a political actor. For Wodak et. al. (2009), the recognition of an imagined community, and a it conceptualization of a nation as a system of cultural representation, is at the same time a mental construct and “an imaginary complex of ideas containing at least the defining elements of collective unity and equality, of boundaries and autonomy…[and] this image is real to the extent that one is convinced of it, believes in it and identifies with it emotionally” (p. 22). Thus, the question of how this imaginary community reaches the minds of others is at the center of this portion of the analysis: how is it constructed and conveyed in discourse and mediated via a technological apparatus that is contingent on user engaged social media platforms.

**Imagining a Nation: The Sacrifice From its Citizens and its Military**

In this instance, one aspect of this (re)constructed national imaginary focuses on the ability to protect any corresponding mediated nation. Therefore, in the propaganda shared, imaginary is founded on the ideal that it must be protect itself via its citizenry that make up the military and its leader. Concurrently, the national imaginary assumes a sentiment that the citizens of the nation must answer the call to protect the nation and that its leader must be willing to use its military might to do so. In naming and identifying the types of individuals who are ready to protect and serve their country, and in juxtaposing them to those who are unwanted, and, in many cases, positioned as invaders of the country, the individuals who
sacrifice for their nation, and the tools they use to do so, are celebrated. As such, this first section creates and discerns how this rendition of the national imaginary describes, ascribes, and delineates the differences between the people in its own national construction as well as how the tools of protection are celebrated.

In engaging with pieces of material that (re)circulate this kind of national imaginary, the role of the citizens, its leader and the military fundamentally take on a different tone than in eras before social media platforms. Specifically, the representations of the different types of citizenry, in naming who belongs and who does not, are crucial because of their (re)circulation hinging on users propagating that information. Therefore, though this Trump national imaginary may be representative, or even be a part of ultra-conservative discourse in the United States, Trump as a signifier of it represents as a way for users to not only act upon the world but to shape it (Kumar, 2006).

Further than that, however, the communicative event of liking and sharing memes of this kind also implies that the users are not only in their own way acting and shaping the world but are themselves being shaped (Kumar, 2006). Users, in this instance, are not only the shapers of the national imaginary that depicts certain worldviews but are also the laborers in which the worldview circulates. By engaging, entering, and laboring on behalf of the national imaginary, users are entered into social relations with each other on behalf of this political project. Consequently, ideological worldviews in the propaganda emphasize how media and information technologies not only shape how individuals think but are a way to shape the thinking of others by specifically calling upon users to shape themselves and others (Fuchs, 2017).
Compared to an age of traditional media outlets, and the idealizations of media covering nationally specific topics, social media platforms further agitate how temporality and spatiality arise from nationally specific issues. Traditional and mass media that are designed to deliver general interest news to broad audiences have been joined by niche sources that narrowcast to discrete users (Stroud, 2011). The participatory nature of (re)constructing the Trump national imaginary by building dissemination into the content can relay information directly to individuals without the intervention of institutional gatekeepers, for example. Consequently, memes are not virtuous pieces of content that simply circulate across platforms. One of the benefits of using memes in a propaganda campaign comes from their ability to create and perform political identities because users have a tendency to believe things that already align with existing worldviews (Philips, 2017; Philips & Milner, 2017). In relaying different types of individuals, and especially different types of citizens and the role of the military, the (re)circulation of the content is user driven to the extent that the worldview in question becomes its own end.

This constructed national imaginary paints precise attitudes and ideals that is tied to an overt, strong, militarily centric perspective. Traditionally, the relationship between media and the military has had a complex, ever-evolving relationship with institutional media outlets. The military-entertainment complex that celebrates the values of the military has led to the consideration of how videogames, the pleasures of playing or watching war, or the companies who benefit financially from selling both weaponry and media, inundates a relationship between the military and the public (Lenoir, 2000; Der Derian, 2001; Stahl, 2010). With a dominant concern as to how the military invade the domestic sphere and promote militaristic pleasures through popular culture, the military-entertainment complex
has a history of covert and deceptive practices that influence the public’s perception of it (Corner & Parry, 2017). In revealing the pervasive power and appeal of militarization, critics have addressed the material processes, that is, the magnitude of state-funded defense resources and military-related industries, but also, the ideological processes involved. More specifically, this points to the necessity of how media and military centered content engenders an emotional connection between fighting forces and the public (Paris, 2000; Kelly, 2013).

On social media platforms, and digital technologies more broadly, the relationship between the depiction of the military and the nation has evolved. With the advent of digital cameras, mobile phones, and even helmet cameras, access to military operations, and the sharing of the content on social media platforms, has transformed the way the military experience is mediated. Moreover, the uses of social media within the military and their families has received significant attention when it comes to personalizing and personifying military members and their experiences as individuals (Silvestri, 2015; Maltby and Thornham, 2016; Chouliaraki, 2016). As such, in the (re)constructed Trump national imaginary, the role of the military is emphasized to support members’ sacrifices to the nation in a way that positions Trump as empathetic to that sacrifice. More than that, however, the memes speak to this sacrifice and highlight the role of the military-cultural capital that drives the performances and reception of how military identities are negotiated and constituted through communicative practices (Corner & Perry, 2017).

Perhaps most indicative of this idealization of this imagination is revealed in how the content utilizes the role of the military in maintaining and protecting the boundaries of the nation. Both real in that the nation is portrayed as existing within a bounded, demarcated
space, and figurative, in that the national imaginary is imagined and constructed through beliefs and values that must be shared, the sacrificial citizenry emerges as the ultimate citizen. Since the four theories of the press (Siebert et. al, 1956), the variable considered for the study of the relationship between mass communication and social structures has been the national state. The development of mass media and nation states has been intimately linked with each other, creating a situation in which institutional and traditional media have been intertwined with institutional, economic and cultural structures of the countries that were representative of the nation it found itself to be. Consequently, this has led to imagined communities and nations as cultural symbols to be analyzed as finite and territorially defined, coinciding with the boundaries of nation-states.

Though the notion of the four theories of the press has long been critiqued as too tied to the idea that media reflect beliefs of the population, Curran (2002) notes that media systems identified by conventional national borders have experienced a process of downsizing and mutual ties. The impact of information and communications technology on globalization has been disruptive. Since modern information and communicative technology between individuals, organizations and community have rendered physical space and distance irrelevant, they have fundamentally widened the reach of networks of social activity and power, the intensity of regularized connection, and the speed of the interaction and processes (Carelli, 2014). The Internet, digital media, and especially social media and Web 2.0 platforms have modified the behavior of users that shape the relationship between users, media contents, languages, and practices. Given the historical phase characterized by the rise of media technology and media consumption, the national view of media practices struggles
to explain the more diverse and complex nature of media and its relationship with social, economic, political, cultural and technological systems.

Additionally, predominately repetitive in this version of the Trump national imaginary is the value of freedom. Based on the notion that the nation is protected from outsiders, the citizens of the military are thus the ones who are the purveyors of this freedom. Pavlick (2019) notes that one of the most fundamental values at the basis of U.S. American identity lies in the belief, and passion, for freedom. Harvey (2009) theorizes that freedom is essential to The American Ideology while Foner (1998) argues that the idea is a requisite in order to self-identify as an U.S. American and one that is a defining concept of the culture and society. On the Internet, and in the use of social media platforms, this sentiment of freedom coalesces with the idea of Internet freedom and the notion of freedom of speech that platforms provide. While no legal definition of Internet freedom exists, the concept is often articulated with universal human right, the right to free speech and associate, the right to free press and the right to privacy and access to information technology (Parks & Mukherjee, 2017). However, as Gillespie (2010) suggests, private intermediaries, like social media platforms, strategically frame themselves as “platforms” to pursue economic interests and impact the legal framework in which they operate.

The privatized governance of social media platforms, their platform policies, design choices, and business models are predicated upon identity infrastructures and metadata aggregation that ultimately affect the universality and free flow of information on the Internet. In doing so, these practices and structural properties can promote or constrain civil liberties. Balkin (2009) identifies the key values of free expression as the “protection of individual freedom to express ideas, form opinions, create art, and engage in research; the
ability of individuals and groups to share their views with others, and build on the ideas of others; and the promotion and dissemination of knowledge and opinion” (p. 427). The association of the freedom of the Internet and the way this Trump national imaginary (re)circulates emphasizes the American Ideology and the passion of freedom that is emphasized in the memes. The citizenry, the military, its leader, and the value of freedom are all points of axis that matter to this Trump national imaginary and that rely on the rhetoric of freedom that comes from user participation.

For example, figure 1, depicts an image of a soldier standing at the edge of a military aircraft, waving a United States flag, with text that reads: “Land of the Free because of the Brave.” Textually, not only is this an historical relevant call to the role of the military in the United States, but the post also includes a comment that emphasizes the ideal of bravery and freedom further by adding a comment (and subsequent tags) that read: “Don’t forget, who stands for all of us! #americafirst #buildthewall #donaldtrump #presidenttrump #stopterrorism #noislam #maga #stupiddemocrats.” In the text alone, figure 1 relies on linguistically important cultural clues that promote a rendition of a national imaginary which highlights the role of the military and its imagery. However, in coordination with the hashtags that are used to aggregate its (potential) online audience as a way to connect the type of national imaginary to the themes and topics of conversation surrounding Trump, the imagery of the soldier and the flag create a cohesive linguistic imagination that are insinuated with the use of #AmericaFirst and #maga. This discursive creation of this imagination, therefore, are not separate and disjointed acts of imagery and text, but instead rely on each other both rhetorically and in the ability to organize its acts of discourse to an area of the platform as well as in its dissemination.
Put differently, figure 1’s text and imagery, in conjunction with the hashtags, fundamentally depict and (re)create, as well as (re)produce, an imaginary that relies on the purported strength of military. Through “Land of the Free because of the Brave,” the imagery is tied to the notion of putting America First and through Making America Great Again. Without any direct visual reference to Trump, notions of bravery and freedom on behalf of the military are there to protect the apparent values of this national imaginary. In linking notions of bravery and freedom together, the inherent contingency between bravery and military might to protect the nation exist within a political perspective that relays itself back to Trump as president. Within this construction of bravery and freedom, envisioned through the soldier and the U.S. American flag, bravery and freedom are symbolically and textually interlocked and interconnected. As a cohesive whole, the representation, and the ultimate
construction, of the national imaginary made possible by electing Trump rests on the conceptualization of an historicized notion of patriotism (particularly through the #stopterrorism hashtag, for example) that exists based on the military prowess of the United States.

Here, there are two crucial aspects to note in the symbolic use of the flag and in the discursive relevancy of the soldier. First, the patriotic value assigned to the flag, as well as the visual and linguistic cues that tie figure 1 together, can also be assessed via the historical patriotic precedent of national symbols. The attachment that U.S. Americans have to their flag is often regarded as the prime symbol of a highly patriotic nation (e.g., Dalton, 1988; Evans & Kelley, 2002; Rose, 1985; Skitka, 2005; Welch & Bryan, 1996). As Kemmelmeier and Winter (2008) argue, the act of the displaying the flag in the United States is readily recognized as a statement affirming one’s allegiance to the nation. While arguing that the U.S. flag is an important cultural vehicle that captures collective values and sentiments, the flag is critical to the maintenance and reproduction of U.S. American identity by connecting citizens to the nation. The flag and the individual from the military achieve meaning through its embeddedness in various cultural processes and practices that are “seen as summing up, expressing, representing for the participants in an emotionally powerful and relatively undifferentiated way what they system means to them (Marvin & Ingle, 1999; Ortner, 1973, p. 1339).

For some scholars, the question of who has the power to define what it means to be a citizen of the any nation revolves around the notion of how people use material objects to forge, assert, impose, transform and resist definitions of cultural citizenship and a shared national identity (Kertzer, 1988; Wood, 2014). Via the social media platforms that mediate
these representations of what it means to be a member of this national imaginary, the platforms mediate the experiences for users while helping them construct the very perceptions of that national imaginary (Timmins & Lombard, 2005; de Kort, Meijinders, Sponselee, &IJsselsteijn, 2006). More specifically, in the communicative event of engaging with a piece of content, or with suggesting its relevance to the idealization of what it means to participate in the (re)construction of the national imaginary, social media platforms afford and present users with the ability to understand, participate, and negotiate the layer of symbolic material. The aggregation of information, the organizing of the given content, and the use of hashtags that directly correlate to this Trump imaginary exists as way of embedding content, and users, into a space of meaning that is afforded to them by the technological apparatus.

In this way, the use of the flag in this instance is points to how material culture can be used to depict a nation and mark identity in complex ways (Wood, 2014). Moreover, it offers itself to be part of the symbols that are used as an active element in the construction of differing identity categories that are made and remade when social actors interact with material world around them (Fisher & Loren, 2003; Meskell, 2001). Hall (1996) argues that the construction of a national identity based in these cultural material artifacts are not uniform but are to be thought of as a discursive sketch that represents possible differentiations between the groups of society. Importantly, the notion of the U.S. American flag in this representation, then, is not to simply relay possible interpretations of military prowess on behalf of a particular nation or a rendition of the national imaginary, but in conjunction with the hashtags that are used via the platform, it is to create perceptions of on who has access to claiming citizenship via the representations.
Sacrificial Conservatism: The American Civil Religion of Soldiers

For many scholars, the concept of civil religion has been a pervasive, albeit, extremely problematic concept. However, the content that was disseminated to favor Trump relied on a narrative that favored, and more fundamentally connected Trump, to idealistic versions of U.S. American conservatism. As such, the conservative position that is underscored here plays a part in constructing the national imaginary through accentuating and reiterating certain values and beliefs and tying this system of beliefs and values to the possibilities of dissemination. In this, I argue that the citizens who chose to become soldiers and are willing to sacrifice themselves are symbolically and technologically tied in order to overemphasize this conservative strand of the U.S. American civil religion. The sacrificial conservatism describes instances in which the U.S. American soldier exists as the ultimate citizen of the national imaginary and the anchor of the civil religion.

Bellah (1967) broadly defines civil religion as an “elaborate and well institutionalized” national faith, existing “alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches” that provides “a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere” (p. 1, 3-4). Other scholars, however, have critiqued and criticized this definition as too broad and general. Marty (1974) challenges Bellah and argues that not all U.S. Americans share a single civic creed, a common set of civil religious values, or a unified civil religious tradition. Instead, Marty argues that civil religion exists in multiple forms or modes, including “priestly” and “prophetic” ones. In its continued deconstruction, civil religion is contemporarily seen as a consciously created ideology that is “an imposed phenomenon rather than a permanent spontaneous force” (Cristi, 2001, p. 3). Far from a
universal and unchanging construct, it is regarded to be pluralistic and protean, with different groups and subcultures using different variations on civil religion “to frame, articulate, and legitimize their own particular political and moral visions” (Demerath and Williams 1985, p. 166; see also Murphy 2011; Remillard 2011; Lienesch, 2019).

The mode of this civil religion carried out on social media platforms thus emphasizes the participatory nature of the circulation and the overemphasis on the military-cultural capital that drives their (re)construction. In the (re)circulation of the symbols in the memes, and in the conservative rendition of it, civil religious symbols and rituals can build consensus, encourage national unity while also generating “highly charged conflicts” that “reflect deep-seated cultural differences that continue even today to set Americans at odds with one another” (Sarna, 1994, p. 21; see also Williams 2013; Lienesch 2018). Above all, rather than stable or static, the concept of civil religion has come to be seen as elastic and resilient, capable of adapting to changing circumstances.

Today it remains very much alive as a “fluid, contested, and evolving symbolic construction” (Clark Roof, 2009, p. 300; see also Weinstein 2017, p. 252). The national imaginary depicts the sacrifices of worthy citizens, and the civil religion that emerges, depends on constructing the ideal type of citizen – one who is brave and one who is willing to sacrifice. Embracing this sacrificial aspect is used to position citizens as either worthy of being accepted against those who are not wanted. More concisely, the need for sacrifice indulges in and subsumes the possibility of death in order to partake in the construction of the ideal soldier, or more poignantly, the ultimate member of the national imaginary.

Figure 2 depicts the citizens who willingly sacrifice for it as inherent to the values and beliefs that are communicated. This image shows a U.S. American soldiers carrying a
casket draped with an U.S. American flag out of a war plane, a traditional practice for fallen soldiers who die in combat, with the text that reads, “American Men won’t work for the same wages as Illegals…That’s true, they work for much less and sacrifice much more” (hashtags: patriot, patriots, americanpolitics, politics, conservative, libertarian, republican, usa, america, freedom, MAGA, PresidentTrump, alllivesmatter). The imagery that comes from this image are important for two reasons: first, the image juxtaposes a sentiment of the ultimate sacrifice (death for country) as something that is performed and carried out only by those brave enough to do so (i.e. citizens who are brave enough to sacrifice). Secondly, the image uses illegal immigrants as a way to differentiate the value of the U.S. soldier’s work against someone who is not willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice. Particularly telling is the reference to the work of illegal immigrants as being simultaneously better and less important than the work of the U.S. soldier. In noting that U.S. soldiers’ risk more for less pay, or less recognition, the supposed “illegal” immigrant is positioned in the current national imaginary as superior to the soldier in the defunct state. Since the soldier is put on the pedestal of sacrificing more than the immigrant, the notion of protecting the nation becomes the ultimate sacrifice that only “American men” can pay.
Combined with figure 2, Figure 3 depicts a soldier laying in a military issued cot, military issued boots, and text that reads, “when your job requires you to write your blood type on your boots, you have earned the title hero.” This meme aims to convey the fact that the soldier laying in the cot is not at home and is away on a military mission lying next to his weapons and gear. As such, it simultaneously aims to show the sacrifice of being away from home and the danger that one puts themselves in for defending the nation. Further, the text, particularly with the emphasis on the words “blood type” and “hero,” underscores the experience that the sacrifice can manifest as. In other words, with the emphasis on the words, along with the imagery of the blood type on the boots, the soldier’s way of life is centered on the recognition of the danger that comes with the position, as well as a connotated definition of the word “hero”.

Figure 2 taken from @_AmericaFirst_
However, in another version of the same meme used in Figure 3, Figure 4’s comment section is used to communicate the notion that veterans are not treated as well as they should be when they return from their time away. The caption reads:

“Too sad that most of our heroes have only those boots left. They are poor and homeless. It looks like the have earned only the title, nothing more. A little respect and money from the government would be nice, though. I feel ashamed when I think about this situation in our land of the free where the freedom is earned by the brave like this man.”
The combination of these two memes, and how they communicate and define hero as part of the communicative event, the hashtags, and the captions which accentuate the platforms possibilities of communication, extend the (re)construction of the national imaginary as contingent on the military while also depicting how the apparent lack of care of these individuals receive presents a break in the cohesiveness between patriotism and the care of the patriots, between what the national imaginary should be and what it currently is. Since the depiction of the national imaginary, the nation, and the security of the imaginary are contingent on the bravery and the necessity of the soldiers, this dissonance between how the soldiers are perceived and the how they are treated provides room for the content to accentuate a differentiation between how the military members have been treated in the past
versus how they should (and can be treated) in the future under a President Trump. Moreover, the platform’s ability to mediate these values are contingent on the users who also propagate the memes.

