

Portraits of Mis-/Disinformation Through the Research Persona Method

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Large-scale problems like our current climate crisis require productive engagement by global publics not only in word, thought, and deed but also in feeling. All of these aspects are vulnerable to disruption by mis- and disinformation, especially as it emerges interactively on the online platforms that host most of our discourse. Scholarship has focused on the possibilities and limitations of fact-based intervention and on apprehending false information's influence at scale, but doing so misses an important aspect of its operation, namely its manipulation of individual users' affect. Employing speculative research personas, an innovative research method formulated by Bounegru, Devries, and Weltevrede, we investigate these affective impacts on Instagram and TikTok. We find that, in subtle and less subtle ways, the mediated experience of these platforms produced affective environments that, even when not directly radicalizing, led users away from capacities important to addressing crises, such as the capacity to conceive and be energized by common goals across lines of social difference. We conclude that affective intervention is needed alongside rational intervention, noting how these platforms' combination of affordances and aesthetics enables microfascist content and desensitize paranormal absurdism.

Keywords: persona, affect, platform aesthetics, microfascism, digital methods

The climate crisis calls into question how we communicate and process subjective affective states. Outside our social spheres, the spaces where we confront the facts and feelings associated with climate change are occupied by the models of major social media platforms. Over the past decade, these platforms have become a critical forum to mobilize climate action, but have yet to produce substantive change. Prior studies focused on the factuality of anthropogenic climate change and pointed to participant polarization and the limitations of science communication as obstacles to consensus (Antonio & Brulle, 2011; Hart & Nisbet, 2012; Jacques & Knox, 2016). However, the persistence of misinformation and disinformation within the ecology of social media illustrates avenues for research that go beyond the binary paradigm of climate denialism (Hassan, Musa, Latiff Azmi, Razali Abdullah, & Yusoff, 2024; Lim, 2019). Researchers surveying the intersection between social media and the climate have called for new forms of imagination and

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intervention in our engagement with online platforms, emphasizing the preponderance of quantitative studies focusing on open application programming interfaces (APIs), digital publics, and “settled science” as a framework for climate debate (Pearce, Niederer, Özkula, & Sánchez Querubín, 2019).

Concurrently, restrictions on API access in response to scraping scandals such as Cambridge Analytica and, more recently, the prevalence of AI models trained on public data, dubbed by some scholars the “APIcalypse” (Bruns, 2019), demand changes to the methods employed by digital researchers (Rogers & Koronska, in this issue). This project proceeds by way of these compounding crises, employing novel digital methods to exploit the affordances of major social media platforms as critical research tools. These platforms have designed their user interfaces (“like” buttons, autoplays, view-count displays, etc.) around the aggregation enabled by big data, employing algorithmic interventions that personalize users’ affective experience in ways that they expect to be favorable to their business interests. The affordances of algorithmic influence sidestep issues of authenticity and create unique information flows that aim to maximize certain emotional states (Devries & Brett, 2021). To follow these affordances, this research project uses the speculative research persona method (Bounegru, Devries, & Weltevrede, 2022) to provoke platform responses to climate anxiety. By generating fictive, climate-anxious accounts and deploying them on Instagram and TikTok, this research project follows their algorithmic personalization to trace the affective spaces patterned by each platform. Through an adversarial approach to their affective affordances, reappropriating the “methods of the medium” for our own ends (Rogers, 2013, cited in Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2016), our research examines how these online spaces adapt to concerns about the future of our shared environments. Our findings indicate that while these platforms accommodate anxiety and uncertainty about the climate crisis, their pressures toward positivity and increased engagement offer far more opportunities for maladaptation than they do pathways to action.

This project developed two speculative research personas with shared affective cues to better understand how ongoing algorithmic personalization on social media responds to climate anxiety. This research method uses performative and relational practices to develop fictive profiles to walk through social media platforms without the contamination of the research team’s data footprint, building off the framework established by Light et al. (2016) as the “walkthrough” method. By employing burner phones and enhanced security measures, these personas presented their respective profiles with the bare minimum of user data, offering portraits of the personalization mechanisms always at work on the back end of major social media platforms. As outlined by Bounegru et al. (2022), the persona method is responsive to the movement toward algorithmic sorting to achieve “personalized information flows [that] aim to provoke systematized affective resonances between lived experiences, discourses, ideologies and networked logics” (p. 78). In the case of the climate crisis, these affective resonances are critical to coordinating action scaled to the magnitude of anthropogenic climate change. Climate anxiety, or persistent feelings of unease about the climate crisis, has attracted attention in recent years as both a pathology and a legitimate response to widespread inaction, affecting multiple age ranges and driving calls for adequate societal responses (Clayton, 2020; Crandon, Scott, Charlson, & Thomas, 2022; Ray, 2020; Taylor, 2022). Crandon et al. (2022) note, “Climate anxiety has been associated with rumination, difficulty sleeping and negative impacts on work, study and family relationships” (p. 123), yet there has been little analysis of how these feelings and experiences are absorbed by social media platforms at the personal level and how they adapt to accommodate climate-anxious users. These issues remain difficult to analyze via quantitative digital methods, as they emerge in the gap between

user and platform rather than the data trail produced after the fact. Such spaces are agnostic to issues of truthfulness, and as Bounegru et al. (2022) illustrate, facticity is affirmed by feeling before it is determined to be truth or falsehood.

Misinformation and disinformation have occupied a central place in digital research since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, and valuable scholarship has studied them via large data sets (Allcott, Gentzkow, & Yu, 2019; Daniels, 2018; Lewis, 2018). Some studies have engaged in aspects of impersonation to emulate actions taken online in the course of emergent misinformation streams (Haroon et al., 2023). However, the distance afforded by research methods built on massive data sets makes it hard to gain perspective on the ground level of this experience. Moreover, as noted above, these methods are precariously reliant on private corporations' commitment to public access to their data. Understanding these environments on a more personal scale provides a deeply needed contrast. These more top-down perspectives map how misinformation and disinformation spread, but cannot tell us why certain narratives take root or what it feels like to experience it firsthand.

To open these spaces and investigate the intersection of platforms, agency, and affect, this study presents the results of a pair of personas' sustained deployment on TikTok and Instagram and critically assesses how their platforms offered maladaptive responses to the presentation of climate anxiety. Our research team developed and deployed two speculative research personas, Ian Walley and Carolina Martinho, with interests adjacent to the climate crisis we hypothesized might provoke platform responses. For three months, these personas were regularly guided by group decision making and algorithmic recommendation, fleshing out their profiles and social networks as their platforms worked to sort out where they belonged online. For considerations of consent and covert research, these personas were strictly operated on public accounts, making selective use of following and like features to expand their circle of feedback.

As the online environments traversed by our personas show, social media provides many opportunities for affirming the affective reality of the climate crisis while opting for maladaptation. Whether by muddying the waters with an occult worldview in which all crises are simultaneously true and fabulous or by turning to reactionary sustainability with fascistic undertones, the algorithmic drive to personalize captures such feelings and concretizes them as added obstacles to addressing the climate crisis. Despite being conceived as politically inactive, with a smattering of contradictory or complicated outlooks on a changing climate, both our personas found their anxious attachments reinforced and remediated by a slew of content adjacent to their concerns. Our persona-based research was motivated by the following questions: How does algorithmic personalization on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram mediate climate anxiety? Which platform affordances inform affective experience concerning climate anxiety on these platforms? Where does climate anxiety intersect with misinformation and disinformation?

Method and Methodology

To address these questions, we employed the speculative research persona method to build new forms of relationality by performing the part of the climate-anxious user. In contrast to the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2016), the speculative research persona method adopts tactics from the humanities and arts to generate a fictitious user profile to be operated as though it were an actual account. However,

as Bounegru et al. (2022) caution, the persona “is not meant to further a researcher’s interpretation of a subcultural space or represent that space through description” (p. 92). Rather than creating a strawman to confirm the researchers’ hypotheses, the creation of the speculative research persona is coextensive with the affordances of the platform, reappropriating personalization to expose the platform’s algorithmic agency in shaping user experience. While not actively impersonating a real social media user, the persona method is not endorsed by the terms of use in any of the social media sites explored here. That said, Internet research ethics exist in the breach between the private interests of social media platforms and the societal well-being of their users. It is therefore “debatable as to whether following a website’s terms and conditions is a legal requirement for academic researchers whose work benefit[s] the knowledge level of society at large” (Association of Internet Researchers, 2019, p. 15).