The relationship between the values, beliefs and morals of this Trump national imaginary fundamentally rely on the circulation of the memes via the presence and interaction of the users. Therefore, the (re)circulation of its content not only necessitates an adherence to a worldview or the agreeance in a worldview’s values and beliefs, but in the ability to further propagate it on its own merit. Though the assembling of this worldview relies on historicized and rampant versions of conservatism in the United States, it is also advantageous to, and advantageous of, the platform’s ability to aggregate its users and its content through the circulation of meaning and in the use of hashtags. For example, *Figure 5* emphasizes how the national imaginary situates the role of “American” men who idealize the family in order to secure an quintessential future for its citizenry. *Figure 5* depicts an U.S. marine accompanied by his (apparently) young daughter, dressed in his U.S. Marine uniform, sharing tea with her. With the image, the text reads “Her Daddy. Her Marine. Her Hero” with the tags: patriot, patriots, americanpatriots, conservative, libertarian, patriotic, republican, weethepeople, secondamendment, MAGA, PresidentTrump, alllivesmatter.
This meme is particularly telling because it presents the temporality of the nation’s past, present, and future, places the responsibility of this temporality as inherently masculine, and is aggregated by hashtags that underline this esteem positionality. #Americanpatriots, #conservative, #patriotic are all simultaneous categories of values in the national imaginary but also ways to embed the content into itself. The meme of the tea party and the protection of the nation combines the notion of defense and security with heroism and fatherhood while being #republican #patriots. By presenting both valor and bravery alongside the presence of the child, the nation becomes the space that deserves sacrifice, and where that sacrifice
deserves recognition because without the sacrifice required, future generations who inhabit the space of the nation are at risk of being lost.

Additionally, figure 6 shares this sacrificial theme by depicting an U.S. American soldier, presumably at an airport, holding a child with text that reads:

“A United States serviceman is about to be deployed and is saying goodbye to his newborn daughter. It’s another powerful example of the sacrifices our nation’s bravest make every day. Thank you to all the brave men and women who serve our country.”

This national imaginary’s civil religion relies heavily on its priestly and prophetic characters. Here, the content creates the perception that Trump is the answer to the current military woes while also fundamentally pointing to him as being the savior and the prophet of the military. Though the content does not necessarily say or indicate how Trump would improve the military experience, it nonetheless insinuates that he will. The connection between Trump being the savior and the prophet of the military is directly tied to how both Trump is repeatedly centered in this light and in the way that the tags allocate him as such.
By strategically adhering and repeating hashtags like #MAGA, #PresidentTrump, #patriot, #americanpatriots, and #conservative, the linguistic and technological communicative acts does two things: first, it provides the lexicalization needed in order to situate Trump as being both the protector of this national imaginary and the most patriotic candidate while also providing the space in which the Trump national imaginary exists within the platforms. The ability to be both a signifier of value and belief in a political project and the place of like-mindedness content affords social media platforms the ability to construct its own discursive space on the imaginative behalf.

In pushing this preference of Trump as the most equipped and the most patriotic, Trump unequivocally becomes a symbol of patriotism, or more broadly, the symbol of the national imaginary because he is positioned as showing the most unconditional appreciation of the soldiers. For example, Figure 7 features an image of an unnamed soldier sitting upright juxtaposed to an image of Donald Trump with text that reads “Donald Trump quietly helped marine whom Obama ignored. Marine spent 214 days in Mexican prison…then gets paper with Donald Trump’s signature on it.” Though the event happened in 2014, right as Trump was preparing a presidential run, the meme does not include any temporal context, nor does it include the reason why the U.S. Marine was in the Mexican jail. Instead, the aim is to front the act as an individual act of kindness towards the military on Trump’s behalf.
Moreover, the lexicalization of Trump as being the preferred candidate and person to take care of the military is furthered by *Figure 8* from the profile @veteran_us. Without any justification or mathematical proof of the claim, the meme depicts Trump and Hillary Clinton in an exaggerated caricature form with text that reads “Military prefers Trump over Clinton 2-1.” The argument is contingent on the notion that Trump is the better prospect for helping the military while, perhaps most tellingly, also being contrasted to Clinton’s relationship, or lack thereof, with the military. In all, this particular meme represents this potential national imaginary with Trump as president, and the protection of the soldiers who are both brave and sacrifice on behalf of the nation, relies both on specific renditions of patriotism that can only be protected by an individual who carries and exudes that brand of #patriotism and #freedom.
In being (re)constructed as the one who will take care of the nation and the people who protect it, Trump is shown to possess the characteristics that a leader must have. For example, *Figure 9*, shows a wounded animated/cartoonish soldier with his arm in a medical sleeve with text that reads “Why must the best government employee wait for the worst government healthcare?” Although *figure 10* makes no direct mention of Trump and any potential plan to improve the conditions of the soldiers, the meme’s text feeds into *Figure 10*’s text, which are related in that they stem from the same profile @_veterans_us. In *Figure 10*, the meme shows a cartoon version of Trump, sitting in, presumably, the Oval Office, with the text reading “Trump’s 10-point plan to fix the VA” (Veteran’s Affairs Department).
Figure 9 taken from @veterans_us

Figure 10 taken from @veterans_us
Since these two images were shared by the same profile (@veterans_us), not only does the importance of caring for the veterans become an evident theme of these particular pieces of content, they overall arching theme of them exude preference, or visually accentuate, the role of Donald Trump in these improvements. In general, the content of the profile @veterans_us favors Donald Trump and (re)constructs him as the only one capable of protecting the nation and as being the best candidate that can help obtain the necessary changes.

An Imaginary Built Around its Leader: Trump and His (Symbolic) Nation

In the memes that center Donald Trump as a crucial symbol in a national imaginary, Trump’s metamorphosis from civilian to politician to political savior is intimately tied to the values and beliefs (re)constructed within it. The point here is to extrapolate how the forms through which this intertextual rendering of Trump is relevant to the political and social movement in which he exists and the role of the social media platforms that propel and further this type of imagery and symbolism. Though the analytic focus of this chapter rests on the notion of the national imaginary as it is (re)constructed contemporarily, one strikingly important conceptualization needed to provide a robust reading of the propaganda is the historicization and, subsequently, the projected future of the nation to build a coalesced vision of the imaginary around Trump as a signifier. The national imaginary directly related to the posturing of Trump, and its dependence on conservative imagery, allows for an understanding of the discourse as a greater whole within the environment of the platforms.

In this instance, nation and nationalism carry significant weight when considering the role of media in their (re)circulation. As noted above, Anderson’s (1983) imagined
communities offers two insights. First, the fact that the imaginary is, again, a cultural construct and secondly, the recognition that media play a significant role in creating it through its dissemination. In the accounts of different media traditions, Curran (2002) notes that historically, media not only served to promote a national identity or national imaginary, but that it was effective in advocating for greater social tolerance while representing the nation in more exclusive ways. More substantially, however, Curran argues that it is important to recognize that each new means of communication influences the organization of society in altering dimensions of time and space, in changing the nature of human senses and perception, in altering the interpersonal relationships between individuals in a society, and in recognizing that media (particularly “new” media) disturb already established flows of communication and influence.

As already argued, digital media and social media platforms have influenced and changed the way a national imaginary can be disseminated and collected by hashtags. However, I argue that the (re)construction of the Trump national imaginary with symbols that favor Trump as a particularly patriotic candidate emphasizes the role of distributed media in a propaganda campaign. Distributed media underscores the social organization of media production that is shaped by the qualities and capabilities of digital technologies (Wittel, 2016). The logic of distributed media is more advantageous than mass media because distributed media are much cheaper and more efficient, and their phenomenological qualities have serious implications for the social. With the increased number of media producers, distributed media enable new forms of collaboration and peer production, and due to the digital things that make up distributed media, media itself becomes ubiquitous in that all aspects of the social world become mediated (Wittel, 2016; Livingstone, 2009).
The consideration of distributed media lies in recognizing the value of meaning symbols and signifiers that are part of this national imaginary by way of, and within, the platform’s ability to (re)circulate meaning, as in the use of hashtags to aggregate information on behalf of users. Dean’s (2009, 2014) influential concept of communicative capitalism argues that the circulatory capacity of symbols creates a fundamental uncertainty and insecurity in what they are able to mean and how they represent a set of norms and values. Consequently, Dean argues, there are no ultimate guarantors of meaning and as a result, “affective intensities” become more powerful as people seek imaginary identities that can take the place of the eroded symbolic identities (2014). As such, I argue that the relationship between the increased number of producers who are participating in the distributed media and the use of hashtags enhances and intensifies the affective intensities that arise with the Trump national imaginary. The collection and storage practices of hashtags as part of the technological infrastructure of social media platforms, combined with their role in extending and limiting the construction of meaning, indeed intensify, and give meaning to, the conservative national imagination that becomes analogous to this (re)constructed national imaginary.

Though I do not disagree with Dean in the idea that symbolic efficiency are increasingly local and unable to transfer, the point is to consider the affective intensity Trump operates as a symbol within the conservative logic. According to Smith (2010), nationalism is an ideology and a movement that is characterized by the promotion of interests of one nation with the goal of gaining and maintaining sovereignty. Crucially, nationalism maintains that a nation is a natural and ideal basis for a polity and is the only entity and source of political power (Smith, 2010; Yack, 2012). Michael Billing’s (1995) banal
nationalism illustrates how thinking as “a nation” can be acquired gradually and over time through banal acts such as reading newspapers, reading literature, or listening to speeches of politicians. Ting (2009) argues that in this imagined world of a nation, specific objects, events, or persons can be assigned as symbols with meanings beyond their everyday function and in the habitual use of these collectively developed signs and symbols, they can be entrenched in our everyday life and function as part of the everyday cultural world.

For Ting (2009), it is in the daily lives of ordinary citizens, when they are engaged in activities like reading about national politics, that they encounter the figured world of nationhood. Greenfeld (2005) argues that the organization of society via nation, and a subsequent rise of nationalism, are necessarily products of the use of symbols in a specific way. At the most fundamental level, nationalism is the modern culture, the “symbolic blueprint” of modern reality, the way societies see and construct the world around themselves, and exists as the modern consciousness (Greenfeld, 2005, p. 326). Particularly important for the analysis of the memes here is the notion of social mobility, which Greenfeld (2005) argues, is crucial to the persistence of a modern kind of nationalism. The point here is twofold: exploring how the symbol of Trump is mediated through platform potentialities and second, understanding how Trump’s persona as an individual function to feed the national imaginary of his political possibilities.

The positioning of Trump as the potential symbol of the national imaginary functions to further his political possibilities because of how he represents the ideal version of egalitarianism (Greenfeld, 2005). For Greenfeld, egalitarianism affects nationalism because it gives individuals the opportunity to feel as though they oversee their social status. By inserting this discursive device into the propaganda, Trump’s persona is not simply an outlier
of his potential possibilities as president, but instead, a point of axis through which he functions to establish beliefs, values and morals. More specifically, because the memes use Trump’s private life as a focal point in the presentation of him as a presidential candidate, it also functions as a way to share the symbolic culture of the national imaginary. From this perspective, the (re)construction of Trump as a primary symbol of the imaginary elucidates the potential society that contains an open and fluid system of social stratification, branded with social mobility.

As the ultimate national symbol in appearing to be a self-made individual who embodies ambition, and as one who was able to shape their own destiny, Trump’s presence exudes a mystic of nationalistic intent. Here, the memes that situate Trump as an outsider and in a battle with the current political establishment assumes two things. First, it necessarily positions Trump as simultaneously being under attack by the enemy facets in the government that could never accept Trump as one of their own, while secondly, positioning him as the savior, or the one who will bring the country to its former glory. For example, Figure 11 features a full portrait of Donald Trump with text that reads “He beat the democrats, republicans and the media…his only ally, the American people!” Tagged with #stupiddemocrats, #illegalimmigrants, #patriotsgirl, #conservativeparty, #donaldtrumphair, #illegalalliens, #nojihad, #fakenews, this meme functions to posit Trump as the answer to the problems of country while being the one who operates as leader because he bested the political system.
Trump materializes as something above the politics at play because, in the quest for a new kind of leader, the citizenry voted for him and put him into the office regardless of what the political establishment wanted. The tags emphasize the nationalistic endeavor by presenting Trump as the savior of his people. In using tags like “stupiddemocrats” and “patriotsgirl,” for example, the imagination of the nation becomes one that excludes Democrats while also assuming patriotic action as being connected to supporting Trump. Further, Trump’s nationalistic imagination forms in the lexicalization and text structure of the meme. At the textual level, Figure 11 portrays Trump as larger, and quite frankly more powerful, than the traditional practices of U.S. American politics by “beating” the Democrats, Republicans and the traditional media. As such, situating him positions Trump as not just a political actor within an historical moment, but propels him from political leader to political savior in order to build a nation surrounding him.

Further, the dependence on the national imaginary built through the persona of the outsider who eventually becomes the leader of the country continues. In detail, Figure 12
depicts Donald Trump walking up the stairs into the presidential plane of Air Force One, with the seal of the President of the United States prominently displayed in the foreground. The text of the meme says, “we have a president that is putting the security and prosperity of America first. Thank you, President Trump!” Along with the hashtags, #americanmade, #patriots, #americanpatriots, #politics, #conservative, #libertarian, #patriotic, #republican, #wethepeople, #americaproud, #MAGA, #alllivesmatter, the meme suggests that the dependence and survival of the United States is contingent on Donald Trump being president.

Figure 12 taken from @_AmericaFirst_

In figure 13, a similar sentiment is expressed. This meme shows Donald Trump waving at a crowd, with the text “Mr. President, the media may not support you, the establishment politicians may not support you, but the American people support you!” (hashtags:
These two images, (Figure 12 and Figure 13), situate Trump as simultaneously the attacker and the attacked, as both the savior of the nation and the political actor in charge of saving it, and as the actor who is imperatively different than traditional politicians. In framing Trump as different than other politicians, particularly and especially different than his Democratic opponent Hilary Clinton, the memes reinforce him as the person who can beat traditional politics and who is unanimously supported by the average U.S. American voter. Situating Trump as both the person under attack and as the person who overcomes the traditional political player positions him as different but also superior to all other candidates. Perhaps accentuated by the narrative that Trump gave up his “billionaire lifestyle” (Figure
Trump is the personification of the “American Dream,” fronted by the notion that he is a successful capitalist and that he is the example that all U.S. voters should follow.

Figure 14 depicts a relatively young Donald Trump in the portrait pose with text that reads “Trump, the man that gave up his billionaire lifestyle to be humiliated, ridiculed, and slandered in order to save the American people” (tags: guns, conservative, civilrights, Trumpforpresident, patriotnation, trump2k16, trump2020, republicanpride, patriotplace, draintheswamp). As someone who symbolizes the ability to master the game of meritocracy, Trump not only understands how the game works, but he is, in his own right, paying the ultimate (financial) sacrifice in order to help others achieve the same. In line with the notion that Trump is the savior and the defender, this meme defends the idea of meritocracy and helping the average person reach the Trump level of financial success. Particularly telling in this set of tags, however, is the tag “drain the swamp.” Though a specific reference Trump’s campaign rhetoric, Trump’s financial success is used to position him as a means of financial superiority while insinuating that he will be able to clear the way for all other U.S. Citizens to be as successful as he is.
Trump National Imaginary: His (mediated) body politic

Following the election of Trump to President in November 2016, many scholars attempted to explain the decision-making process of the U.S. American electorate via different avenues (Norton, 2017; Mast, 2017; Kreiss, 2017). For some, economic anxieties or economic dissatisfaction explain Trump’s appeal (Berezin, 2017; Edgell, 2017). For others, Trump’s appeal came from some of his more pernicious attitudes as a candidate, including but not limited to: his attitudes towards women (Edgell, 2017; Wayne, Valentino & Oceno, 2016), his attitude towards people of color, especially racist and xenophobic attitudes towards black, Muslim, Mexican, and apparent international refugees (Ekins, 2017; McElwee & McDaniel, 2017; Jones & Kiley, 2016), and the perception that Trump was the defensive representation of Christian values in the United States (Braunstein, 2017; Gorski, 2016, 2017; Jones, 2016). Further, polls leading up to and following the election found that white working-class men and women in the states of Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania
were some of the strongest supporters of Trump (Berezin, 2017). Particularly interesting about this group of voters was that they not only voted for Obama in the two previous elections in 2008 and 2012, but that their drive to Trump came from their increasing insecurity about their economic and social position in the United States (Berezin, 2017; Edgell, 2017; Wayne, et. al., 2016).

As such, Trump’s presentation of these potential voting factors not only insinuate that he was advocating for particular positionalities, but that his candidacy (and ultimately, his presidency), were buttressed by specific renditions of a national imaginary. For example, Berezin (2017) and Sides (2017) argue that Trump’s ability to speak to the economic dissatisfaction juxtapose his outspoken, unapologetic populist appeal to Clinton’s perceived liberal elitism was a defining factor in his victory. Schaffner, MacWilliams and Nteta (2017) found that holding “hostile” sexist attitudes was a strong predictor of respondents likely voting for Trump more so than economic dissatisfaction or racism. Similarly, the aforementioned Wayne et al. (2016) found that hostile sexist attitudes was a stronger prediction of Trump support that authoritarian tendencies, ethnocentrism, or economic anxiety. Further, racism was also a powerful predictor of a Trump vote. Taken from the 2016 post-election American National Election Studies, McElwee and McDaniel (2017) found that blaming black and African Americans for their societal disadvantages or believing in the notion that blacks have too much societal power were also sturdier predictors of supporting Trump rather than issues surrounding immigration.

Particularly revealing here is the ability to construct Trump, or to front Trump, as the focal point of this imaginary in a way that functions mediated via the social media platforms. Though the reasons why individuals voted for Trump is complicated and multifaceted, the
memes that were part of the propaganda campaign nonetheless rely on the ability to enable and extend the ability to communicate, like, and share the sentiments that were emphasized, underscored, and highlighted in these memes. In engaging in these communicative actions and practices, inherently built on Trump’s talking points and political beliefs, the imaginative construction exists as practices always in an ongoing process of interaction, expression and cultural labor. Perhaps most indicative of the national imaginary and the components of its citizenry lies in an image of a Trump supporter wearing a t-shirt (Figure 15). Though the image does not depict the face of the individual, the meme features a male figure, showing the back of the shirt with the quotation, “Obama called me a clinger, Hillary calls me a Deplorable, Terrorists call me Infidel; Trump calls me AMERICAN.” Accompanied by the tags, “American,” “americafirst,” “buildthewall,” “donaldtrump,” “presidenttrump,” “trump,” “stopterrorism,” “noislam,” “illegalimmigration,” “maga,” “republican,” “stupidliberals.”
Not only does the reference to Obama and Hillary separate the citizenry of Trump supporters as anti-Democrat and anti-establishment, the hardline reference to being called an “infidel” reiterates and reaffirms the hardnose patriotic undertones that are apparent in all of the memes of the national imaginary. More explicitly, the meme creates political distance and separation from the Democratic politicians, in that assumes that the “American-ness” of the national imaginary is one that exists outside of them, or one that exists as the anti-thesis to the Democrats and the assumed the Democratic values. With the linguistic tie to being called an infidel while simultaneously being proudly proclaimed as an “American” by
Trump, the notion of American-ness itself is resituated and rearticulated as someone who opposes being called a clinger, deplorable and a terrorist. In other words, the cohesiveness, lexicalization, and construction of the imaginary, and the idealization of the national imaginary’s citizenry, becomes defined as a different, separate entity and as only those who are adorned “American” by Trump.