The persona method aligns with a range of ethnographic approaches “embracing the agency of the researcher in [the] process, by first claiming and then actively enacting one’s role as editor, translator, and indeed, the fabricator of the story” (Markham, 2012, p. 345). The method is relational. In its creation, a persona is sought for the mutual impingement of researchers’ histories, events relevant to the research questions, geolocational restrictions, and deliberate contradictions. The nub created is then refined via interaction between researchers and confrontation with platform affordances. It is never the product of direct concoction, yet neither is it a pretense of data-driven objectivity. As de Seta (2020) remarks, such objectivity never exists in digital ethnography, the best of which is “often thoroughly edited, translated, scrambled, rephrased, anonymised, cropped, selectively blurred and collated” (p. 90). Any more or less authentic user on an algorithmically mediated platform is interpreted, filtered, modified—in short, fabricated—by the algorithmic environment itself into a “measurable type” (Cheney-Lippold, 2017, p. 19) with known, probable, and possible traits: that is, a persona. This process of interactive fabrication is the object of study here.

To provide the initial template from which this process of fabrication builds, our team used the dramatic exercises Bounegru et al. (2022) adapted from their collaborators, Ioana Juncan and Alexandra Juhasz. This practice called on the research team to establish the speculative research persona’s backstory and define their relationships, developing a rationale for how this persona would respond to different content shown to the associated account. Through the “position of the speculative user experiencing personalisation” (Bounegru et al., 2022, p. 85), we were then able to guide the personas alongside the platform’s personalizing algorithms, working in concert to see where Carolina Martinho and Ian Walley would end up. To operate these personas, our research team met weekly during sessions to cooperatively guide the personalization process, deliberating over the content encountered and deciding on the personas’ responses. These sessions were recorded, and at the conclusion of the three-month research period, their content was transcribed by the authors for further analysis.

The embodied experience of undertaking the persona method was twofold: one experience as researchers at desks interacting via web conferencing software, and another as the persona spending time with the platform. While physical and logistical conditions may have prevented scrolling as fast as a persona may have realistically done, or as late into the night, they permitted collaborative discernment of how that persona’s particular story would influence their interactive choices. The following example is illustrative:

TikTok [displays video about a comet soon to be visible from Earth]

Research Team Member 1: "Yeah, let's watch it through the end, yeah."

*RTM4: "This is the problem with doing the, doing this as, like, a live thing, is all—I'm like 'No, no, no, keep the video on; *I* wanna watch.'"*

RTM3: "Hahaha"

RTM4: "So"

*RTM3: "It's all about what *Carolina* wants."*

RTM4: "Yeah"

RTM1: "I think Carolina would be into that—"

RTM3: "Yeah"

RTM1: "—She likes flying and planes and all that, so yeah."

RTM2: "Yeah—does it extend to space?"

RTM1: "Yeah."

RTM3: "Sure."

Persona 1: Carolina

The experience of our first research persona, Carolina Martinho, on TikTok and Twitter provided vivid and, in some cases, surprising examples of how platform aesthetics emerge from affordance and how affect co-evolves with aesthetics. Although each platform demonstrated its own character regarding these processes, we concentrate here on Carolina's experience on TikTok, which brought them into particularly high relief.

In an "open source" approach to the speculative research persona method codified by Bounegru et al. (2022), the research team imbued Carolina with enough characteristics to self-sustain and retain coherence as she was subjected to algorithmic mediation on TikTok. Choices of national origin (Canadian born in Portugal), class (comfortable family income without professional status), life events (loss of a beloved grandfather in a climate-related event), and habits of mind (preoccupation with aviation tech) supported interactive decision making consistent enough to represent an individual user in various mediated situations.

Complementing these choices are geographic and logistical ones. Online session durations, times of day/week, and locations of her device's engagement with the platform were required to match those of the research team's actual use of the device. To reconcile that requirement with the fictional circumstances of Carolina's life, researchers gave Carolina a part-time job—cleaning airplanes at a local airport while she waits to enter an IT certificate program. Carolina scrolled her feed while on breaks at this job and also prior to bedtime. Noticeable among the dancing teens and kitten videos were patterns of misinformation and disinformation that start from virtually her first click.

Carolina and Mis-/Disinformation

If fringe thinking could be arranged along a spectrum of intensity, Carolina's experience on TikTok started at the shallow end and mostly stayed there, but grew significantly more focused. Less than two

minutes into her first session, still following no one, she was shown the sentiment in Figure 1, underlain with gently rolling waves and piano music: "Karma said ¶ A time will come in your life when some people will regret why they treated you wrong ¶ Trust me . . It will definitely come." This message attracted Carolina on multiple levels: It assuaged her resentment of her social peers, it committed her to no particular course of action, and it placed power and responsibility for improvement in the hands of an unseen force instead of on her. It became her first like on TikTok. Roughly one minute later, she was shown her first #aviation content (Figure 2), which she liked and from which she went on to view other #aviation posts before the network lagged and ended the session.

From that moment, the incidence of uncanny content increased, and its focus shifted, with some exceptions, to space and UFO themes. In her second TikTok session, Carolina encountered a video on planetary history from spaceship II (Figure 3), watching to its end, when the video's mechanical narration proclaimed, "Through all the hardships, the earth is still standing. The earth does not need human protection." This bold statement, technically at odds with Carolina's climate anxiety, nonetheless reinforced the idea that human efforts and concerns were insignificant, in a way continuous with Carolina's unexamined absurdism. Subsequent videos turned more explicitly toward paranormal ideas about space: "UFO capture on video!!! Exposing the truth," "Here's what would happen if we nuked Jupiter," "TERRIFYING THINGS SAID BY ASTRONAUTS," "Minutes after they shot down the Ufo in Alaska," and "Updates On Alaska UFO."

On TikTok, the constant motion on the screen, the role of audio (more reminiscent of a radio with a perpetually changing dial than of, say, YouTube's more discrete, serial soundscape), the user interface's occupation of the entire screen, and the number of textual and graphical user interface elements overlain on videos are all culturally marked in similar fashion: Their associations are with freneticism and superficiality, suggesting infinite breadth coupled with minimal depth. Garbed in affordance, TikTok seems to represent what Ezrahi (2004) terms "outformations"—epistemic phenomena that replace information, which had previously eclipsed wisdom, as the source of popular understandings. Outformations "combin[e] cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and other dimensions of experience. They are rich and frequently intense like wisdom, but unlike it, they are largely disconnected templates of stimuli" (Ezrahi, 2004, p. 278).

In context, the pseudoscience Carolina encountered on TikTok retains an element of self-conscious absurdity. Even if a given video attempts deadly earnestness, it is hard to detect in a fast-changing stream of largely lighthearted fare. Whether this combination simply makes the misinformation more insidious, slipping into the user's mental repertoire unchallenged, or allows it to be more easily dismissed depends on a combination of many things—circumstance, psychological habit, brain chemistry, prior associations, and so on—each of which is itself dependent on many other things. This means being nudged with misinformation is an emergent experience that confounds intentionality. No content creator, code function, or platform executive is the author of any given confrontation between information and user, let alone the author of the whole set of confrontations that constitutes the ongoing experience of the app.