In this chapter, I deployed CDA to focuses on the in a way that linguistically, symbolically, and textually ties the (re)constructed national imaginary with specific values and beliefs about a body politic to the hashtags and platform possibilities. The ways the content and the platforms tie together mediates and conceptualizes a national imaginary that deserves to be protected and sacrificed through the elevation of certain citizens who are willing to do so. In the defense and protection of the nation, the national imaginary emerges to forefront a militarily centered need for security. The security imaginary, as conceptualized by scholars as a distinct facet of the national imaginary, relies on an historically relevant, socially accepted means of life in the United States.

In this rendition of the U.S. national imaginary contingent, Donald Trump emerges as the crucial missing element. First, not only is Trump (re)constructed as a man who needs to be saved from the political system already at play in the United States but is simultaneously appointed the savior of the country. This dual character of Trump draws from more poignant, straight forward relevant political lines of thought in the United States. For example, this dual character positions him as the ultimate leader, the one who has the historical understanding of where the nation has been in order to take the nation to where it needs to go. For the national imaginary, this means that the religious tonality of the content is both covert, as in Trump being positioned as a kind of chosen leader, and overt, as in the content directly
references a religious overtone that should buttress the kind of national imaginary it should aspire to.

Second, the symbols are crucial to the construction of the national imaginary. Symbols typically associated with that of the country, the flag being one of them, not only helps perpetuate notions, and ultimately definitions, of patriotism, but also creates and disseminates the attitudes towards the national imaginary. Specifically, Trump’s presence works as a symbol of this national imaginary. For example, he becomes the prime example of what it means to be a patriot in the sense that the nation is only going to be saved due to his personal sacrifices. In this disseminated form of patriotism and symbolism, the centering of Trump provides an avenue through which the emergence of who the prime body politic is imagined to be. All in all, the construction of the national imaginary weaves through the (re)construction of the patriotic, religious, militarily centered, and conservative policies that are contemporarily associated with the Republican Party.

In the next chapter, I engage in discerning how the memes encourage user engagement. Though I do not aim to understand the effects the content has on the user, I instead focus on the type of language used in order to encourage user labor with specific pieces of content through the social media platforms. As will be shown, understanding how the content encourages user labor via interaction is important for two reasons. First, it functions as a primary way of examining the role of the platform as the medium of the propaganda through using specific linguistic cues like “Like” and “share” in order to boast user engagement. Secondly, it also functions to implement elements of the structural capabilities into the analysis that can consider the role of communicative capitalism and digital capitalism more specifically. Further, the encouragement of user-based interactions
will provide a lens into the analysis that works towards a consideration of the affective media structure and the affective pieces of content specific to the social media platforms and memes.
Chapter 5 The Language of a Nation(al) Imaginary: User Labor and Acts of a Nation

In this chapter of analysis, I focus on the strategic use of language with two consequences in mind. First, I detail how this rendition of the Trump national imaginary is based on symbols, expressions of values and beliefs, and imagery that actively engender the structural capabilities of social media platforms via user dissemination. Here, specifically, I underscore how the meaning making of a political project coincides and actively engenders the structural capabilities of social media platforms that expand and intensify their capitalist practices, and more specifically, user labor. In chapter one, I contend that the (re)construction of this kind of imaginary is based on certain symbols, values and beliefs that rely on the possibilities of mediation and the construction of meaning provided by platforms. Here, the focus on the relationship between content and language functions in considering how the language as a meaning making activity is material, technologically constituted, and which capitalizes on the contours of how this version of the Trump national imaginary is (re)constructed. Here, my goal is to answer my second research question.

I argue that social media platforms are an historically specific piece of technology that mediates a perspective totality within a political project while furthering an economic endeavor. Since social media platforms are tools of communication that play an active role in the reproduction of social relations, they advantageously exploit the political imaginary while revealing the inner relationships that obscure the relations of exploitation. In this way, language in the propaganda exposes how social media platforms operate as a sociotechnical system that positions the political worldview in the propaganda contingent on platform logics. The content that (re)constructs this Trump national imaginary is ideologically
constitutive of a political project while simultaneously recruiting user labor that exemplifies the role of media in the reproduction of ideological conditions. The use of language on social media platforms as the concurrent site of meaning circulation that the imaginary is contingent on for political purposes is also the place in which the networks of (inter)acting humans and computer networks are activated and realized.

Secondly, I analyze the role of language as a main factor in generating, and exacerbating, user labor. In this sense, the strategic use of language underscores the structural construction of the platforms that expand the role of capitalism in everyday life within the purview of communicative capitalism. By focusing on how the memes prompt user labor by encouraging users to like and share, the creation of data as is itself a form of technological language which serve capitalistic endeavors. Though platforms present themselves as neutral entities that supposedly function to better communities, cognition, and communication, language that encourages specific user behaviors to generate data relinquishes and abandons its neutrality in order to entertain circulation on the values and beliefs encoded within a piece of content. The intertwining of language as part of a national imaginary and language as a strategic arm of disseminating propaganda via user labor means that the capitalistic endeavors of data collection and storage serve the expansion of capitalism built on the very belief systems of the national imaginary.

Overall, I argue that the role of language on social media platforms is thus the moment in which communication and information are material social practices that operate in a particular form in how they shape the thinking of individuals and of others (Fuchs, 2017). With this simultaneous, yet analytically distinct, focus on language (i.e. in how values and beliefs are tied to the structural capabilities of the platform and how the generation of data
via user labor through strategic linguistic cues), I situate social media as tools of ideological (re)production through the circulation of meaning in a political context while also serving as a primary source of (digital) capitalism. In the form of a propaganda campaign, the communicative act of sharing or liking a piece of content that communicates a particular worldview is the vital moment when language and labor are fused. The fusion of information and communication are the material practices in the construction of meaning (Fuchs, 2011), weaves language and labor as mutually constitutive/constituting, and function through the structural properties of social media platforms. (Social) media platforms are tools that shape society, both as tools that circulate beliefs and values through emphasizing the social gratifications users gain (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013) and operate as a key element and a main constituent of contemporary economies (Fuchs, 2015; Briziarelli & Karikari, 2016; Fuchs & Mosco, 2016). They must synchronously be considered as places of community, cognition, and communication that enable, exacerbate, and continuously push the evolution of economic endeavors.

McGuigan (2014) argues that means of communication, as entire social projects that serve social needs, are themselves means of productions that include forms of language and advanced forms of communication technology that are always socially and materially reproduced. With platforms that existentially need users to interact with them in order to beget more capital, the social construction of meaning, and the communicative technological infrastructures through which this meaning circulates, distributes ideology within a political motive and as part of domination and exploitation fundamentally and always through the use of language. Since social media platforms put individuals in contact with each other to mediate the social, platforms afford users the ability to be a primary actor in the
(re)construction of Trump’s national imaginary. On the other hand, because platforms are afforded the ability to collect a variety of data: user demographics, personal information regarding tastes, habits, status update content, information about the kind of communicative channels users utilize to socialize; they are keen to how users socialize and provide extraordinary detailed profiles of individuals, localized and networked communities, and offer intent clues on consumer habits and affective relations (Brizarelli & Karikari, 2016; Scholz, 2011).

The (inter)action of the human networks with their technological networks perpetuates particular kinds of user labor and is aggravated by the expansion of distributed media through digital things. Distributed media underscores the social organization of media production that is shaped by the phenomenological qualities and capabilities of digital things (Wittel, 2016). Thus, user labor via the prosumptive practices of a Trump national imaginary stresses the distributed era of media because media is cheaper, more efficient, and based on different phenomenological qualities. With new forms of collaboration, peer production, and social relations, the organizational patterns of the social shift while communication and technology continue to constitute essential elements of the productive force and the social relations of production (McGuigan, 2014). Centering the role of communication and technology in this instance is to explore how language is used to (re)produce ideological worldviews that exploit the user in order to reify the economic condition and to (re)create a Trump’s national imaginary.

The language that (re)constructs a Trump national imaginary is thus a combination of information technologies and political content wherein political communication exerts, and is contingent upon, prosumption, communicative capitalism and user labor. Though I argue for
a reconfiguration of conceptualizing communicative capitalism, I still place the technological structure of social media platforms as the intermediary and the producer of user networks, affective political and economic practices, and as the center of a milieu of social, political and economic endeavors. Focusing on and extrapolating the structural conditions of the platforms including their need for users, user-engagement, labor and value presents an historical moment in which the means of communication mediate the political, social, and cultural renderings via the ability to capitalize on the social construction of meaning. By taking the “social” in social media seriously, I contend that the Trump national imaginary was (and still currently is) the ground upon which platforms lose their neutral stance as communication technologies and are the site in which the expansion of capital happens through the strategic use of language.

**Language and Ideology: Socially Mediating the Trump National Imaginary**

As tools of communication, media and media technology offer a perspective of the social totality that is comprised of an anthropological condition, are inherently ontological and are fundamental in the (re)production of social relations (Fuchs, 2011; Berry, 2014; Briziarelli, 2014). Aouragh (2015) argues that digital spaces are products of both capitalist hegemony and simultaneously used to resist capitalist logics. In this respect, I argue for a specific rendering of the role of social media platforms as an historically specific piece of technology which mediates a perspective of the social totality, their social relations, a political project and exist as an economic endeavor. The transmission of, and meaning construction within, the content is inherently dependent on the language that build a national imaginary within the (inter)acting networks of networks via user labor. Therefore, the user in
this political context, and in this political communicative moment, is subject to the ideological intervention of social media that combines the objective element of producing actual media content and a subjective element of consciousness (Brizirelli & KariKari, 2016).

Marx and Engels (2001) argue that the production of consciousness and the production of ideology are linked to concrete human activity. The production of ideas, concepts and consciousness is directly interwoven with the material intercourse of man, “the language of real life” (Marx & Engles, 2001, p. 35-36). Consequently, language of real-life activity, wherein language is used to (re)circulate the meaning of a Trump’s national imaginary, is a specific instance in which social media platforms are contingent on its mediating capabilities of intertwining language, meaning construction and labor into a singular moment. The encouragement to participate in a project of imagination with an economic consequence that pertain to the organization of social relations. The focus on this meaning circulation primarily emphasizes the ability of users to like and share. The combination of a worldview, tied to the tools of dissemination that social media platforms provide, exacerbates the prosumptive properties of ideas, concepts, and consciousness that surround a Trump national imaginary.

In this particular section, however, I am not interested in the potential consequences of the (re)circulation via user effects. Instead, I pay attention to how the language in the memes is both ideologically constitutive of a national imaginary and in the circulation of the imaginary’s meanings behind its beliefs and values. The content I examine here delves into how the worldview presented accentuates the role of language as an act of worldview building and as a structural necessity via user engagement. The values, beliefs, and type of national imagination do not just actualize or materialize as part of a dissemination campaign
but instead aim to, and in fact rely on, how the values, beliefs and common-sense notions are tied to the platform structurally.

*Figure 16*, taken from the profile Angry Eagle, details a story that alludes to the kinds of common-sense values and beliefs that are expected in the Trump national imaginary while also implicating the user to the transmission process. In this meme, divided into two sections, depicts of a man who is described as a US military veteran. Juxtaposing this apparent veteran, shows a group of individuals, some with their faces covered as to not show who they are, burning a U.S. American flag. The text for the meme reads, “LIKE for the Veteran” over the man who is the apparent veteran and “Every Like Increases Temperature in Hell FOR SUCH SCUM.” Further, the comment of the story reads, in full: “The scale of human degeneracy is measurable, but these morons exceeded all possible limits. William Barclay, a 92-year-old Las Vegas veteran was ready to lose his ass for the sake of future generation. He was drafted into the Navy when he was 19. And this is how dumbass leftwingers [sic] thank him! William Barclay says he went outside to let his dog to the bathroom Wednesday morning when he noticed his U.S. Navy flag was burned to ashes and one his American flags was in shreds. He also saw two American flags flying on his block were burnt to ashes too. Fuck the morons who did this! May Lord or anyone else send them to hell! (Tags: americaneagle, stupidliberals, secondamendment, trump, Donald, guns, hillno, murica, MAGA, Calexit, nobama.)
Since the point of interest here in the values, beliefs and their relationships to mediating its dissemination via liking and sharing, the meme content and comment centers dissemination as inherent to the belief system. The ability to identity with the apparent morality, or in recognizing the lack thereof, depicted in the meme and explained in the comment uses the ideological worldview of a Trump national imaginary that is inherently based on the nationalism that referred to in the first analysis chapter. The tonality of patriotism in the national imaginary is telling in this meme because it reinforces an “us vs them” discourse technique that separates the body politic of a Trump national imaginary. Further, this meme idealizes how the social construct and the construction of meaning operates as a merging of creating a kind of social consciousness. In creating a set of values built on the dichotomous personification of a type of body politic that emerges because of the acts that further mediate it, the meme represents the building of common-sense social relationships that shape the wants and desires of a (re)created sociality. Though there is no
way to tell if the story about the veteran is true or not, it’s assumed validity relays the taken for granted values and beliefs that further propagate its (re)circulation.

Similarly, *figure 17* employs the same kind of communicative tactic in tying the national imaginary to the tools of dissemination. In this instance, the meme strategically encourages the user to “like” a depiction on the behalf of a veteran. The meme, featuring an older gentleman presented as a veteran pilot standing in front of vintage warplanes, bestows upon the user a choice to either engage with the meme or ignore the meme, to the detriment of the veteran and the national imaginary. Contrasted to the elder pilot is a photo of a man spitting on a blonde woman with a description which reads, “Ignore for rapefugess [sic].” With the user implicated in the dissemination of the imagination, this meme communicates specific notions of who is revered in the imaginary and who is not. More than that, however, user engagement with the photo intensifies the racist, staunch anti-immigrant stance that runs through the national imaginary. The meme constitutes not only who should the body politic of a Trump national imaginary be but reifies the active participation of its construction by presenting a staunch contrast.

![Figure 17 taken from @AngryEagly](image)
In implementing the choice of the (re)construction of the body politic into the content, the user engages in what it means to be patriotic, who its revered citizen are, who it deems unworthy and what qualities these unworthy individuals are ascribed with. As such, the conceptualization of patriotism here not only pits against refugees but further creates, and asserts, how refugees act and behave. Within these assumptive qualities of refugees lie the driving force between the shared beliefs, values, and morals of a Trump national imaginary. This circulation of a practical consciousness, as well as enacting upon that practical consciousness, positions *figure 17* exists as a means through which the national imaginary becomes the worldview shaped by the user interaction. The strategic use of the word ignore in the meme underscores the lack of neutrality in the content as well as in the platforms.

On the one hand, the use of the word ignore assumes that platforms are contingent on the existence of users who create network of community and meaning. If a user chooses to ignore interacting with a meme, the platforms exist as neutral presenters of information and only as the bearers of opinion. However, on the other hand, the use of the word ignore implies that the practices of identification with memes during a political project is the instant in which platforms lose their neutral stance as simply bearers of opinion. Though the mere presence of users in inherently an economic gain for platforms, as will be discussed later, the use of the word ignore, as a strategic practice of communication, implicates the construction of meaning as a main source of labor on behalf of the user networks.

The significance of the use of ignore further provides the context in which the use of language is ideological in the (re)construction of a worldview especially in its ability to strip the platforms from their neutrality. The worldview of the national imaginary and the ideological economic value of the word on platforms is precisely inundated in the user. For
example, if the user chooses to abide by the word ignore and not further disseminate the meme, the user is inherently operating and identifying with the kind of world that choses refugees over veterans. Moreover, the word ignore, within this construction of meaning, implies that a Trump national imaginary does not include refugees and further marginalizes them in a specific way. This mediated rendition of how refugees act is not only contingent on this one meme but rests on the amalgamation of the different kinds of meme within the propaganda content. However, to intertwine the words like and ignore into the same meme is significant because it directly dichotomizes the kinds of clashing worldviews that frames a national imaginary with Trump against a national imaginary without Trump.

Lastly, in this demonstration of the use of language that encourages users to like and share, is figure 18. Here, the meme that is used fore fronts the U.S. American military superiority in order to perpetuate a U.S. centric worldview as a military power. On the left side of the meme is an U.S. American soldier standing next to a military cannon, as if the soldier is getting ready to fire it. In the aim to (re)construct the might of the military, the meme juxtaposes the U.S. soldier to a man of Arab descent shown climbing into the cannon as if he were the ammunition for the dilapidated weapon. Above the U.S. soldier is the text “USA” and above the man who is in the cannon is the text “ISIS.” This sense of valor that is inherent to the soldiers not only depicts them as the celebratory citizen but also as better equipped to secure the nation.
Taken as a whole, this meme does a couple of things to insist upon a type of national imaginary on Trump’s behalf. Similar to figure 17, it reiterates stereotypes about the kind of individuals who are positioned as enemies to the nation. By labeling the individual as part of “ISIS,” without any context or description as to the individual is, the meme relies on stereotypes and assumption of the types of individuals who are associated with the group. Further, on these stereotypes alone, the (perceived) military superiority of the United States is further reinforced because of the differences in the quality of arsenal. Without sharing who the individual that represents ISIS, the military prowess of individuals and groups other than the United States is shown to not be able to match the U.S.. Moreover, the security national imaginary that is shown via the soldier identified as the soldier from the USA, the perceived enemy of the United States is shown to be overpowered, overmatched, and out gunned. More importantly, however, the use of the word like continues the theme of how language can further perpetuate the worldview.
The worldview and national imaginary encouraged through the use of words such as like and share matters because, as shown in figure 16 and figure 18, it is contingent on the notion of the national security imaginary wherein the user participates in the (re)construction of that consciousness by enacting upon it. By positioning the U.S. military as powerful and able to defeat its enemy, the enemy is always positioned as inherently inferior and, by default, easy to defeat. The national imaginary, deeply rooted in its military conservatism and neo-conservative, pro-military tendencies, is thus associated as reliant on its veterans and in destroying the enemy. The memes identify the types of anti-refugee, anti-immigrant rhetoric that is (re)constructed within a Trump’s national imaginary while also insisting on the hardline, dominant geopolitical power worldviews. Through the ability to mediate these beliefs via the strategic use of the word like materializes the circulation of meaning particularly centered around Trump through the human and social networks that arise from user presence.

The Language to Mediate the Social and the Technological

The role of language here is not simply to connect the possibilities of dissemination to the platform, but instead, to recognize how the linguistic and visual representations presented in the memes mediate the relationship of a network of networks. In the previous section, I outlined some specific tactics that were used with the words like, share, and even ignore. Here, I focus specifically on the (inter)acting social activity of media and political communication mediated via representations of a worldview where language is a social action dependent on a social relationship built on social media platforms. More specifically, here, I emphasize the role of social media as media platforms and language as a social action
through a emphasis of the (inter)acting networks of networks. Instead of highlighting how language is strategically used, I underscore how the ability to like and share memes invigorates a dual ideological perspective on behalf of a propaganda campaign.

Williams (1977) notes that language is a social action dependent on social relationships. On social media platforms, the technological capabilities and the structural capacities, i.e. social media platforms as spaces and places of social organization of some kind, the linguistic and technological relationship is thus at the crux of ideological concerns. The memes that (re)construct some kind of Trump national imaginary centers Trump, vague values, beliefs, and morals, and renditions of its body politic as an ideological construction of a particular political project. The language of real life and language as practical consciousness is acted upon and actively engendered through already existing social relationships via the social media platforms (Williams, 1977; Marx & Engels, 2001). Hence, the consideration of ideology here is not just the (re)construction of the national imaginary as the intermediary between language that mediates meaning and the user labor (as explored later) that it is built upon. More specifically, it is the way in which the memes advantageously rely on the platforms to mediate the imaginative powers because of the imaginative possibilities that are built into them.