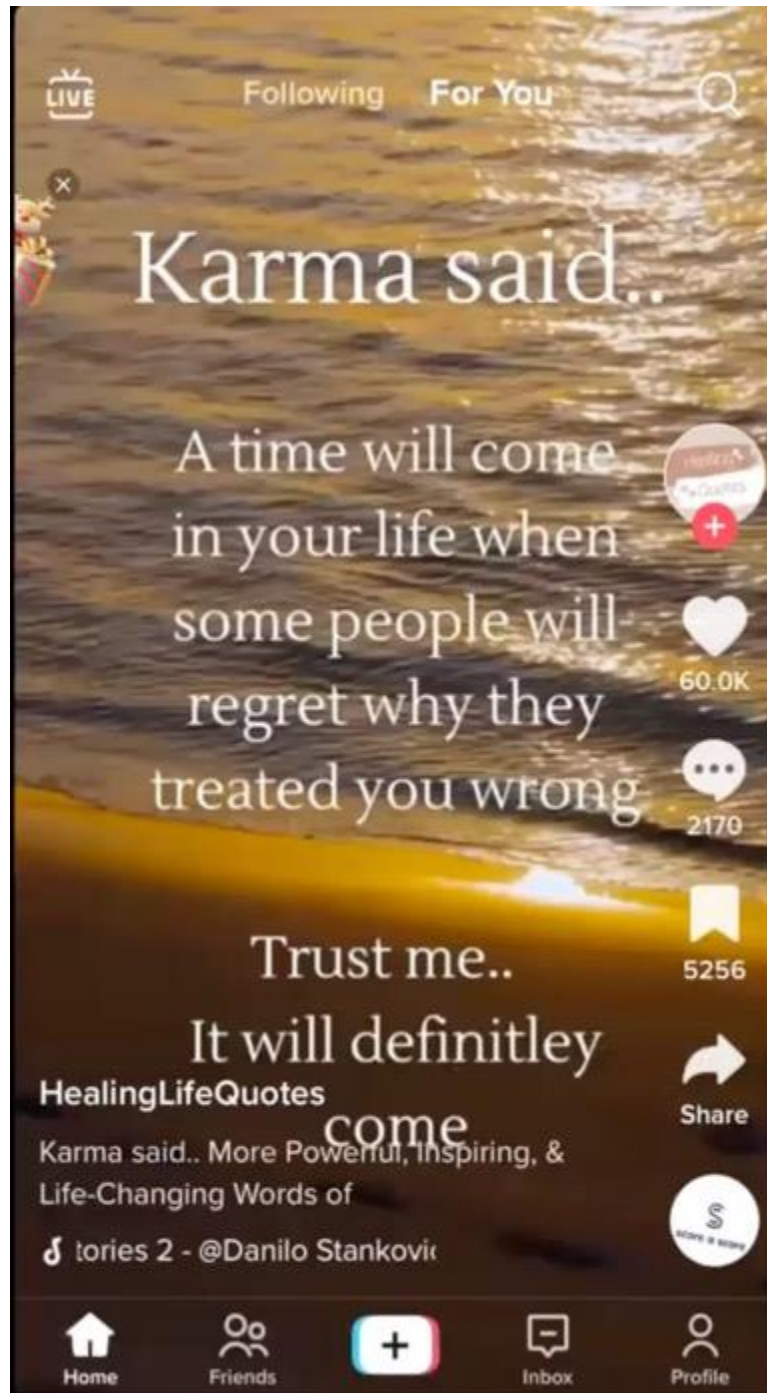


Figure 1. Carolina's first like on TikTok (Personal communication, January 13, 2023).

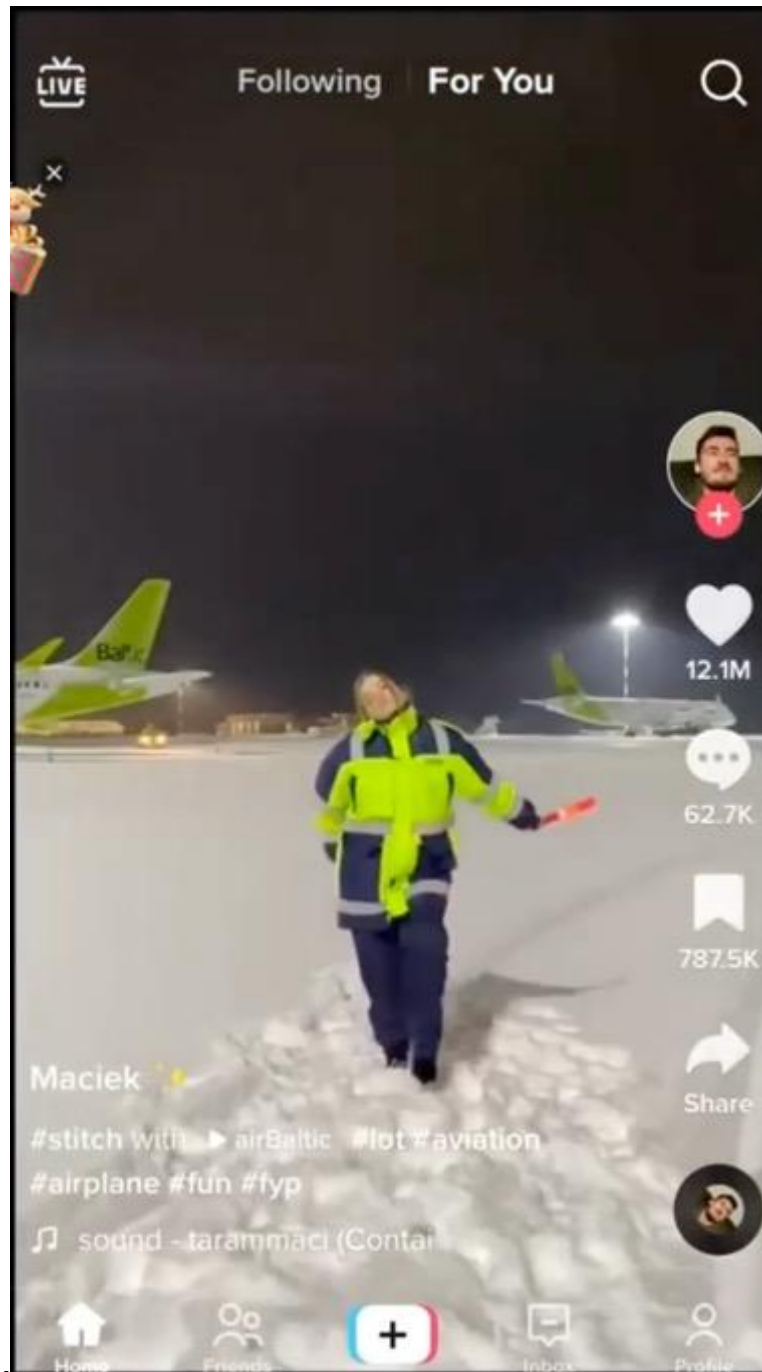


Figure 2. First #aviation TikTok content shown to Carolina (Personal communication, January 19, 2023).