In linking the dissemination of a Trump national imaginary to liking and sharing pieces of content, the memes encapsulate a particular definition of ideology as defined by Eagleton (2007). For Eagleton, “ideology is matter of discourse rather than language” (p. 9). Accordingly, this definition and conception of ideology is concerned with actual uses of language between individuals, aimed to produce specific effects. By linking the Trump worldview, and the dissemination of it via social media platforms with words such as “like”
and “share,” this ideological perspective is less of a matter of the inherent linguistic properties of a statement or of a pronouncement and more of a matter of who is saying what to whom for what purposes (Eagleton, 2007). With a focus on purposeful discourse as opposed to instances of language or “idioms” (p. 9), Eagleton argues that what is ideological is the power-interests that are served and the political effects that can be generated. In the context of a Trump national imaginary and a propaganda campaign, the values, beliefs, and symbols that are necessarily part of the imagination is related to the socially mediated circumstance in which an utterance directly attempts to reify its social context.

In this instance, the (re)construction of a worldview and national imaginary through the use of symbols and utterances within this social context accounts for the relationship between the use of symbols to materially (re)construct an imaginary of Trump, the drive to encourage user labor (which will be considered in detail later), and how an ideological worldview can shape the wants and desires of a social group. As such, the group’s ideological worldview as politically constructed outlines its wants and desires within the particular contours detailed through the aspects of patriotism, religiosity, and idealizations of a leader and citizenry. Elster (1982) argues that ruling ideologies, like the ones performed and thus (re)constructed within a Trump national imaginary, can actively shape the wants and desires of those subjected to them.

Moreover, Elster argues that ruling ideologies must also engage with the desires, wants, and needs that individuals already have, and individuals must re-inflect them in their own idiom into their (inter)acting networks of networks. Eagleton (2007) notes that ruling ideologies must provide worldviews back to their subjects in ways which render the ideology plausible and attractive. By being the result of the social activity of meaning construction,
these ruling ideologies must provide a basis through which individuals can (re)create and (re)construct a coherent identity while furnishing motivations for effective action.

As Elster notes, successful ideologies must attempt to explain away flagrant contradictions and incoherencies because ideologies must be more than imposed illusions. Given that ideologies must communicate a version of social reality which is real and recognizable enough to not be immediately rejected, it must also be considered real and legible to the individuals that exist within it (Elster, 1982). In a media environment built on social activity, meaning creation of an ideological worldview, and user labor, Elster’s definition of ideology and Eagleton’s particularities in paying attention to the social context of who is saying what and to who, the media environment in which a national imaginary is built presents two consequences. First, paying attention to the specificities of the language used to create meaning around a Trump national imaginary insinuates that language as a social activity and language in a specific context underscores the idea that communication is “social interaction through messages” or symbolic construction of a particular kind in a particular way (Gerbner, 1970, p. 72).

Second, the use of symbols and the construction of meaning via social interaction on social media platforms through actual instances of language within a social context encourages user labor on behalf of the social activity of making meaning for the national imaginary. In other words, the language used to describe an ideological worldview while also encouraging the user to act on behalf of the nation, in the age of social media, implicates the social interaction through messages to its social context in this national imaginary differently. In arguing that language is constitutively human, Raymond Williams (1977) notes that meaning is necessarily a social action, dependent on a social relationship where
“consciousness takes shape in the material of signs created by an organized group in the process of its social intercourse” (p. 36). In the (re)construction of Trump’s national imaginary, as it were, the needs, new needs and human reproduction happen in specific forms that are aimed at delineating who can participate in it, what can exist within it, and what kind of nation it claims to be.

Thus, the language used in the propaganda is not merely subject to just the personalization of views via tools of mediation that platforms provide or just a political project of Trump’s national imaginary engendered by an outside political actor. Social media platforms are the objective realizations of social relations and social interactions and the merging of where the construction of meaning is the result of social practices, and the social labor, that shape the thoughts of users. Due to social media platforms being communicative technology that are the articulation of artifacts, practices and social arrangements, users are subject to the economy of (digital) capitalism, the way digital things influence the ever intensifying practices of distributed media, and create the social relations that compose a lived reality of (inter)acting networks of networks. Though Marx acknowledged that thought can become an objective force when material reality is shaped subjectively (Kumar, 2006), the complexity of the materiality of communication networks are conceived of as fundamentally material, constituted in actions, interactions, and contacts that can be directly observed and reported (Lievrouw, 2016, p. 36).

When a user shares parts of a Trump national imaginary in their own network through the existing computer network, the technological capabilities of sharing, liking and constructing meaning are not just perceived but are enacted upon. Language, then, is not just a material act to generate meaning and to get users to labor on behalf of the imaginary but is
also the material consequence of communication and technological relationships and social relations. The device, network, system and encoded practices of sharing and liking are the physical characters of the technological devices that define the distributed and that also create, reinforce, stabilize and support the social practices and social actions made possible. As part of this, the (re)circulation of a Trump national imaginary, including the practices, the construction of meaning, the language used to describe values, beliefs and morals, and the labor on behalf of user presence and user liking and share are materialized and algorithmically rendered. As Papacharissi (2015) argues, “algorithms render affective gestures embodied, permitting them to attain discursive materiality and thus potentially develop into narratives of connection and discord or the in-between. This materiality is the product of the interaction between the affordances of each platform and the habitus of practices and predispositions toward technology that characterizes a given era” (p. 119).

Via language that links values and beliefs to the technological architecture that enables the (inter)action of networks of humans and computer networks, the materiality of discourse between structure and the values of the imaginary thrives on, invites, and rewards sharing (Papacharissi, 2015). Shareability functions as an affordance that invites, and discourages different genres, of social activities. As Papacharissi argues, shareability functions as an affordance that invites and discourages particular genres of social activities. In the case of figure 17, liking the worldview is juxtaposed to ignoring the worldview and is an example in which the social activity of sharing is a specific type of social activity. As a result, networks are only as active as the information that flows through them, where the act of sharing renders the technological structure visible, and how actor nodes materialize digitally as they share information.
The act of information sharing is fundamental because it is in the sharing of information that makes actors present. The act of sharing can, in some cases, be read as an act of agency where networked publics can be read as publics (Papacharissi, 2015). In her theorization of an affective public, Papacharissi argues that affective publics materialize uniquely and leave digital footprints. In a Trump national imaginary that surfaces because of the shareability of the content, the affective tendencies and affective motivation that are contained within the ideas, thoughts, technologies and bodies that support interactions within and around affect emerge. As will be explored in detail in chapter three, scholars have evoked the concepts of the affect economy and affective labor in order to explain the mediated efforts that exploit and reproduce affective outputs (Hardt & Negri, 2004; Papacharissi, 2015). For Hardt and Negri, the development of the relation between affect and value traces how immaterial labor is produced, and ultimately, performed, via affect. Affective labor presents a variety of immaterial labor, associated with “labor that produces or manipulates affects” (2004, p. 108). Media, and especially social media, for example, invite audiences to consume content via affective relationships developed with media genres and media personas, and more importantly, may lead to the emergence and cultivation of particular feelings and emotions (Papacharissi, 2015).

Though Papacharissi argues not confuse affect with emotion and feeling, where “we might think of affect as the force that drives the unconscious tap of the foot to music,” affect in media is capable of sustaining and transmitting in ways that may lead to the cultivation of subsequent feelings, emotions, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors (2015, p. 23). While being integrated into whole economies, affect attunement afforded through online means moves interactions between (inter)acting bodies in plains that are social, cultural, and political which
sustain affective patterning (Grusin, 2010) or contribute to the sustenance of mattering maps (Grossberg, 1997). A Trump national imaginary is contingent on the sharing and liking of worldview content and digital media invites and transmits affect while sustaining affective feedback loops that generate and reproduce affective patterns of relating to others that are further reproduced as affect, that is, where the intensity has not yet be cognitively processed as feeling, emotion, or thought (Papacharissi, 2015). In fact,

“These experiences are not separate but are integrated into congruent media practices, habits, and rituals. Haptic, optic, and tactile, but also the computational capabilities of media invite particular modalities of affective attunement. The connective and expressive affordances thus generated grant a given technology its own mediality, and this mediality invites particular forms or textures of affective attunement” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 23-24).

The affective tendencies that are underscores and the consideration of materiality in how social media platforms determine social relationships and social relations requires a recognition of distinct, yet mutually constitutive, aspects of the social, political, technological, and of who says what to whom and to what effect. Language is not only a social action that creates meaning, nor just the link between values and beliefs of a political project contingent on liking and sharing but always both. The interweaving, intertwining, and interlacing of language, values and beliefs and a technological structure present unique instances in which technologies are responsible for a multitude of meditated possibilities. They are sociotechnical tools that shape the thinking of users, that rely and enact upon objectified and actualized social relations, the social activity of meaning making, and the (inter)acting networks of networks that encompass not only relationships with technology,
economies, bodies and discourse, but that shape how individuals move through the world, and that create and fortify social relations which compose our lived realities.

As such, the role of language, and the theoretical considerations that are possible in this instance because of language, make the relationship between the technological and the political particularly affective and effective. The point of considering materiality is to account for the two-fold conceptualization of language as both a social action and a technological feature that is itself its own material act that intensifies the expansion of social relations and its role in capitalism. The technological form, however, is not simply a technological feature but subsumed within the content generated and featured within content. Further technological form masquerades how the values and beliefs are shared within the (inter)acting networks and thus require alterations to how user labor and language mesh towards, and on behalf of, a political project.

**Acts on Behalf of a Nation: Working for a National Imaginary**

The simultaneous moment in which a user likes or shares a meme of a Trump worldview is the second component of language because of the way it generates user labor in specific ways in order to perpetuate and (re)circulate the propaganda. More precisely, the contention here lies in taking the discursive aspects that (re)construct the national imaginary, the connection between language that connects discourse to the platform capabilities of dissemination, and the platform logics into one moment that coalesces through, and because of, user labor. Though it has been analytically advantageous to consider these discursive techniques and strategic language use as independent and as different components to the content, here, I aim to consider the convergence of all the independent aspects into a singular
moment that implicates an ideological worldview, a political project and user labor into an instant in which communication technology and communicative practices materialize with economic consequences.

These economic considerations are contingent on the practices of language and the engagement of user labor due to how social media platforms depend (inter)acting networks based on a community’s system of values, beliefs, and symbols. The notion of a political community engaging with the construction of meaning of values and beliefs on social media platforms is consequential to how they can experience, and even express, a form of self-value and self-actualization via the affective tendencies through media practices. In particular, the age of distributed media through digital things afford the use of strategic language in order to take advantage of the form of propaganda. The ability of social media platforms to personalize, collect, analyze, and store individual user data, and with data being created because of user labor, have a profound effect on how a rendition of Trump’s national imaginary circulates. Therefore, when strategic language connects values and beliefs of a political project to the structural components of social media platforms coalesces into user labor, the (re)circulation of a Trump national imaginary represents a moment in which technological structures and human relations are interlocked and mutually constitutive through the social activity of meaning construction and the expansion of capital into everyday life.

Jutel (2017) argues that social media’s reliance on its affective qualities via user to user can serve as a transformative form of politics akin to prefiguring of a new social that can bypass control mechanisms, mostly via the ways in can affectively and effectively produce content. However, in the convergence approach that I posit here, where values, beliefs, and
user labor coalesce into one moment, relies on recognizing how social media platforms encompass and exist because of the affective and effective ways the propaganda calls and insists upon user labor to further (re)produce content. As such, the memes that I focus on here are crucial because they rely upon the discursive construction of Trump and his corresponding national imaginary, use language to create a link between the imaginary and the circulation possibilities afforded via social media platform, and most importantly, center the user to labor in the name of the national imaginary via the platforms and their possibilities. Therefore, in order to properly analyze how these memes are respective of this coalescing analytical moment of convergence, I focus on memes that underscore and emphasize language that explicitly connects the Trump national imaginary and user labor.

Though in the last section I highlighted the way this strategic use of language interconnects the ideological value of a political worldview and the economic practices contingent within them, here I situate materials that put these moments into action. Through language that encourages the user to interact with the platform, the worldview and the ideological consequences thereof are not just instances of “liking” and “sharing” content but actualize as acts on behalf and because of the national imaginary. This moment, contingent on user labor, and the exacerbations wherein the user’s presence and action are capitalized on, are thus the labor in which the national imaginary is built.

Fuchs (2016) argues that the more time user spends on social media platforms, the more profile, browsing, communication, behavioral, content data is generated and is offered as a commodity. Further, Fuchs (2016) argues that productive labor on social media is work that produces use-values, labor that produces capital and surplus-value for the purposes of accumulation, and labor of the combined/collective worker that contributes to the production
of surplus-value and capital. As such, the creation of a symbolic ideology is a value-creating activity and interactions on social media are a commodity that creates value and ideology wherein the symbolic value establishes a link and mediates between use value and exchange-value.

In the rendition of a Trump national imaginary, the ideology associated with a national imaginary that promises specific life changes for the better is a commodity that attaches and conceals the commodity’s exchange-value behind the promises (Fuchs, 2016). Since social media platforms like Facebook creates the impression that users are free and not exploited, the platform is a supposed gift without commodity logic in order to maximize its uses and profits. For example, figure 19 exemplifies the moments in which these analytical instances converge in onto themselves. Taken from the account @stand_for_freedom, the meme centers Donald Trump standing in front of a screen that depicts the logo of the news organization CNBC. With Trump positioned at the center, he is shown holding a revolver, pointed towards the sky with text that reads, “Double tap to offend a liberal.” Not only is Trump positioned as the opposite of a “liberal,” but he is fundamentally positioned as the individual who inherently offends and opposes the liberal worldview. The gun, for instance, though not said outright, is representative of the overtly masculine imagination that accompanies the Trump imaginary while also subsequently used to serve as a counter point to the “liberal” position of being anti-gun. Nonetheless, however, the crucial part of this meme lies in the use of the phrase “double tap.”
On Instagram, when a user “double taps” an image, the user indicates that they “like” the content that has come across their screen. In double tapping the meme, the user has thus enacted on the structural capabilities that implicate the user labor and the ideological worldview as relevant. More so than that, however, the user who engages with this meme further creates the instances in which this piece of content can be further (re)circulated. In engaging by double tapping it, not only is the user potentially “offending” a liberal, as per the worldview’s morals and belief systems, but is using the double tapping as a structural possibility to represent the worldview that supposedly does the offending. Like in figure 18 that encourages the user to “LIKE FOR USA,” this meme encourages the user to double tap to constitute a communicative act for a political purpose. This communicative act, however, is not only the actualization of a political and ideological worldview but is inherently capitalizing on the notion of communicative capitalism and taking it literally.
In taking the notion of communicative capitalism literally, and within the context of a political national imaginary that is related to a figure that is discursively constructed, memes such as figure 20 are not using words such as “like” to achieve some form of political affirmation but are instead using words such as “like” to achieve potential circulation within a social context. In figure 20, taken from the profile @american.made, Trump is again positioned as both the reason to engage with a piece of content and at the center of the ideological worldview that represents a political project. Seated at a desk and sitting in front of a superimposed seal of the President of the United States, Trump is accompanied by text that reads “Hit ‘like’ if you know damn well that he is your PRESIDENT.” Further, the meme is accompanied by a comment that reads, “Hell yeah he is!!” with the tags “maga, conservative, constitution, like, follow, presidenttrump, stupidliberals, merica, trump2016.”
Taken as a whole, this meme not only implicates the national imaginary as (re)constructed but directly references how the political project relied upon the structural capacities. Moreover, however, this further implicates the social and the (inter)active networks that such networks necessarily capitalize on. By encouraging the user to “like” the meme as a verification or action upon which the social can be realized, the liking of the meme further intensifies the abilities through which this meme becomes a circulatory image that reifies social that exists in its mediated form. Liking the meme is not only the justification for a belief or an affirmation of the president, but it catapults the social through which it exists as the moment of capitalization and further integration with the exacerbation of how far the platform can reach into the spheres of the social that it constructs. This infiltration into the network of users that the media platforms construct is not just an indication into how users share worldviews with each other but instead is a focal point into how the platforms rely on the ability to capitalize on the communication necessary through which that meaning is constructed.

Further, figure 21 depicts an image of Barack Obama standing in front of The White House press symbol with text that reads, “Like if you’re glad this man is no longer president.” Crucially, this meme is from the same account @american.made and also shares similar practices in the tags that accompany it. Notably, however, the tags that accompany this image also touch on divisive issues that accompany Trump’s ability to touch on cultural issues. For example, this meme of Obama is complemented with tags like “USA, makeamericaagain, trumptrain, presidenttrump military, supportourtroops, thinblueline,
and backtheblue.” Not only is the meme used to juxtapose the discontent that surrounds Obama for people who support Trump, it directly subjects the social media platform as part of the mutually constitutive practice of language and labor. Moreover, the cultural issues that are implemented into the meme by the use of tags is not only strategic in the sense that it communicates how the meme is to be positioned relative to the issues surrounding Obama, but are further segmented into this realm of sociability that produces the information of one user through user engagement because of communication (Fisher, 2012).

![Meme Image](image.png)

Figure 21 taken from @American.made

Though a user liking a meme is illustrative of an instance in which the platforms capitalize on the social in which meaning and labor fuse together, the other form of user
labor is exemplified in language that directly encourages the user to share the worldview. Though, as argued above, a user liking a meme actualizes and materializes the moment in which the structure capitalizes on the social, a user sharing a piece of content also manifests itself as a further tool of socialization. In other words, not only does the sharing of a piece of content actualize the algorithmic properties of a social media platform or engulf a user into a particular type of sociality, the sharing of a piece of content directly serves the interests of socialization in its mediated form. This type of sharing is not just an instant of socialization but operationalizes the social in the social networks.

With an emphasis on the word share, *figure 22* is an indication of how strategic language can propel the national imaginary as it is (re)constructed. In this meme from the profile @stopallinvaders, a profile that concerns itself with commenting on immigration, Trump is centered, depicted as angrily pointing to the viewer, with text that reads, “Trump is considering an idea of 20% import tax on Mexico so they would pay for the wall after all! Like and share if you support this idea!” With the Mexican flag as the backdrop of the image, Trump’s political position, and his potential national imaginary, is emphasized as being the focal point of political argument. However, with an emphasis on the like and share at the bottom of the meme, the notion of liking and sharing in order to support the idea, whether factual or not, becomes intertwined with the capabilities of the platform. By putting the onus on the user to engage with a piece of content, and because the user is the primary form through which the national imaginary (re)circulates, the language that encourages the sharing of the potential national imaginary is not just the (re)circulation of an ideological worldview, but exemplifies how the platform enact the sociability of the imaginative powers provided by the platforms.
Similarly, the use of strategic language not only encourages the (re)circulation of a potential national imaginary, but also functions to situate the user to express immediacy and specific actions within a political context. In other words, the (re)circulation of a national imaginary surrounding Trump, and his political positions that engrave his national imaginary ties the engagement with immediacy and actions that represent political positions and that permits the user to partake in the immediate need to construct its corresponding imaginary powers. For example, figure 23 depicts Trump giving a thumbs up, foregrounded against a wall, with text that reads, “latest analysis says the wall would practically pay for itself. Like and share if you want it to be built as soon as possible!” Furthermore, figure 24 depicts individuals shown leaping over a wall like structure with a caption that reads, “Illegals cost
American 113$ [sic] billion per year. Like and share if you want them all deported!” Though these two images are both relevant to Trump’s political position on building a wall between the US/Mexico border, the use of strategic language to like and share, and the immediacy in which the user needs to act, emphasizes how language encourage the act and which serves as the primary vehicle of circulation. In the last section, I consider how these engagements on behalf of the user call for a reconsideration of how communicative capitalism can operate in a propaganda campaign.

Figure 23 taken from @stopallinvaders
Communicative Capitalistic Labor: Working for the Trump National Imaginary

Due to how the content drives user labor through strategic language, there are focal points of communication and capitalism that deserve to be reconsidered. First, within the context of a political project like a Trump national imaginary, communication and (digital) capitalism fundamentally shift how values and beliefs persist across user networks. As such, acts of (re)circulation on behalf of user labor generate revenue through the activities of users, where some scholars argue that a shift from distribution to circulation signals a public of not just consumers of preconstructed messages but as individuals who are shaping, sharing, reframing and remixing media content in new ways (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013).

Most importantly, because this circulation is not done as isolated individuals but within larger communities and networks, the spreading of content beyond an immediate geographic proximity drives how individuals interact with each other (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Here the focus is not to necessarily consider the types of spreadability in terms of technological possibilities. Instead, the interest lies more in the relationship between capitalism and strategic communicative practices which serves as the mediating aspects in which circulation and economic practices are the ultimate driving forces of the platform because of the way users interact.

Second, rather than seeing just circulation, and even virality, as the empty exchange of information stripped of context and meaning, I argue that these acts of political national imagination are the fundamental means of meaning creation and value. Specifically, I argue that in Dean’s (2008, 2010, 2016) conceptualization of communicative capitalism, there are fundamental contradictions in the way in which it operates in this context. By tying user
labor, a specific political project, and the structural capabilities that are engendered by user action, communication and capitalism are not the empty exchange of information, lost in the fetishization of the message. Like Dean, I agree that communicative capitalism conceptualizes the commonplace idea that the market is the site of democratic aspirations and “indeed, the mechanism by which the will of the demos manifests itself” (2008, p. 104).

However, the difference in this instance is that the fundamental way in which the demos of a Trump national imaginary manifests undermines political efficacy and opportunity is flipped and used to intensify the demos that it creates. In other words, the contradiction in communicative capitalism is that the fantasy of abundance indeed does cover the way “facts and opinions, images and reactions circulate in a massive stream of content” (p. 107). However, in the moment user labor interjects into the flow for a purpose, the fantasy of abundance becomes the moment of material economic practice through platform logic and the further creation of data.

The point of this consideration is to tease out how the use of social media platforms, and its reliance on (inter)acting networks of networks, is contingent on who sends the message, who receives the message, and, especially in this context, what message gets sent. The goal is not to measure effect, but instead to appropriately recognize the value of strategic language within a political project. As such, the language used in the propaganda not only mediates the social, political and the technological, but by embracing and counting on user labor, operates as a commodity that relies on the circulation of the message. Particularly relevant is the notion of user labor combined with the intensification of communication networks and the expansion and interconnection of global telecommunication networks. More specifically, however, the platform’s role in the intensification of capitalism in a
political project relays more than just the fetishization of messaging. Rather, because platforms are “built on an infrastructure…for processing data for customer service, advertising, and profit” they are “oriented toward eliciting more data, and more kinds of data, from users (Gillespie, 2018, p. 23).” Surplus value is generated in a connected space of infinite size and economic success requires platforms to achieve a sufficient scale of operation to realize surplus value effectively (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Consequently, social media platforms, in the context of a political project, are a principal form of organization through which digital capitalism capitalizes on the social and economic order as being realized. The point here is not to isolate user labor from language and from the generation of user data. Instead, the point here is to argue for how user labor, within a contextualized moment of which a political project is put in place, and the use of language to encourage user-based interaction expand upon and further intensify the structural capabilities of social media platforms and their capitalistic existentialism. The communicative capitalistic tendencies are not simply just the instance in which language encourages user-based interactions, but in the expansion of how data circulates and inscribes the kind of relationships between a community like a Trump national imaginary and the ability to further disseminate it. Data relations, and user-labor, therefore, are not two separate moments of user-based interactions. Indeed, the expansion of telecommunication technologies and how they are used in this effort of propaganda are mutually constitutive, where the human relations that data creates is a potential commodity enabled (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Traditionally, user labor has been conceived up in various ways. Huws (2003) notes that the exploitative aspect of unpaid labor in social media derives from the tendency of
capital to offload labor costs onto consumers which “burden the consumers of unpaid labor” (p. 69). Smythe’s (1981) political economic perspective of television media led to a perspective of drawing considerations to the role of communication into the broader system of the social reproduction of capital. In recontextualizing Smythe, Fuchs (2012) argues Facebook, and arguably social media platforms more broadly, represent a means of production, which converts audience labor of lending attention to actually providing information/content to media owners as commodities to be sold to the advertising industry. Since Smythe’s analysis concerned media such as TV and radio, the question to ponder is how the context of online social platforms, characterized by extraordinary levels of participation, through user-generated content, and the ability to create varied channels of communication, allows for the application of audience labor.

In the same vein, Scholz (2011) argues that Facebook yields value through the audience by providing instrumental material and information for advertisers. In a Trump national imaginary, and in the social construction of values, beliefs, and symbols, this material and information is of a particular kind. Hence, Fuchs (2012) argues that the principal source of Facebook’s value is communication and sociability, originating from their ability to have access to information, to hoard it, process it, analyze it, and finally, distribute it to its customers. Since the informational content consists of a variety of data: specific demographics, personal information regarding tastes, habits, status; information about the kind of communicative channels users utilize to socialize; performative information about the specific way users socialize (Briziarelli & Karikari, 2016), Facebook provides extraordinary detailed profiles of individuals, localized and networked communities, consequently offering important clues on consumers habits and consumer affective relations (Scholz, 2011).
Secondly, social media platforms valorize audience labor in having the audience provide unpaid services and volunteer work, and in this case, be a primary source of (re)circulation of Trump’s national imaginary. Scholz (2011) indicates that many Facebook users deliver, voluntarily, their time and energy for usage. Social media platforms at large, however, emphasize the role of the user’s digital labor with a focus on ideology. Language, and the affective use of the tools of language, are a central component to the reproduction of social relations that engendered and continuously support the functions of social media platforms and digital capitalism. For Fuchs (2010), the focus on labor and new media is on what media extract from audiences rather than what media put into messages. Observed from this viewpoint, value from the audience relates to the valorization of user engagement, including, but not limited to communication, in general, on platforms, the construction of community, the production of messages, and content production where “just as industrial capitalism relied on appropriating physical labor, digital communicative or surveillance capitalism thrives on appropriating users’ digital labor” (Charitsis, Yngfalk, & Skålén, p. 822).

Precisely, capital accumulation is created by users creating content, circulating content, establishing and maintaining relations with others, updating their profiles and all of the accumulated time spent on the platforms. Significantly, work time, i.e. actual time that users are on social media platforms, results in a prosumer commodity that is bought and sold to advertisers and is always based on demographic data and interests (Fuchs, 2012). In centering Bourdieu’s social, cultural, and symbolic capital, Fuchs argues that the economic value production is connected to digital media use where users employ social media to accumulate social relations (social capital), accumulation of qualification, education and
knowledge (cultural capital) and an accumulation of reputation (symbolic capital). This is the kind of informational economy based on affective relations (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012), also described by terms such as Thank You Economy, Social Economy, or the Gift economy (Vaynerchuck, 2011).

In the broad scope of things, social relationships made, kept, and described through social media platforms is inherently contingent on a general range of types of sociability. In this instance of a political project and propaganda campaign, a Trump national imaginary, and the type of relationships established between, outside, and beyond user networks, ultimately produce part of what Couldry and Mejias (2019) consider to be data relations. Couldry and Mejias argue that data relations, in time, “are likely to become as naturalized as labor relations” (2019, p. 27) and not only enable data extraction, but incentivize data as a resource that must be extracted by strategically encouraging user’s to act upon the structural possibilities. The point of considering data relations is to underscore how the merging of data, data extraction, user labor, and capitalism fundamentally operate in a simultaneous moment that are disguised, and in fact mediated, by a simple act of sharing and or liking a content that favors the Trump national imaginary. By positing that data relations are in fact an important part of this technological phenomena, user labor exists as a form of data relations wherein the conceptualization of data relations demystifies the invisible consequences of user labor.

Thus, the creation, storage, and utilization of user labor and data relations alludes to a conceptualization of how pernicious a political project via social media platforms can be for the expansion and intensification of user labor. Broadly, capitalism’s social order is based on labor relations where the transformation of what was once productive activity into labor
power occurs, and labor power has the abstract measurable dimension of a commodity that can be exchanged in a market for money. Under capitalism, workers stop being a part of the conditions of production (as in slavery or serfdom) and their labor power becomes something they can sell as a commodity (Marx, 1867). However, due to capitalism’s fundamental drive to capitalize life itself, new forms of capital and the drive for capital are not all routed through labor – “that is, what is understood in some sense as productive activity” (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, p. 30). Much in the vein of Dean’s argument where messages are contributions to circulating content that are not meant to illicit a response, the annexation to capital of life processes regardless if they are labor or not, shifts the way data is extracted for value, particularly when those involved are not seen as being part of the productive activity.

Consequently, what is significant to this era of capitalist social order is that ordinary social interaction today via social media platforms contributes to surplus value not as just labor, but also as a factor of production. That all of human life, especially its tools of communicative power and mechanisms, are being incorporated within a vastly expanded production process and faces increasing pressure to be commodified whether as data for which platforms get paid in some form or as a form of disguised labor power (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). As Marx argues, “capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is essentially the production of surplus value” (1979, p. 520). Therefore, circulation is the moment of realization of surplus value, not the moment of its creation and, as Jessop (2002) notes, the most important condition for the production of surplus value is the relationship between capital and labor, where the labor force itself becomes a commodity. From this point of view, I highlight how any change in the evolution of capitalism is first and foremost “a change in the form and method of the production of surplus value rather than the
form of its realization (circulation of commodities), no matter how important this is for commodity production” (Pleios, 2016, p. 109).

User activities, indeed, from the mere presence of a user to all activities therein, that go into (re)constructing a national imaginary is the fundamental transformation of labor via digital platforms. However, in a more systematic way, the shift is fundamentally about something deeper where the expansion of the whole process of capitalist production and the factors that contribute to it to encompass the flow of human life in all its open-endedness. Here, the interpretation of Marx, via both Pleios and Couldry and Mejias, is that the fundamental social form of capitalism is not just labor relations but rather, the commodification that underlies the transformation of everyday work into labor relations. In fact, Marx himself wrote of a broadening of commodification when he described that “as a capitalism production i.e. capital develops the general laws governing the commodity to evolve in proportion” (1867, p. 950). In fact, as Couldry and Mejias argue, it is the very possibility of abstracting value from life processes, even when they are not directly productive activities, that leaves open the prospect of new types of commodified social relations, and through them, a new social order for capitalism.

**The Value of Language and User Labor**

In this chapter of analysis, I argue for a focus on the strategic use of language in the propaganda content. More specifically, I noted that a focus on language brings about two specific consequences that are of particular importance. First, I argue for how the (re)circulation of Trump’s national imaginary, based on the use of symbols, expressions of values and beliefs, are tied to the structural possibilities of dissemination on social media
platforms that impact the way users labor to construct meaning. The tying of values and beliefs to the platform’s structural possibilities operates as the way in which user labor is encouraged thus furthering the types of user data needed in order to extrapolate capital. This user labor is the concurrent site of the social activity of meaning construction, meaning circulation, value creation, and within a political project like a propaganda campaign, the reproduction of ideological conditions at two distinct levels. Primarily, at the level of a political project wherein a worldview is constructed, shared, and circulated, and secondly, at the level of social relations wherein capital and capitalism continues its expansion into previously untapped areas of life. Since the use of the language that ties Trump’s national imaginary to the structural conditions of social media platforms is inherently contingent on the role of (inter)acting human networks and computer networks, communication and information technologies are thus the tools that shape both the political worldview and the social relations in unique ways.

Secondly, I situate the role of language in the propaganda content as a main factor of generating user labor that is also a material act of communication and information. This analytical lens underscores and highlights how the structural construction of platforms not only expands capitalism into everyday lives but has consequences for communicative capitalism. Here, instead of analyzing the language the conveys political values and beliefs, and or how language is tied to structural possibilities, I argue that the language in the propaganda prompts user labor that incites the economic engines of social media platforms and that purposefully serve the circulation of a political project. I argue that data as raw material, generated via user labor, is itself a form of language which serve capitalistic endeavors. However, in a political project, the use of strategic language that encourages
specific user behaviors to generate data thus relinquishes and abandons social media platform’s neutrality in order to entertain circulation on the values and beliefs encoded within. Through the intertwining of language as part of a national imaginary and language as a strategic arm of disseminating propaganda via user labor, the capitalistic endeavors of data collection and storage not only mediate community, cognition and communication but also depends on the very belief systems of the national imaginary to serve the expansion of capitalism.

More broadly, I contend that a political project like propaganda carried out via social media platforms fundamentally changes the way in which communicative capitalism can be conceptualized. By tying user labor, a specific political project, and the structural capabilities that are engendered by user action, communication and capitalism are not the empty exchange of information, lost in the fetishization of the message. Though I agree with Dean that communicative capitalism conceptualizes the commonplace idea that the market is the site of democratic aspirations and “indeed, the mechanism by which the will of the demos manifests itself” (2008, p. 104), the moment user labor interjects into the flow, the fantasy of abundance becomes the moment of material economic practice through platform logic and the further creation of data on behalf of something specific. As such, the language used in the propaganda not only mediates the social, political and the technological, but by embracing and counting on user labor, user labor operates as a commodity that relies on the circulation of the message.

Lastly, the (re)production of Trump’s national imaginary via social media platforms on behalf of user labor is contingent on social relationships made, kept, and described through social media platforms and is inherently contingent on a general range of types of
sociability. Due to the dependence of the social relationships maintained on social media platforms, a Trump national imaginary, and the type of relationships established between, outside, and beyond user networks, ultimately produce data relations which function to (re)produce the meaning of a Trump national imaginary and the types of capitalism that very much presents the opportunity for expansion. Data relations underscore how the merging of data, data extraction, user labor, and capitalism fundamentally operate in a simultaneous moment that are disguised, and in fact mediated, by a simple act of sharing and or liking a content that favors a Trump national imaginary.
Chapter 6 The Memes to the End: Affective Labor and (Fetishistic) Political Participation

Throughout the first two chapters of analysis, I argue that memes (re)circulated on social media platforms on behalf of a Trump national imaginary are a small part of a propaganda campaign that incited meaning and labor in specific ways. In the first chapter, I analyze the discursive construction of the memes, how Trump was framed to perpetuate certain values and beliefs, and how social media platforms mediate the meaning of an imaginary. In the second chapter, I center the role of language as a social activity dependent on social relationships and the user labor that is encouraged in order to (re)circulate the political project. Additionally, I argue that a political project can capitalize on the affective tendencies of the media environment by facilitating user engagement, user labor, and linguistic techniques that amplify the (re)circulation of meaning. The interconnection, and the (inter)action, between the technological networks of human networks are not just the structural aspects of social media propaganda but is a primary way in which media practices and political practices fuse and thrive.

In analyzing the construction of meaning separate from the technological apparatus that (re)circulates a political project through user practices, I argue that the platforms mediate the social as an imaginative possibility with certain meanings and values while subsuming the political economic practices of platforms in the (re)construction of it. Any action on behalf of the user to (re)circulate content on behalf of a Trump national imaginary is indebted to how platforms existentially require community, cognition, and communication in order to expand as capitalist projects. Therefore, in mediating the (re)construction of meanings and values, and in mediating the elements of the productive force and the social relations of
production (McGuigan, 2014), communicative practices that intertwine the political with the technological underscore how this media environment alters the intensity and rate of information circulation.

In the previous two chapters of analysis, I use memes to emphasize and stress the meaning making possibilities and the economic practices that occur in the moments of (re)circulation. However, in this chapter, I analyze the specific qualities of memes and why they are a matter of concern in this media environment wherein I contemplate the role of an affective media structure combined with affective Internet content. I argue that memes used to outline a type of national imaginary and that generate user labor are instances in which the media environment carry unique mediating possibilities. However, in order to give a complete analytical perspective, I address and examine how memes are pieces of Internet content that exemplify and exaggerate these unique qualities of social media platforms. I situate the relevance of the memes as unique pieces of Internet content, argue for their role as affective and effective pieces of propaganda, and makes a case for its function in the larger debate of communicative capitalism. In the broader spectrum of Internet content, and in its use for political purposes, memes have not only generated considerable amounts of research attention but have been relevant in studies on propaganda (DeCook, 2018; Rodley, 2014; Smith, 2019).

With the rise of populist political movements, and particularly, right-winged populist groups in the United States, the United Kingdom and Brazil, media and collaborative Web 2.0 technologies have been at the center of the crisis and the apparent solution of democracy (Jutel, 2018; Golumbia, 2013). The potential for expansive communication, connectivity, and creativity provides opportunity for new and previously inconceivable emancipatory potential,
yet, the same features appear to be more detrimental when it comes to right-wing mobilization (Caiani & Kröll, 2015; Caiani & Parenti, 2013; Froio & Gattinara, 2015).

Generally speaking, affective media practices are held as a potentially transformative form of politics that play a large role in prefiguring political social systems. According to Coleman (2014), the Internet enables an affective humanity and “new social practices” which “upend the ideological divide between individualism and collectivism” (p. 49-50). Hence, a focus in the political potential of affective media, and more specifically in the form of memes, provides an opportunity for a concrete intervention of affective media in the political processes.

**The Memes to the End: Affective Labor and Political Participation**

As touched upon in chapter two, theories of affective labor have been crucial to conceptualizing the relationship between labor, technological production, and political potential. Hardt and Negri (2004) describe contemporary capitalism as driven by “networks based on communication, collaboration, and affective relationships” (p. 66). To be affected is simultaneous with the ability to affect, where affect is connective and social, passing between subjects and shaping the “surfaces of bodies and worlds” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 121). On social media platforms and in a political context, the alienated labor is contingent on the sense of “participat[ing] in something that is bigger than one’s self (Cote & Pybus, 2007, p. 96). For Hardt and Negri (2004), the subjectivity of the multitude understands the concurrent developments and contradictions of the social, productive and technological relations.

Delueze and Guattari (1987) offer the “rhizome” as a way to describe a combination of affect theory and cyber-utopian discourses that share a teleology of networked humanity.
For them, the rhizome “ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 7). In this model, all things in the world are rhizomes, or rhizomatically interconnected, and although such connections are not always visible, culture spreads towards available spaces or trickles downwards through fissures and gaps. Given that for some scholars’ politics is seen as a series of micro-struggles dispersed through various sites of the social, the flows of intense and contagious affects can be what brings political subjects into being (Jutel, 2017). For Papacharissi (2015), social media’s circulation of affects activates latent ties “that may be crucial to the mobilization of networked publics” (p. 20). Brown (2014) notes that during the Occupy movement, affective energies coalesced into “interconnect, collaborative and cooperative…[are] heterarchical, fluid and dynamic” (p. 969).