Figure 3. Still of "spaceship II" video shown to Carolina (Personal communication, January 26, 2023).

Platform Personality and Morphology

Platform intentionality may elude easy detection or definition. In its place, what can be ascertained (perhaps uniquely so via this method) is what we might call platform personality. Just as Carolina builds her overall habits from initial conditions (the life story and outlook written for her) and subsequent discrete interactions, and just as those overall habits inform future discrete interactions, a similar dynamic operates on the part of her interlocutor, the app. This is not the same app as it would be for a different user because Carolina's input matters. Neither is it unboundedly different, in part because the app's affordances matter. The rest of what makes it similar to others' experiences of the same app (analogous, perhaps, to the similarity between different individuals' experience of a given human being, beyond the basic continuity of their physical features) may be said to be composed of that app's coherent personality—even if, as with humans (and research personas), the persona is only coherent at a certain distance. Zoom closer in, and we will see only discrete moments that form the pattern we observed when we were farther away (together with the tendencies evidenced in those moments); zoom out, and we will see only a larger ecosystem in which the personality in question itself dissolves into patterns of attention, information, profit, and the like.

Seaver (2019) argues that algorithms alone do not drive platforms' social impacts and that, instead, we must attend to the actions of "*algorithmic systems*—intricate, dynamic arrangements of people and code" (p. 418, emphasis in original). Certainly, the arrangement of human researchers, a fictional persona, and algorithms (the plural applies since no one algorithm is likely to control all of the TikTok app's behavior during a session) that constitute a persona-based research session qualifies as such an algorithmic system. In fact, beyond those components, the system might be said to include the researchers' devices, the persona's device, all the digital trappings needed to establish the persona, and so on, off into the distance.

As an unexpected contribution of persona research, we can now refine our understanding of algorithmic systems' morphology. Carolina's experience of TikTok might analogize to one of the thousands of slices used to create three-dimensional models in the Visible Human Project (Burke, 2007). TikTok itself is not Carolina's experience of it; neither is it the computer code behind that experience, nor the business model that underwrites the code. Simultaneously, TikTok is not *not* any of those things. Resolving this contradiction requires conceiving of the algorithmic system as scalar (DiCaglio, 2021): That is, parts of it emerge together into larger parts; those larger parts condition and constrain the smaller ones, and what the system intelligibly is depends on the observer's scope of observation. If indeed TikTok has a personality discernible at the Carolina scale, different structures are discernible closer up (the double-vision style "Add" button [], the specific succession of videos in a given 10-second span) or further out (viral trends, influencer fandoms, mis-/disinformation campaigns). As with the behaviors of ant colonies, viz. that of individual ants, or of weather fronts viz. local pockets of air, the phenomena to observe are emergent, not necessarily directly predictable from their sub- or superstructures. Indeed, phenomena of misinformation and disinformation emerged distinctly differently for our second research persona.

Persona 2: Ian

Our second persona followed a different path and occupied different platforms. Whereas Carolina was thrust into the position of climate anxiety by design, the alternative direction taken with Ian Walley

insinuated climate anxiety alongside a local saga that erupted through over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic in the greater Toronto area. Beginning in late 2020, Adam Skelly, the proprietor of a series of barbecue restaurants, used his business's platform to announce his refusal to comply with health guidelines that prohibited dining indoors, attracting a following discontent with pandemic restrictions (Lavery, 2021). Skelly cast himself as fighting against what he characterized as "discrimination" issuing from public health officials, using their efforts to restrict access to establishments as the backdrop for escalating social media posts that attracted substantial attention. Over the course of this feud, Skelly's social media access was briefly suspended by court order, and it was revealed that he was in violation of the Toronto municipal code (Spurr, 2024). These events were interlinked with various protest movements in Canada, including the occupation of the capital in Ottawa by the so-called Freedom Convoy and multiple protests along the U.S.-Canadian border against travel restrictions. Amid these developments, the social media accounts associated with Adamson Barbecue turned to other topics, including conspiracy theories about the World Economic Forum (Skelly, 2022). Anomalous among these topics was one post advertising Liberty Ranch in Water Valley, Alberta, a farm offering a variety of organic meats and raw milk processed on site (Skelly, 2023). While the relationship between Adamson Barbecue and Liberty Ranch was not clear, this connection justified further inquiry. This intersection of the restaurant industry, independent agriculture, and political opposition to pandemic-era public health measures stuck out to the research team and gave us an inroad as we decided where to deploy Ian and which interests to put forward for his initial profile.