The point here is to highlight the concurrent visions of social transformations as a depoliticization of the Internet and associated technologies where the optimism of politics and new media is contingent upon the principle of vast human communicative possibilities accelerated through online connectivity. In the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump’s use of social media was a noted political strategy that allowed him to speak directly to his supporters while also creating a media ecosystem that was dominated by his presence. With the memes that (re)circulated a rendition of a national imaginary surrounding Trump, affect and connectivity are the space in which production and the Internet are enacted upon as the social space. Culp (2016) writes that in the convergence of Deleuze and cyber utopianism, there is a conflation of connection and production that obscures the “techno-affirmationist desire to annex everything” (p. 64). In this celebratory sense of affect and connectivity, one
major contradiction that arises is the political and contingent nature of affective media technologies and the role of antagonism in political identity. Indeed, as Jutel (2017) rightfully argues, there is an important distinction in the phenomenological understanding of affective connectivity, which is seen as a politically productive, and the role of antagonism, which can be viewed as an ontological necessity for political identity.

As such, the notion of political transformation, in this case specifically in the election of Donald Trump, remains a crucially central theme in the propaganda content. As with the analysis of earlier chapters, the content that favored Trump here simultaneously call for actions that encourages users to engage with, share, and even follow certain accounts strictly based on the values and political imaginaries that are encoded into the profiles. Cyber-utopianism, in any kind of political change, and the techno-affirmationist narratives that are ascribed to them, are not just the how information is disseminated or accessed. More precisely, the cyber-utopic and techno-affirmationist perspectives are entirely contingent on communicative acts that encourage engagement in different types of way that reaffirm or solidify engagement with a type of politics. Though in chapter two I discuss the advantageous and strategic use of language to encourage user labor to (re)circulate content, this call to follow or engage in a specific types of accounts is indicative of how utopic takes of social media feed into a narrative of changing social and political changes through technological capabilities.

Even though user labor is a vital part of the techno-utopic narrative that circulates, the techno-affirmationist narrative presumably provides new users with new ways to access and take part in the political process. As such, a part of this way of providing users with ways to access and take part in the political process lies in not just creating an imaginary of meaning
but in providing them with accounts that subscribe to the meanings of an imaginary in question. Much in the way Jutel (2017) notes that the flows of contagious affect can bring political subjects into being, and how affective energies can interconnect into collaborative and cooperative spaces (Brown, 2014), spaces and collections of these affective content serve as affective resources of information and meanings on behalf of a political project. One such tonality of affective content is heavily doused in the Republican/Democrat dichotomy that reinforces a Trump imaginary of in group/out group dynamics.

For example, figure 25, from the account @_americanmade, shows an image-micro meme that features celebrities who portray staunch, anti-Trump sentiments. The specific meme in question however features Kathy Griffin, who, after the election, created a short video of her holding a decapitated head of Trump covered in blood. Notably, however, this meme shows Kathy Griffin’s Trump head pixeled out. Additionally, this meme features Rosie O’Donnell, an avid anti-Trump voice in the 2016 election. Lastly, this meme features protestors, holding a banner that reads “Become Ungovernable” with no description to show who the protestors are or what is being protested.

With text that reads, “If you think Liberals have gone too far, follow @DC_Draino.” This practice of interconnecting meaning with other profiles with the same ideal makes two things possible. First, the meme relies on and necessarily emphasizes a worldview that is obviously pro-Trump but also anti-Liberal. In juxtaposing a Trump worldview against a violent, disruptive worldview of Liberalism, this meme simultaneously engenders and highlights the ability to house, connect, direct, and circulate collections of pro-Trump affective content on and across the platforms. Content like this, in which there is a certain ideological perspective and that which encourages worldviews favorable to the positions it
publishes, alludes to the techno affirmationist and cyber utopic discourse that the memes engender. On the one hand, the access to and the knowledge of this account that houses this material provides a digital space in which homogenous views can be stored. On the other hand, access to and knowledge of this account and accounts like it, house the hopes visions of social transformations that capitalize on the human communicative possibilities brought about by social media platforms.

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 25 taken from @_American.made

To be clear, the mere existence of these digital hubs does not imply circulation. However, the existence of these hubs further embeds user activities, particularly user labor, and the economic practices of platforms into these hubs of affective content. In literally capitalizing on the hubs of content, memes that are ready-made and ready to distribute have the potential to generate large amounts of user interaction via the technological structure contingent on the affect of the content and the technological structure. Further, the value, and the potential value, that is possible form these hubs implicates the collection of data and the
data relations that arise from the sentiments. In linking the profile @DC_Draino, the meme effectively, and affectively, link meaning and political projects through a technological structure on behalf of the political project. The data relations, social relationships, and social relations from hub to hub is thus emphasized across the (inter)acting networks of networks and provide ample possibilities for discursive influence in how potential worldviews are framed.

As part of the two previous analysis chapters which focus on a discursive construction of Trump’s national imaginary, antagonism, such as the Democrat/Republican dichotomy and the in group/out group tendencies throughout, emphasizes a role of affective possibilities afforded by social media platforms. Laclau’s (2005) theory of discourse positions antagonism as the ontological precondition for rupture and social transformation. For Laclau, antagonism and affect are coupled in the process of political articulation and any proper political movement must divide the social space between the political community and an enemy. In his theory of populism, Laclau states that this community comes into being through an “affective investment in a partial object” (2005, p. 116) and where a signifier/name becomes overdetermined, eliciting and unifying the emotional energies of followers. Thus, in this instance, signifiers such as “Make America Great Again” or even in the discursive presence of Trump in the content, there is affective political power which imagines a community and its potential enemy. Ultimately, affective media should not be thought of as political in and of itself. Rather, affective media should be seen as simultaneously displacing and accelerating the logics of enjoyment and antagonism, which are the precondition for political identity (Laclau, 2005; Jutel 2017).
In the next section, I take up the meme as a specific artifact of the Internet. Though the meme is a highly researched product of Internet culture, I situate them as pieces of propaganda caught within a political project and that carry their own consequences within identity construction and performances of in group/out group knowledge. As Philips (2017) and Philips and Milner (2017) argue, engagement with memes can be associated with the need to create and perform a political identity with already existing worldviews. Therefore, memes that call upon certain identity markers, specifically, are relevant in the grand scheme of a propaganda campaign by reinforcing “us vs them” but also in generating interaction. Further, I situate them as affective pieces of content within an affective media structure. Again, with a focus on how user engagement is recruited, I note that the form propaganda via memes is particularly crucial in the (re)circulation of a Trump national imaginary. Moreover, I contend that they represent a fundamental tension of utopia/dystopia of political and social change brought about by media technologies.

Memes: The Propagators of the Political, Social and Technological

As a concept, the Internet meme derives its name and its comparative definition from the biological meme first coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976. For Dawkins, a meme is a gene-like infectious unit of cultural transmission or imitation that easily, and quickly, spreads from person to person (Dawkins, 1976). Dawkins attributes three key features to a successful meme: copy-fidelity, fecundity, and longevity. Copy-fidelity is identified by a strong core idea remaining intact notwithstanding copious variations. Fecundity is characterized by hurried duplication and replication. Longevity is characterized by a meme’s capability to uphold a sustainable replication pattern on a long-term basis. Although the term meme is
itself much debated when it comes to Internet content, Dawkins’s original conception has influenced how scholars define Internet memes (Aitwani, 2017). However, as Shifman (2013) notes, a fundamental part of the debate regarding the meme is a sense of ambiguity on the issue of human agency and virality in the process of meme diffusion.

As Aitwani (2017) argues, there is an issue of human agency that goes into the circulation of Internet memes. Some scholars argue that human agency, in this instance the creation and sharing of memes across individual user networks, is not intrinsic to the meme itself but instead only to one kind of interpretation. Drawing from Conte (2000), Aitwani suggests that individual users are not simply vectors of cultural transmission but are actors behind the process where the distribution and dissemination of memes is based on deliberate agents with decision-making powers. For Conte, social norms, perceptions and preferences are crucial in the memetic selection processes and the distribution of the cultural transmission of the content. In this way, Shifman (2013) argues that the perception of people as active agents is vital in understanding how memes travel on the Internet. Consequently, Shifman (2013) formulates the definition of the Internet meme that is one of the most prominent across research of them: “Internet memes are defined here as units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process” (p. 367).

Shifman’s (2014) definition of memes contends that memes are a “group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which [are] created with awareness of each other, and [are] circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (Shifman, 2014, p. 41). This version of Shifman’s definition is instructive because he defines a piece of content through mapping out the structural
components as well as attempting to account for user-based circulation. However, there are other definitions of Internet memes that attempt to account for multiple other factors that go into how memes are constructed and, crucially, distributed. For example, Dynel (2016) defines memes as “any artifact that appears on the Internet and produces countless derivatives by being imitated, remixed, and rapidly diffused by countless participants in technologically mediated communication” (p.662). Laineste and Voolaid (2016) define memes as a “relatively complex, multi-layered, and intertextual combination of (moving) picture and text that is disseminated by the active agency of internet users, becoming popular among them” (p. 270). A communicative-oriented typology of three memetic dimensions: content, form and stance.

Since Shifman’s (2014) definition of memes contends that memes share the common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, Shifman effectively divides memes into three dimensions. Effectively, Shifman creates a typology that can be hypothetically imitated by individual users. Through content, Shifman refers to a specific text, referring to both the ideas and ideologies expressed by it. In form, Shifman refers to the physical incarnation of the message that is perceived through our senses and can include the visual and audible dimensions necessary to transmit the content. By stance, Shifman argues for the ways in which addressers position themselves in relation to the text, its linguistic codes, the addressees and other potential speakers (Aitwani, 2017). By in large, Shifman’s definition also emphasizes human agency in the circulation and transformation of internet memes and is later reflected in the research later conducted in political movements like Occupy Wall Street that emphasized polyvocality (Milner, 2013; Aitwani, 2017).
Knobel and Lankshear (2005) argue that “successful memes” are constituted through elements of humor, rich intertextuality and anomalous juxtaposition. Moreover, successful memes can be strong enough to capture online and offline broadcast media attention. Knobel and Lankshear argue for a dual typology that categorizes memes into static memes, where the content is replicated with little variations, and remixed memes, where the content is replicated via evolution, adaptation and/or transformation of the original meme vehicle. Further, there have been attempts to theorize memes using semiotics and epidemiology (Cannizzaro, 2016; Castaño Diaz, 2013). They further define memes as systems (similar to Shifman) that cannot be understood in isolation but only in context with each other where they are deemed units of information, ideas, and/or mental representations, cultural instructions that are self-replicating and contagious (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2014, p. 152).

In the memes that (re)construct a Trump national imaginary, there is heavy reliance on the structural composition of the memes in that their familiarity goes hand in hand with their readability. Spitzberg (2014) argues that successful dissemination of memes is reliant on how a particular piece of content relies on fitting within mindsets of frames of social networks. Taking this further, Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017) argue that memes function as part of a culture, contributing to a set of ideas which communities gather and act. In this way, the memes rely on familiar meme formats that continue to outline how a Trump national imaginary inflect positionalities of a political ideology. More distinctively, however, the memes in this propaganda campaign rely on frames of values and beliefs in order to encourage circulation across user networks that also contribute to the exacerbation of already
held beliefs. As such, the memes attempt to capitalize on these already held notions by contributing to and capitalizing on these politicized beliefs.

Consequently, memes have a valid, and vital role, in political communication, not only due to their overall frequency, but because of how their satirical and even humorous construction can shape political topics and how they are talked about (Williams, 2016). Moreover, memes are a viable communicative option because they can carry high levels of relatability, inspire research on political issues, inspire actors to participate, and provide a positive approach to something that can otherwise be depressing or unappealing. As Williams argues, in the world of political posts, memes have stolen the show and their popularity and spreadability via social media platforms make them on of the most popular content formats that can generate, and ultimately reach, large audiences. Though the analysis has been focused on memes of all kinds, I use the next examples to extrapolate the shaping of political topics of issues pertinent to the overall worldview. Specifically, these memes present worldviews that are shareable and ideologically complex but that necessitate affective, and agentic, media practices as a potentially transformative.

For example, figure 26 features a political button from the 1992 presidential campaign of then candidate Bill Clinton and his vice-presidential candidate Al Gore. The button shows the names “Clinton-Gore” superimposed on top of the Confederate Flag. The meme’s text features the phrase “It’s only ‘racist’ when Republicans do it.” This meme, taken from the profile @_AmericanFirst_, argues two distinct, yet crucial points on behalf of the Trump national imaginary. This meme not only assumes a familiar form that condenses ideological value into a small piece of Internet content, it also engenders the human agency and the political ideological perspectives as instances wrapped in intimate form with
complex, and even contradictory, viewpoints. As a small example of this agentic and ideological worldview, the meme is not simply a piece of Internet content that represents, communicates, or solidifies worldviews. It is part of a digital culture that resembles social and political ideological contentions engrained in the piece of information.

Similarly, figure 27 relies on and is contingent upon the notion of human agency while attempting to communicate that the Republican party is not the (only) racist party in U.S. American politics. By showing a man dressed in a suit surrounded by individuals
dressed in outfits of the Ku Klux Klan, and with text that reads “It is voting day and you’re the only Republican there,” the meme drives the question as to which U.S. American political party is historically racist. In creating an association between the Democratic Party and the Ku Klux Klan, the meme condenses complex, historically latent ties to racism and presents them as factual and as easily understandable. This understanding, and even the facilitation of identity markers, creates the kind of affective and generative relatability that presents the opportunity for circulation. I use these two examples to set up a larger argument that contends for conceptualizing successful transmission through affective media structures as well as the dynamism between fetish and effective political communication and political change.
Notably, these two examples do not directly encourage user engagement. Arguably, these two memes rely more on user identification than with encouraging overt engagement. Though, again, the aim is not to measure user effects. Instead, the point of contention lies in the affective qualities that hinge on the ability to perform the identity of Republicanism and as being anti-racist. *Figure 28* renders itself useful to the political contentious time while also tying the values of a Trump national imaginary into the affective ecosystem. During the rise of Trump’s candidacy, political protests against police brutality held by Colin Kaepernick garnered and sustained national and international media attention for his kneeling during the playing of the national anthem before professional football games.
As his own way of protesting police brutality and the historically maltreatment of communities of color by police, and in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement, Kaepernick’s kneeling revealed in considerable attention and was seen as either the epitome of patriotic protest or the epitome of patriotic disrespect. As such, the conversation surrounding the protest circled around whether Kaepernick’s kneeling was the idealization of U.S. Americanness or the epitome of unforgivable behavior. The meme contrasts former National Football League stars Tim Tebow in the top half and, on the bottom, Colin Kaepernick. Crucially, both men are shown kneeling, with text that reads, “why do liberals hate this” superimposed across Tebow’s top half, and “but praise this?!” on the bottom half near Colin Kaepernick.

The point here is not to simply consider the easily encoded Democrat/Republican binary, but more importantly, detail how this particular issue is bound up within a larger societal discourse of supposed engrained U.S. American values that were part of the Donald Trump campaign. Famously, Donald Trump was quoted at one his political rallies as saying, “Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners -- when somebody disrespects our flag -- to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he's fired!' (Graham, 2017). Though at his rally Trump did not mention Kaepernick by name, Trump’s larger allusion positions this meme as to what is acceptable or unacceptable behavior, acceptable or unacceptable protest, feeds into the Republican/Democrat binary and the idealism of what values U.S. Americans are supposed to have.

Therefore, not only is solidarity with the meme’s message a proclamation of identity and/or political beliefs, it is also simultaneously an example of how this simplified and condensed piece of information misconstrues complex political conversation. Without
referencing Tebow’s public proclamation and performance of Christianity as the reason for
his kneeling, the juxtaposition and comparison of acts is inundated with supposed U.S.
American values. More than that, however, this image represents the kind of harsh
dichotomies in which Trump’s national imaginary generates the circulation that is apparent in
the content. The dichotomies that create and reinforce the identity assumes the role of
othering in that Trump’s national imaginary is (re)created in concert with Trump’s own
public commentary. This reiteration of othering, and the simultaneous political identification
and user-generated circulation, positions memes such as this as potent, yet clearly visible,
pieces of political commentary.

Bernardino and Sollano (2017) explain that the prevalence of Internet memes has
contributed to the worldwide prevalence of statements and discussion of issues about politics.
The authors conclude that memes create an online culture of emancipation and debate by
promoting an innovation of awareness and freedom of expression. This innovation of
awareness and freedom of expression allows individuals to engage in conversations via the
use of memes. Further, they mention that the meme-making process is always a meaning that
can provide genuine interventions into mainstream political discourse because memes may
become entangled in the achievements of new political arrangements and the production of
new political subjects. As such, memes used to (re)circulate and/or bring attention to a
Trump national imaginary are viable forms of political participation whether the goal of the
interaction is to inspire humor or to perform a political identity wherein the construction of
conflict and the construction of others takes place. The roles of memes are both a
fundamental part of contemporary political communication and a way to examine political
division and its discursive process.

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Affective Media and the Political Possibilities of Memes

Generally, the relevance of propagandistic memes and their advantageous reliance on the technological structure of social media is crucial for two reasons. On the one hand, the use of memes in a political project is part of the self-replicating techno-fetishism that can actively relieve users of the “guilt that we might not be doing our part” (Dean, 2009, p. 37-38). The ideas of access, inclusion, discussion and participation are realized through expansions, intensifications, and interconnection of global communication technologies and, in a political project, can manifest through the (re)circulation of memes. Further, these techno-fetishistic ideals if access and inclusion can manifest in hubs of content that store, and potentially encourage, (re)circulation. Crucially, Dean (2008) argues that the political efficacy of networked media depends on its context. In these hubs of information that store memes of a Trump national imaginary, these ideals of access and inclusion fortify and underscore why the act of engaging with a meme can relieve potential users of their guilt through the sharing, identifying with, and political performance of adhering to and propagating a political imagination based on certain values.

In chapter two of the analysis, I argue that Dean’s (2009) communicative capitalism is an effective way of conceptualizing the relationship between a political message and the economic consequences of social media platforms. I contend that in a propagandistic context, communicative capitalism very much depends on the types of messages sent, who is sending them, and what is being said. In order to encourage a type of user labor that proffers the dissemination of propaganda, a propaganda campaign via social media implicates the role of capitalism in an advantageous way. However, in conjunction with the affective possibilities
of media, communicative capitalism can be a way of drawing on the apprehensions and gratifications of communication practices via the networked constructions of meaning while also feeding into the continuous loops of surveillance (Dean, 2009, 2014; Zuboff, 2014; Jutel, 2017). Indeed, for Dean, the affective investment in a virtual democracy creates and (re)produces a type of hyper-activity in pursuit of pure communication that search for consensus and a categorization of all things.

Always combined with the user labor required to (re)circulate a Trump national imaginary, a user-based dissemination manifests itself as faith in the Internet as an ideological and organizational principle of politics and societal components (Jutel, 2017). Citing Lacan’s “jouissance,” Jutel argues that affective media and its use in political communication is caught between a constant self-replicating techno-fetishistic exercise and a politics of transgressive enjoyment. One the hand, the self-replicating techno-fetish falls back on a communicative capitalism argument where, in the act of sharing and engaging, users feel as though they are part of the political process and part of the political transformation. On the other, the transgressive enjoyment occurs “when the enjoyment of a subject is supported by the thought that he or she is transgressing the Other’s laws and ideals” (Glynos, 2008, p. 682). Jouissance and transgressive enjoyment occurs when a subject is able to steal the enjoyment that the Other has supposedly stolen from the subject and the subject’s enjoyment is constitutively stolen, always already taken by the Other (Fink, 1995; Glynos, 2008).

Though I do not aim to consider any perceived real emancipatory possibilities of affective media structures, nor do I contend that the Trump presidency was/is a direct result of political memes, I maintain that at the intersection of the content and discourse of an
imagination and the teleologies of affective connectivity lies a tension of affective qualities and a reliance on the teleology of individual participation. The user engagement that is encouraged is thus not only a sharing of information which acts as the (re)circulation of imagination but also the affective, necessary, identity producing qualities that (re)circulate on the platforms. The teleology of individual participation, whether by identifying with content or in the strategic use of language that encourages participation, is what creates the merging of the demos and of the economy, but also, what creates the affective tension in memes, specifically. Though Dean argues that the technological fetish is political for users in relieving the guilt of inactivity in the political process, the transgressive enjoyment that manifests in doing it for the lulz (Coleman, 2012; Milner, 2013) and trolling (Phillips, 2012) are particularly affective.

Affective media are not simply those that circulate the affects of online culture and the intimate details of users, they are also always a space of production, performance and the quantification of affect (Jutel, 2017; Fuchs, 2012). In this instance, there is a convergence of political economies as the “pleasures of communication” that further embroil the lives of users and emphasize ceaseless circuits of capital (Terranova, 2004, p. 91). The potential and promise of user empowerments and of new social worlds is what drives the affective labor of posting, sharing, and consumes the lives of users where the discourse of affective media has become a hegemonic ideal of capitalism, labor, play, and political possibilities (Dean, 2009, 2014; Jutel, 2017; Fuchs, 2018). There are two main theoretical perspectives in which affective media theory arises from. First, there is the theoretical perspective that rests upon Lacanian Marxism arising from Žižek (1997, 2006, 2008) and Dean (2009, 2010, 2016).
Second, there is a Deleuzian formulation of affect theory, which predominates scholarly accounts of new media and enjoys saliency in a kind of cyber-utopian discourse (Jutel, 2017).

While both the Lacanian Marxist perspective and the Deleuzian perspective attribute “affect [as] inherently political” (Papacharissi, 2015), the perspectives differ on the question of a political ontology. For the Lacanian Marxist perspective, the political subject is marked by trauma, antagonism and drive for enjoyment as opposed to the Deleuzian perspective which is marked by a teleology that sees affect as a prelude to a radical democratic becoming. For Brown, the two differences in affect materialized in movements such as Occupy and the Arab Spring where “without the biopolitical influence of the subjective orientation of unwaged digital labourers, social movements such as Occupy Wall Street…would never have come to pass” (2014, p. 696).

However, with the rise of Donald Trump and the alt-right, more broadly, in the United States, and their claim to the affective subcultures of the Internet, the dynamics of enjoyment are crucial in theorizing the political is constituted. For example, doing it for the lulz (Coleman, 2012; Milner, 2013) and trolling (Phillips, 2012) are practices that legitimize and uses nearly any means to anger or fool others for the entertainment of the troll and the crowd. The apparent reason of “doing it for the lulz” is related to an approach of strict non-seriousness since sentimentality or idealism makes one easily offended and creates a target easy for trolling (Phillips, 2012). Further, in their examination of 4chan’s /b/board, Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017) argue that memes in contemporary digital culture are crucial in forming and signifying communal belonging, including using doing it for the lulz and trolling as effective ways to designate in and out groups. Trolling, as practiced within a
specific site, can also be used to gauge a user’s degree of familiarity with what is known and unknown within a digital area and is thus tested time and again through interaction.

For donah boyd (2018), Internet content like memes can be part of a process that benefits from hacking the attention economy. Here, content can be used to manipulate media for profit, can use ideology and lulz that have been effective in the past and that have evolved over a considerable amount of time. In an information ecosystem that is contingent on decentralized networks of people that leverage networked tools to affectively and effectively play into the attention economy, information manipulation in this way is unfolding in a political, global, and populist nature (boyd, 2017). In part, the aim to share and engage with and share memetic content can be associated with the need to both create and perform a political identity (Phillips, 2017) where people are more often memetically, and not empirically, situated due to a tendency to believe things that align with existing worldviews (Philips & Milner, 2017). Since the engagement and sharing of memes often occurs in situations in which thoughts and ideas are told to us by individuals that are trusted, there is a compulsion to believe things that may or may not have been independently verified (Phillips & Milner, 2017).

Contained within the notion of hacking the attention economy and doing it for the lulz, some of the memes that amplified a Trump national imaginary attempted to capitalize on this kind of discursive approach to humor. In this way, the memes articulate and rely on popular culture references and popular culture icons that are already famous renditions of memes. In figure 29, the meme features the actor Nicholas Cage. Cage’s appearance is not random or without reason. In fact, Cage has famously been part of digital Internet culture for a while (Know Your Meme, 2020). Dating back to 2011, Nicholas Cage memes have been
featured across all types of social media platforms and have been remixed and remedied in all kinds of ways.

According to Know Your Meme, Cage’s use in memes has been associated with humor and sarcasm. Figure 29 features one of Cage’s most famous memes entitled “Nick Cage has great hair.” With Cage’s face pointed towards the sun, long hair down, and smiling, the meme is used to articulate satisfaction and even delight. With image-macro lettering, the meme says, “when you haven’t heard Obama’s or Hilary’s voice in over a month.” The comments and tags of this meme indicates that the point is to communicate gratitude towards, or “a peace of mind” as per one comment, that comes with a Donald Trump victory. The historical trend of using Cage as a humorous figure is of crucial importance because, as noted above, the “doing it for the lulz” “hacking the attention economy” is part of the populist right’s communicative practices (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017).
Consequently, this example represents not just a larger tactic used by the memes that are supportive of a Trump national imaginary but reinforces the importance of affective qualities that can be embedded into content to presuppose and buttress user engagement. Cage’s appearance in a meme that is supposed to express joy and gratitude is both an aspect of digital culture and the expansion of political communicative tactics. The tactic here, via the attempt to create humor, and its reliance on already established political sentiments within a larger discourse that relies on detesting Democrats and Democratic personalities, is
not an independent source of political activity. The lulz becomes a space and act of political identity with specific purposes in the propaganda.

**Techno-Democratic Fetish: The Value of Memes**

Indeed, the notion of virtual democracy is indeed a type of depoliticization because it extends affective networks without encouraging consolidation into organized political networks (Dean, 2010). However, the communicative practices that take place over these technological structures encourage, and indeed attempt to extend, a technology in order to reconcile a more democratic social order according a Trump national imaginary. Though Dean’s argument of interpassivity reinforces the notion of technological fetishism, hacking the attention economy, doing it for the lulz and exaggerating already culturally relevant practices of a general Internet community and imagination provides the space of affective practices.

In a media environment that attempts to comprehend the Trump made media ecology that consists of the use of social media and traditional media outlets, the memes that encourage the sharing of political propaganda highlights the underlying questions of techno-solutions to the difficulties of democracy. Here, there use of social media sites like Twitter and Facebook are not singular instances in which Trump carries out attacks on the fake news media, but are fundamental moments in which the circulation of Trump material fits in, capitalizes on, and fetishizes the sharing economy with the intentions of creating political and social affect. For example, though social media’s impact in the 2016 United States presidential election may seem novel, it is a descendant of previous tactics used by politicians to skirt legacy and traditional media in arguably affective ways. Beginning in the
1980s, the rise of entertainment platforms like talk radio and television talk shows was coupled with more prominent political roles, eventually giving rise to the infotainment genre (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2009; Owen, 2018). Politicians turned to these avenues of new media to circumvent mainstream, legacy media in order to insert more voice over the news agenda.

Moy et. al. (2009) argue that the infotainment emphasis of new media at this early stage offered political leaders and candidates a friendlier venue for presenting themselves to the public. The fusion of politics and entertainment attracted audiences that typically had been disinterested in public affairs (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). Of course, the affordances of these new media channels, coupled with the rise of celebrity politicians and social media platforms, created space for spectacle of excess and reality TV presidents, where the tools of language and props are used to ignite and maintain audience attention (Owen, 2018; Blankenship, 2019). For example, figure 19, as explored in chapter 2, is one way in which this rise in the spectacle of excess manifests via the type of imagery and discourse used by candidates and how they are presented in Internet content. Particularly pertinent is how these spectacles frame candidates like Donald Trump wherein they attempt to relate the value of memes in the fetishistic and overdetermined effective/affectiveness way in which the Internet that takes part in political communication.

In figure 19 from chapter 2, Donald Trump is shown holding a six-gun revolver pointed to the sky. In this meme, the text reads, “double tap to offend a liberal.” Though crucially indicative of the user labor needed to disseminate an image of Trump’s national imaginary, as well as the type of national imaginary that revolves around Trump in general, image #6 is also characteristic of how memes can amplify a spectacle of excess and simultaneously rely on a fetishistic narrative of dissemination. The (supposed) technological
solutions provided via social media platforms to Trump and his followers is in giving voice to the supposed voiceless and forgotten (Seargent, 2017). As such, the content that fits within the rhetoric of the sharing economy and in encouraging users to engage in their democratic possibilities is a moment in which techno-fetishistic material ignites the voice of the voiceless.

On the one hand, this version of Trump’s national imaginary and they dissemination of its content is techno fetishistic. It exists because of, and is contingent upon, both the ideals and values of the Trump national imaginary wherein the mere notion of its existence provides voice to the voiceless that aims to provide an aide to democracy within the communicative capitalistic practices. On the other hand, however, Trump’s national imaginary and the Trump rhetoric of voice, as well as the perceived notion of techno-disruption in politics, equates democratic citizenship with a self-directed, neo-liberal, individualized digital subject. Therefore, the access, ability, and tenacity in which a Trump national imaginary circulates, at least in part, depends on the very access and abilities of users to participate in the circulation (Jutel, 2017). Caught between being a fetish as a result of communicative capitalism and in granting political participation to individuals who were previously voiceless represents a larger narrative of (new) media bringing about utopic or dystopic political and social changes.

In the memes that favored a Trump national imaginary, as well as in Trump’s own political rhetoric via his own personal use of social media platforms, the tension lies in the positive and negative aspects of communication technology and political possibilities. Given that for some authors, social media and its political uses depends on what activists can learn about algorithms (Varis & Hou, 2019). Others argue that the political practices and uses of
social media must be understood as sociotechnical assemblages that contemplates the relationship between news-making professionals, bloggers, social media activists, and the multidirectional flow of information that has altered the way individual consume information (Chadwich, 2017). Nonetheless, there is a recognition in both camps that the use of social media can aide in the influence of a political situation. Considering the discursive connections between Trump’s political practices, campaign rhetoric, and platform strategies, social media platforms are very much sites of assemblages of actions, discourse, and tools “associated with digital technologies which have to be recognized by specific groups of people as a ways of attaining particular goals” (Jones, Chik & Haffner, 2015, p. 3).

In this reading, figure 19 demonstrates, Trump’s presence is not simply about “offending a liberal” but regards his presence as doused in the aims to offend. Further, Trump’s presence and the discursive construction to “double tap” (or any communicative act of that comes from user engagement, for that matter) coalesces into a moment in which the act of engaging with this piece of Internet content is the type of user-engagement that constructs the types of sociotechnical assemblages (Chadwich, 2017) and platform strategies (Chik & Haffner, 2015). The encouragement to double tap to offend a liberal is, thus, an indicative moment in the type of communicative capitalistic logic that exacerbates user labor for its circulation that simultaneously, and effectively, (re)produces the convergent relationship between Trump’s rhetoric, the discourse that goes into an imaginary, and the reliance on the use of media to provide some kind of political change. Consequently, the apparent participation in the communicative political process has led to theorizing social media platforms as being a detriment to the democratic process.
Ever since the 2016 presidential election, research has placed a high focus on determining the role of echo chambers, the destruction of the public sphere (Andrejevic, 2013), and in creating Architectures of Serendipity that provide users with an ecosystem of already agreed upon beliefs and values (Sunstein, 2018). In an era of digital media and political communication, digital media have become a site of a kind of metapolitical battle – where political movements have learned to exploit the logics of new media and old media to draw attention of a broad audience to its message (Maly, 2019). Entman and Usher (2018) profess that digital pump-values is an ample way to describe how the flow of political information is influenced by platforms, analytics (data about audience behavior), algorithms, ideological media, and rogue actors (hackers, bots). As such, the memes that rely upon the discourse of adding (digital) voice to the voiceless exacerbates the fetishistic value in the flow of information that aims to take advantage of the very same circulation.

Entman and Usher (2018) argue that due to social media’s maturation, scholars must, “re-evaluate the processes through which news is produced, distributed, assimilated, and acted upon” (p. 298). For them, this need to reevaluate stems from a consideration of the imbalances in discourse between the left and right, the rise of hegemonic tech companies, and the political possibilities for civic participation in late-capitalist democracy. Ultimately, Entman and Usher contend that the 21st century’s hope of more efficient communicative practices involving political communication has not produced a more accountable government but has instead stiffened the hierarchy of control. In the age of mass media, the means of production were expensive. Most people could not afford the ownership of all the necessary assets to contribute to the production of print media or broadcast media.
Computational Propaganda: The Distributed Value of Memes

In concert with communicative capitalism’s notion of techno-fetishism, and the depreciation of a message’s value in the process of political participation, Entman and Usher’s (2018) pump-value metaphor is useful in describing both the affective qualities and mechanistic, technological qualities of social media’s role in political communication. For them, the pump-value metaphor reflects how digital and digitized features enhance (pump) and diminish (value) in communication flows. The pump-value concept directly confronts the role of technology, data, and the Internet by assessing how these communicative practices are inherently sociotechnical systems comprised of digital objects that are used to disseminate messages and how this amalgamation of information can influence communicative practices on platforms. In chapter two of the analysis, I argue how a political economic viewpoint, particularly from the perspective of user labor, elucidates how the value, as well as the material acts of constructing meaning both rely on and are advantageous of (inter)acting networks of networks. One major claim is that digital technologies through distributed media and its digital components offer a fundamentally different political economic approach to a media landscape that has fundamentally changed the practices of information distribution.

For Woolley and Howard (2019), computational propaganda describes the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully manage and distribute misleading information over social media networks. “Computational” propaganda is a more recent form of the propaganda that has existed in our political systems for millennia. Computational propaganda is understood as propaganda created or disseminated by computational means. Since social media platforms, and the Internet more broadly, offer access to user data, knowledge of how social networks are composed, and, also, possibilities
for collective engagement opportunities, the concept of computational propaganda inherently relies on the technical and the affective. However, an often-overlooked aspect of computational propaganda is the viability of the affective tendencies that are encoded into the types of political propaganda.

Further, Woolley and Howard (2019) argue for a consideration of the affective qualities and the mechanistic, technological qualities of social media’s role in political communication through their conceptualization of computational propaganda. For them, computational propaganda is not just the consideration of the computational or technical aspects of this era of propaganda. In fact, computational propaganda advises, and argues, for both quantitative and qualitative research angles. This quantitative and qualitative nature of addressing and researching computational propaganda is advantageous in that it aims to consider user networks and large data information as well as discursive, rhetorical and linguistic influences. Here, I argue for a theoretical fusing of the phenomenological experiences of distributed media to the technical possibilities in social media via the affective properties and the specific types of propaganda in the memes.

Algorithms are often blamed for their role in constructing echo chambers and polarizing areas of conversation (Sunstein, 2019; Finn, 2017; Howard, 2015). In fact, in the conceptualization of computational propaganda, political bots are said to masquerade as genuine grassroots movements that can ultimately shape and manipulate public opinion. Not only is this potentially detrimental to the type of imaginaries and ideas that are possible and disseminated, they are harmful and impact the political economic aspects of online journalism. Primarily, coders and their automated software products, including but not limited to bots, can learn form and imitate legitimate social media users in in order to
manipulate public opinion across a diverse range of platforms and device networks (Woolley & Howard, 2019). In the case of a Trump national imaginary, computational propaganda is a way of framing the effective and affectiveness of the dissemination due to specific aspects of the technical structures that are available. Similarly, user labor and user engagement that feeds algorithms inspired and engendered by types of Internet content is also part of this technical, yet always politically social, environment.

Therefore, while I concede that computational propaganda should not simply deal with the computational or technological form of propaganda, I argue that computational propaganda benefits from a subjective qualification from the prospective experience of the user through the arguments in the entirety of this analysis. As such, computational propaganda benefits from considering how users exude labor, how platforms mediate meaning, and in the form of affective content like memes with a specific political project in mind. The role of memes and how they figure into the specific type of propaganda that exacerbates and capitalizes on the phenomenological qualities of social media content is a missing, yet crucial, element of consideration in computational propaganda. Consequently, there are two implications.

Computational propaganda forms part of a “suite of dubious political practices that includes digital astroturfing, state- sponsored trolling, and new forms of online warfare known as PsyOps or InfoOps wherein the end goal is to manipulate information online in order to change people’s opinions and, ultimately, behavior” (Woolley & Howard, 2019, p. 5). For Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018), the fundamental mistake of the “Internet polarizes” narrative is that it adopts a naïve view of how technology works and understates the degree to which institutions, culture, and politics shape technological adaptation and
diffusion patterns. In their view of network propaganda, Benkler, Faris and Robert argue the narrative of “the Internet polarizes” is an insinuation that the technological processes and the convergences of social media, algorithmic news curation, bots, artificial intelligence, and big data analysis somehow hinder the public’s ability to govern themselves as reasonable democracies.

Similarly, Bolsover and Howard (2017) note that trying to understand computational propaganda only from a technical perspective, as simply a set of variables, models, codes, and algorithms, plays into the hands of malicious actors who create propaganda, the platforms that serve it, and the firms that profit from it. Consequently, the very act of describing something as wholly and purely technical or in very mechanistic terms may make it seem as though these events are unbiased and inevitable. Moreover, academic research into computation propaganda must engage with both the systems of power and systems of knowledge that produce it, including the human actors and the motivations behind it (Bolsover & Howard, 2017). Instead, the understanding of a problem like computational propaganda must arise from addressing the computational and the political. With this in mind, memes of a national imaginary are aspects of computational propaganda that can be evaluated at the axis of both the technical and social.

On the one hand, as argued above, the technological and affective structures in which a Trump national imaginary circulates fundamentally changes the political and the economic. Moreover, it implies that those same technological and affective structures are crucial in soliciting the political anxieties that have historically come with new media practices and new media structures. The distributed nature of the current media ecosystem alters the experiences of users and change the way in which a propaganda campaign can work. Further,
through active users that engage in distributed media and the computational qualities contained within, I claim that the user’s role in the (re)circulation of a Trump national imaginary are aspects that computational propaganda should also consider. As previously noted, the construction of memes is not only a vast part of Internet culture and digital spaces and a fundamental part of the Internet experience. They are also active agents of political and social information and ideologies that thrive on the types of interactions that propaganda campaigns call for.

For this reason, situating memes as the Internet propaganda in question is not outside of computational propaganda, nor is it outside of the political economic qualities of social media platforms. Instead, memes represent the kind of digital propaganda that circulates due to the ideological and political performance of identity and exemplify the kind of propaganda that thrives on an ecosystem which amplifies the supposed tacit and dormant political possibilities of ever-changing media ecosystems. Historically, new media and new media practices have been greeted with celebrated utopic visions and simultaneous dystopic visions of political and social change (Briziarelli & KariKari, 2016). However, an elaboration of computational propaganda within a context of distributed media provides the viewpoint of social media propaganda that exudes an opportunity to consider the technical, social, and material aspects of Internet culture seriously. As always, a consideration of language matters in how propaganda spreads and in the social construction of meaning.