Ian was fleshed out with a professional and personal biography that established his position on social media as a restaurateur rebuilding his business ventures. He was recently separated and was a longtime chef, fed up with the strictures of city life and exploring the feasibility of operating a farm-to-table restaurant in the countryside. His social media accounts, @tosmoked and u/tosmoked, were meant to represent the early stage of this new business venture, part personal account, part potential enterprise. Having reconfigured Ian as a more apolitical counterpart to Adam Skelly, we established an initial set of interests from the profile creation functions on Instagram and Reddit. We then used a mixture of platform recommendations and contextual cues to widen Ian's circle, following barbecue brands, major cultural figures, and commonalities between previously identified accounts to build a network of approximately 50 accounts to follow on both platforms. However, it became apparent that the platform dynamics available on Reddit were ill-suited to the collaborative nature of the persona method. While we continued to operate Ian on Reddit, these findings remained marginal and were excised to allow for more emphasis on Instagram. In parallel to Carolina, Ian's experience on Instagram allowed for an intriguing interplay of platform affordances, but where the findings associated with our first persona are more concerned with the immediacy of affect and its relation with misinformation and disinformation, our second persona enabled an inroad into an emerging configuration coupling climate anxiety with a crypto-fascistic approach to sustainability. As such, our focus is primarily directed toward a specific axis of interlocking accounts and the aesthetic response they engender.

Ian and Mis-/Disinformation

After an initial set of 25 Instagram accounts, including notable restaurateurs, popular media figures, and specialty barbecue accounts, Ian was set loose to accumulate recommendations and find new accounts to follow. Most of these accounts followed existing overlaps. Shared touchstones in the food

industry, alongside generalized thematic content such as cooking or nature, were supplemented by cultural figures who spoke to some of the existing affinities in the spaces Ian moved through. While we did not set out to follow Joe Rogan, he was followed by almost all the barbecuing accounts initially selected. This cross-referencing proved an immediate affordance for the platform. Whereas Carolina was exposed to far more muscular algorithmic personalization from the get-go, Ian's personalization was subtler and more drawn out, and unlike TikTok, Ian's suite of followed accounts stayed close and consistently connected. Different figures were engaged in routine cross-promotion, selling each other as a lifestyle. Rather than anonymous content passing in quick succession, Ian's experience was slow and communal. In the hands of the platform, Ian was personalized as an emergent part of an existing, if fluctuating, community.

Instagram's technical features play on the successes that have kept it a predominant part of the social media ecosystem for the past decade. The default site for influencers, advertorial content, and luxury brands, Instagram consistently remains a space for curating both communities and lifestyles. Literature on Instagram consistently highlights the effects of its visuality, especially as it pertains to authenticity, celebrity, and gender (Abidin, 2016; Hurley, 2019; Marwick, 2015). Similarly important is the role shared images play in the curation of communities (Blight, Ruppel, & Schoenbauer, 2017; Gomes Ferreira et al., 2020). While research points to a higher degree of sociability on visual platforms like Instagram, there is less commentary on the other affordances of the platform. As it has worked to accommodate the commercialization of its user base, Instagram implemented features to provide more connections between profiles. Instagram includes dual posts, in which multiple accounts collaborate for a single piece of shared content. This kind of posting for promotional purposes across a shared network became the locus of Ian's experience.