Phenomenologically, the qualities of digital media and the digital technologies that constitute it changes the way users experience and engage with it. With the number of media producers increasing dramatically, the (re)circulation of a Trump creates and activates the innerworkings of the (inter)acting networks and is (at least) partially constructed by users and
their labor. As previously argued, a Trump national imaginary is not just the result of the technological infrastructure but also in the materially reproduced value of meaning construction. With a higher number of media producers, combined with a higher number of media consumers, user prosumption thus intensifies the level of individualization that exemplifies social media’s technological practices of data collection and the user networks that participate in the circulation of meaning. The memes that propped a national imaginary (re)constructed around Donald Trump rely on the circulatory possibilities of this media ecosystem that phenomenologically stems from the individual user.

Secondly, digital technologies that comprise distributed media enable new social forms of media production and media distribution. This mediated expansion is thus the sight of new social relations, new social formations, and the sight of the social construction of meaning on behalf values, norms, and practices that influence the (re)circulation of content and the type of political imaginaries that can arise from them. Moreover, digital technologies are not just media technologies, they are built into all productive processes (Castells, 2008). As such, the digital economy now is not just the ICT economy anymore, it is simply the economy (Briziarelli & KariKari, 2016). In the relationship between media and politics, a shift from mass media to social media impacts the approaches to understanding the influence of media and media technologies in political situations. As already noted, this change is not to be remiss with a simple change in media ecosystem. Instead, it is important to contextualize that actions which change the innerworkings of the media ecosystem trigger multifaceted chains of reactions that inevitably seek new forms of balance (Joyce, 2018).

Across both legacy and social media political economic approaches, however, is the tension between understanding media’s need for capital to survive and their (apparent) public
service. Since media has been historically situated as both a private good, i.e. commodity, and a public good because it (at least to some degree) constitutes itself as the public sphere, media institutions have a social, cultural, and political function while always being driven by economic interests. Wittel (2016) argues that it is this dual nature which allows media companies to make the argument that they are an independent force who supposedly safeguard democracy. The discourse of participating via Internet content, as well as the discourse of political participation in general, exacerbates and revels in the kind of argument that situates media as a democratizing force.

Accordingly, memes of a political project elucidate this computational aspect while highlighting the interweaving of computational, digital, and socio-political actions. Further, it underscores the intensity in which these political strategies rely on computational and digital enhancement. Therefore, the tension between the political use of social media and their political economic existence lies in the what Finn (2017) deems as the theocracy of computation. Finn (2017) argues that the theocracy of computation does not necessarily change the world but is a source of its evolution, wherein computation opens up new possibilities for user while also linking proprietary commerce and individual freedom. Not only do these changes from the computational affect the material realm, but they also impact the cultural, mental and spiritual spaces of empowerment and agency.

The story of algorithms is the story of the gap: the space between ideal and implemented computational systems, or between information and meaning (Finn, 2017). The question of language’s role as a technology of cognition remains a crucial one and it is one that links symbolic language to the role of technology (Finn, 2017). Indeed, we perceive language as a special case of the relationship between humanity and technology precisely
because it plays an ontological role in constructing the world as we perceive it (Finn, 2017). I agree that the question of language’s role as a technology of cognition is in how it links symbolic to the technological sentiment it can disseminate. Perceiving language as a special relationship between humanity and technology must not just include coding and technical software. It needs to consider the types of content that build the reality of values and norms on behalf of users and how the products of the Internet culture are distributed. Therefore, computational propaganda, and specifically the use of memes, should not be absent from the conversation surrounding propaganda and media.

Contrarily, memes, particularly memes with specific messaging and engagement tactics, provide the instance in which the convergence of language, linguistic and technical cues are not simply a type of propaganda, but are representations of a mediated social, political, and technically constructed social experience that explains the ever revolving relationship of society and technology. The affective need to adhere to, perform, and monitor group membership provide an instance in which the makeup of a political propaganda campaign can benefit from, and indeed influence, its circulation across (inter)acting networks of networks. User engagement, user labor, the phenomenological qualities of this age of media, and the construction of meaning are all fundamental aspects in which networks of networks operate. As such, this propaganda campaign is an example of the convergence of materialism and its impact on historical change. Though communicative capitalism maintains that political activity on social media is post-political and lost in the fetish, a material and social connection to the types of communicative activity is nonetheless crucial because it activates current economic, political, and social activities that manifest through and because of social media platforms.
Chapter 7 Conclusion: The Value(s) of a National Imaginary: Social Media, User Labor, and Affective Media

In interrogating a political propaganda campaign carried out on social media platforms, I argue that the political economic practices of platforms, fueled by an (inter)action of human networks and technological networks, underscore the significance of communicative tactics that manifest through the strategic use of language, and user labor that drive political and economic projects. By embedding the morals, values, and beliefs of a (re)constructed Trump national imaginary into shareable pieces of Internet content, the propaganda campaign in question utilizes the platform’s interactive possibilities of liking and sharing in order to further propagate its circulation. In an analysis that focuses on the
discourse of memes that were used to drive the imaginary, the creation of meaning within the
content and the transmission of it through the tools of dissemination via user labor
intensifies, strengthens, and emboldens political projects and platform logics that affectively
buttress political propaganda.

The analytical moments in question focus on memes that were propagated via
Russian social media profiles, including but not limited to, @_AmericaFirst_, @veterans_us,
@American.Made, and @American.Veterans. These profiles were the center of analysis not
only because they communicated a hard preference for Donald Trump but because they were
identified by name by intelligence agencies as active profiles either before, during, and after
the 2016 election. With Trump as the center of attention and as a signifier of political
possibilities, I interrogate a relationship between a sentiment of technological utopianism that
is built into the rhetoric of social media platforms that supposedly provide a space of open
communication against the pernicious use of language that encourages user labor via user
participation in order to propagate content. As such, language is always a sight of meaning
construction via human networks that exploits their existential economic structural properties
via their technological networks. The presence of users, as well as any kind of engagement,
development of community, or political, social, or cultural project obscures and hides the
economic structural properties of social media platform because the platforms present
themselves as open sites of communication. As such, users participating in the dissemination
of a national imaginary not only hinges on the development of a political project through its
beliefs, morals, and values but also that the speed, rate and intensity at which it circulates, as
well.
Fluid Moments of Communication for a National Imaginary

These fluid moments of communication, via the circulation of meaning and the use of technological apparatus through user labor which encourage users to like and share, blur the boundaries between language as social act, language as foundational to the economic mechanism of platforms, and language as part of a political project that drives it all. Therefore, the examination of language presents the ability to argue for how ideology is (re)produced at two distinct levels: 1) the (re)production and (re)circulation of ideologically loaded discourses on national imaginaries that circumvent traditional mass communication outlets and that run on user labor and strategic language use; while 2) inserting such user generated, ideologically loaded discourses into the strategic goals for capitalist gain through affective media content and via an affective media ecosystem. Therefore, on the one hand, examining this version of a Trump national imaginary underscores how Internet content can articulate values, moral, and beliefs through language’s ability to mediate meaning and in the (re)production of platform logics at the structural level via user engagement.

Language as an act of meaning construction, as a political project, and as the economic engine of platforms materialize as simultaneous instances of communication in action but which are undertaken as distinctive moments in order to delineate their respective roles on social media platforms on behalf of a political project. The sharing of memes on the (inter)acting networks of networks not only (re)produces one ideological rendition of a Trump national imaginary but also (re)produces the role of social media platforms in expanding, intensifying, and deepening the role of data, data relations and capitalism. Though the simple act of sharing pieces of Internet content can be viewed as the mundane interactive process of Web 2.0 Internet, in a political project, the interaction is the circulation
of ideological worldviews that are contingent on affective pieces of Internet content, an affective media ecosystem and the literal value in which users create. More broadly, a propaganda campaign carried out on social media platforms that capitalize on user labor, user engagement and the construction of meaning exemplifies the relationships between users and media content that circulates and languages and practices that arise from them. As such, apparent mundane acts such as liking and sharing, and that which circulate meaning via technological networks are instances of complex ideological worldviews that require analytical attention at various levels.

The (re)circulation of the values, beliefs, and morals of this type of Trump national imaginary matter on a discursive and descriptive matter in two respects. First, in a media ecosystem that is contingent on user engagement in order to circulate content, the tying and embedding of the national imaginary to the tools of dissemination via liking and sharing provide ways to analyze the contours of the political project and how it is contingent on the communicative technology in question. On the one hand, this approach provides an understanding as to what a national imaginary is comprised of, while on the other, ways of understanding how media technologies fortify its circulatory power and how they mediate the political and the economic via a sociotechnical tool that can shape the thinking of users. The political economic practices of social media platforms, built on a rhetoric of open communication and connectivity, not only subsumes socialization as an economic practice, but encourages the socialization to increase, reinforce and boost its economic practices. By concealing the interactive necessity of its economic existential practices, and by presenting themselves as open, unmitigated, and free spaces of communication, examining what kinds of messages that are propagated via user labor put specific attention on the entanglement
between the construction of meaning and the value of user propagation. The creation of the symbolic ideology, such as one an ideology that comes with the presence of Trump is not only a value-creating activity but the interactions on social media is a commodity that creates value and ideology (Fuchs, 2017b).

Secondly, the national imaginary mediated by the memes is fundamental to the overall mediation of its circulation because of how user actions correspond to the existential rhetoric of social media platforms. The overall rhetoric of connectivity and the notion of operating as spaces of open communication present the possibility of the (re)circulation of information on social media platforms as a celebration of contribution, participation, and acknowledgement. Consequently, discourse in the memes that ties the values and beliefs of that national imaginary to the possibilities of liking and sharing pieces of content are two parts of the same linguistic process. The user labor that is strategically built into the propaganda, and the way in which the memes encourage users to participate in the (re)construction and the (re)circulation of the national imaginary, is purposely embedded into the material in order to drive circulation. Accordingly, any analysis that does not account for the values, beliefs and morals of the national imaginary, and the ways of mediating its circulation, negates a more robust conceptualization of social media’s presence in current political communicative practices. The strategic use of language that constructs and defines what a Trump national imaginary exists as is both imaginative and mediated by the form of media technology and the communicative practices that are contingent and the presence of users who are shaped, and who shape others, because of it.

Trump’s mediated national imaginary as a signifier of a political project alone is worthy of analysis in attempting to decipher and determine what political possibilities were
brought about by his presence. However, combined and contextualized within the like and share environment of social media platforms, this national imaginary fundamentally operates through an economic foundation that is always based on user labor. Hence, user labor as a foundation for the (re)circulation and (re)production of it operates as both user presence on the platforms and by user engagement that disseminates the pieces of Internet content. While the discourse is one end of the (re)construction the national imaginary, how this discourse circulates via user labor is the other end of the operation. Consequently, the form of the propaganda in question, and the media ecosystem in which it (re)circulates and is (re)produced, is substantial on two ends.

**Propaganda, Memes, and The Politicization of (Social) Media**

Initially, the forms of propaganda in this analysis focus specifically on memes. As veterans of Internet culture, memes have been the center of research attention in a vast majority of ways. However, within a political project that capitalizes on the rhetoric of open communication and that which tie values and beliefs to the tools of dissemination, the memes in question are valuable in what they say and how they are meant to circulate on the platform for their distributive possibilities. By condensing and simplifying complex worldviews into shareable pieces of content, and in emphasizing the spreadability of their content through liking and sharing, memes are pieces of propaganda that rely on and exacerbate the economic activities of social media platforms. Built on user labor, this national imaginary is thus actively (re)circulated, (re)produced, remixed, remediated, and (re)distributed on behalf of the users who also labor to create the value of the meaning built into it. By working as the creators of the symbolic, semiotic and linguistic meanings in action, as well as existing as the
distributors and disseminators of it, memes propagate as effective and affective pieces of Internet culture. More importantly, as previous research on memes contends (Philips, 2017; Philips & Milner, 2017), memes are useful in constructing and acting upon political identities as well as establishing and determining group membership. Accordingly, the labor of users is simultaneously technologically utopic that leans into the rhetoric of open communication but which ultimately constrain the communicative activities of users to the capitalistic endeavors of the platforms.

As has been a viable part of the argument for communicative capitalism, the tension between the utopic possibilities of social media platforms and their capitalistic hindrances has long been argued as a detriment to political projects and the political processes. Though the notion of participation constrained by labor is not new, the memes in question underscore the value of them as both are necessary in the context of political propaganda. As part of a long withstanding practice of meme and Internet behavior, “doing it for the lulz” gives the overly problematic content like that on behalf of the Trump national imaginary room, and reason, to circulate. Furthermore, the Trumpian notion of giving voice to the voiceless through the use of social media platforms not only reifies the notion of platforms operating as spaces of open communication but intensifies the need for sharing in order for users to be active participants of the (re)construction of the national imaginary. By relying on and encouraging users to share and disseminate this kind of Trump national imaginary, memes that communicate certain idealizations of what the Trump national imaginary is comprised of affirms that the (inter)acting networks of networks rely on both what is said and how it is spread.
The consideration of user labor as inherent to the (re)circulation of content aims to remove the veil at the intersection of technology and capital wherein a political project can mask and obscure the work of sociability on social media platforms. Moreover, memes, as affective media content that condense complex worldviews into shareable pieces of content, exhibit mediated qualities that aide in shaping the thinking of individuals while circulating on the sociotechnical tools that do the same. Memes that circulate on social media platforms inherently rely on their structural composition in that their familiarity goes hand in hand with their readability. Therefore, the memes represent an opportunity for users to participate in the (re)construction of a national imaginary also perform social tasks like constructing a coherent identity and group membership (Philips, 2017). By presenting the chance to engage with reified desires, wants, and needs that align with a Trump national imaginary, interaction with content that condones the Trump national imaginary (re)inflects political ideological worldviews into the (inter)acting networks of networks. In the ability to communicate one possible version of a social reality by participating in the communicative act of liking and sharing, worldviews can be conceived of as real and not be immediately rejected.

**Closing Statement**

In paying attention to who says what, to whom, and for what purposes, memes present an ample opportunity to analyze how the discursive and symbolic construction influences the way in which it circulates across the (inter)acting networks of networks. Moreover, in paying attention to how language is used to describe an ideological worldview, while also paying attention to how it encourages users to act upon that worldview, social media platforms connect social interaction as an action of propagation that is exacerbated by
the use of social media platforms as both the expansion of commodification of diverse social processes and spheres of life that is uniquely exacerbated by the use of digital things via digital capitalism. The collection, use, and storage of data that is crucial to the platform logics is contingent on the ability of users to contribute to the imaginative possibilities through an age of distributed media. Language, then, is part of the (re)creation of needs, new needs, and human reproduction that persists to exist within a dynamic presence which undergoes a constant regenerative process because the construction of meaning and the role of users in perpetuating that meaning due to their labor.

The notion of social media platforms as affective media structures that thrive under communicative capitalism and as part of a techno-democratic fetish ultimately idealize user participation that partakes in supposed political change. In the consideration of political memes, this is particularly prevalent as they are primary parts of Internet culture with an historical relevance in political commentary. The technological affects of Web 2.0’s communicative structures and the social, political and cultural properties of memes are not separate aspects of their effectiveness. Instead, the structural and constructed properties that memes are comprised of provide a dialectical moment of fetish and potential for political change.

The circulation of political memes, comprised of the values and beliefs that mediate a particular version of the Trump national imaginary, and which incite and encourage user labor to (re)circulate it, affirm a political discourse through the affective possibilities that incite affect as a political logic. More specifically, the affective political logic draws in political subjects into the inter-subjective, individualized dynamics of enjoyment such as “doing it for the lulz” and, in the case of the Trump, the Trumpian claim of “giving voice to
the voiceless,” as already mentioned. Crucially, however, the political potential of the
Internet, combined with new media technologies and social media platforms which hinge on
the subject of affect, are ripe for content like memes during a politically contentious moment
due to the distributed media, and more specifically, the nature of social media platforms with
broader implications.

Broadly, it provides a viewpoint into how the politicization of media communication
technology continue to evolve and through which they have been historically politicized.
From the supposed re-opening of the Habermasian public sphere to the site of social
movement techno-assemblages, social media platforms have been theorized as both utopic
and dystopic in their political usage. However, in a political project that bears the brunt of a
campaign as large as the presidential election, social media platforms become the space in
which niche communities of national imaginaries collide and coalesce within the supposed
space of open communication. The point here is not to delve into the technological
determinist impression of algorithms and echo chambers. The point is to recognize the
relevance and importance of how social media platforms mediate contrasting and conflicting
idealizations of their purpose as communicative technologies and as sites of social
interaction. This point of tension reveals the historical significance of social media platforms
in that, like communicative tools before them, they are politicized and bring about hopes and
fears of social transformation. However, in the age of social media platforms, the
individualization of data, the extensive intensification of data relations, and the overall
encompassing of digital capitalism signals an era of intense circulation based on the very
values and beliefs that the material is built upon.
Following the 2016 election, social media has (again) taken center stage in the debate about its use and implications in the political process. As noted, every (new) communication technology brings with it a dual nature of optimism and pessimism that pushes the possibilities of both commodification and the potential political reach and influence in social and political organization. Ultimately, social media’s capability of producing social change is both enabled through the apparent possibilities of the platforms and constrained through the social relations in which the platforms operate. Thus, the possibilities brought on by social media are heavily shaped by political and economic interests and also by the persistence in the cultural and social life of powerful utopic/dystopic accounts. In the powerful narratives of utopic and dystopic potentialities, it is important to recognize that human agency must be accounted for. Not only are social relations exclusively produced by people partaking in everyday life activities, but the relationship between social media and (platform) capitalism will continue to crystallize in institutions such as the market, the law, the state and notions of liberal ideology and democracy will all be affected by the affective media industries.

The consideration, and fundamental importance, of language and communication technology as part of the means of production in the social construction of meaning, is significant because it relies on recognizing that language and communication technology are intrinsic to all forms of labor and social organizational patterns. More than that, they constitute essential elements of the productive force and the social relations of production. Crucially, this outlook underscores the historical significance of language and its relationship with communication technology and media, especially in its evolutionary forms. With the current age of media operating as a key element and main constituent of contemporary economies, digital technologies, and digital media, have had, and continue to have, profound
impacts on the possibilities of political communication. The Trump national imaginary that was (re)circulated and (re)distributed during the 2016 presidential election in the United States exacerbates and intensifies the ideological underpinnings that propel the ability to mediate multiple messages in the social media landscape.

Within this digital media environment, social media platforms utilize the affective energy of users and the valorization of symbol manipulation and communication to greatly intensify capitalism’s ability to colonize new spheres of life via the ability to capitalize on a variety of data and data collection practices. Social media platforms function as an authoritative reproducer of the essential social relations through necessary ideological and cultural logics of capitalism. In a political communicative context, the ability to capitalize on affective media production speaks to condition of capital to harness the networks of computer networks and the (social) networks of user networks. Understanding the complicated relationship that social media has with commodification and its political potential has long been a driving force behind research. In the instance of Donald Trump, and in the strategic use of data and data specific advertising, the combination of user labor, distributed media, digital technologies, and the role of media continue to manifest in multifaceted and complex ways.
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