An axis of three interconnected accounts merits further attention, especially as one's ongoing rise to notoriety coincided with Ian's exposure to their content (Agnew, 2024; Del Valle, 2023; Jezer-Morton, 2024; Vanderhoof, 2024). The farm account @whiteoakpastures provided the first opening to this trio. The account for a family farm of the same name, @whiteoakpastures, bills itself as an advocate and supplier of humane and sustainable meats. Proprietor Will Harris maintains a large public profile, appearing on media outlets including Good Morning America and the Joe Rogan Show. In the last few years, Harris has fallen under greater scrutiny, and the tenor of @whiteoakpastures' content has become more overtly combative. While this element was evident at the time Ian followed the account, the posts that made it to his feed were highly selective and far less volatile. Whether this was a feature of algorithmic sorting or a result of Ian's patterns of activity is unclear. On the surface, there was little objectionable content, as @whiteoakpastures called attention to risks to supply chains and animal health and well-being that would be reasonable to a food professional. However, this content had little context and occasionally included bizarre claims, with one post from February 6 insinuating that their pastured poultry would be immune to the highly pathogenic avian influenza, as "viral material is cleansed with sunlight" (White Oak Pastures, 2023). While this idea is technically feasible and their stated concern for holistic animal welfare is admirable, sunlight is unlikely to be the panacea intimated by the account (Lytle & Sagripanti, 2005; Sharun, Tiwari, & Dhama, 2021, paras. 4–6).

From @whiteoakpastures, Ian was introduced to a pair of accounts involved in the same marketing process. Like @whiteoakpastures, these accounts have since undergone public scrutiny, warranting more

attention. The accounts @ballerinafarm and @hogfathering are associated with homesteaders/influencers Hannah and Daniel Neeleman. The Neelemans provided an appealing realization of Ian's objectives on social media and a captivating vignette for the research team. As noted by a profile in *The Baffler* (Del Valle, 2023), @ballerinafarm is the archetype of the nascent "tradwife" movement. A portmanteau of "traditional wife," tradwives are defined by their high-visibility performance of conventional heteronormative femininity online. Though the strong right-wing associations of some tradwives have attracted attention (Mattheis, 2021; Proctor, 2022), @ballerinafarm balked at the presentation of explicitly political content. Although Hannah Neeleman has more recently come to act as an archetype of the pro-natalist politics espoused by J. D. Vance and other conservatives, including Elon Musk (Agnew, 2024; Vanderhoof, 2024), Neeleman disputes this affiliation, particularly the appellation of "trad-wife" (Neeleman, 2024). Moreover, unlike other figures occupying the tradwife space, @ballerinafarm has the resources to show rather than tell. Del Valle (2023) highlights that, as the scions of an airline and security tycoon (Daniel's father), the Neelemans do not need to work for a living.

On their 328-acre ranch in Kamas, Utah, the Neelemans sell themselves as a lifestyle. In addition to a catalog of home goods, the coupled accounts promote a vivid, if highly mediated, model of the ideal life advocated for by more vocal tradwives. Their content is jointly produced, regularly engages in cross-promotion and dual posting, and paints a starkly gendered portrait of homesteading. Wide shots of a snowy Utah horizon set the backdrop for Daniel's content, documenting farm routines with occasional links to their merchandise in the captions. Hannah's posts offer the same links more consistently, but barely leave the kitchen. Visually, they provide a parallax view of gendered work. Where Hannah cooks, cleans, and ferments in a fixed frame, often co-occupied by a rosy-cheeked child waiting in the wings, Daniel presents disconnected snippets of outdoor problem solving and hard labor. Paired, they form an idealized picture of patriarchal tradition, with gender etching a sharp division in their content, yet this visuality enabled a kind of selective sensing for the research persona. Ian was exposed to dyssynchronous patterning of their material and more readily offered purchasing power from Hannah's posts. Peering past the protective veil of the home, Ian was readily invited to participate in an urban facsimile of the homesteader lifestyle by buying the Neelemans' products. While the research team, hewing to Ian's lovelorn background, was initially dissuaded from engaging with @ballerinafarm, the consistency of the account and its striking content placed it as one of the most persistently remarked on during the research period. Her posts remained conventional yet affectively provocative.

While far from the only content on Ian's Instagram feed, this combination of homesteading, traditional gender roles, and self-promotion proved thematically representative of Ian's experience. Immediately, the research team was struck by the almost pornographic perfection coloring @ballerinafarm's content. Though devoid of any sexual material, this content offered an inviting fantasy for the persona. Staging a marital ritual, @ballerinafarm's cooking videos would routinely conclude with her husband literally coming in from the cold to enjoy the fruit of her labors. The Neelemans' seven (now eight) children play an indispensable role, maintaining a presence that, though hectic, never disrupts their mother's efforts. She is unflappable, but always accommodating and always accessible. Though performing a bifurcated lifestyle, it is notable that the Neeleman home is stripped of the privacy and insularity aimed at in a traditional gendered environment. Rather, Ian, like the rest of the Neelemans' massive follower base, was invited in. Instead of taking action like @hogfathering outdoors, Ian could occupy his place through a scopic, mediated gaze

reaching into the heart of domestic life. In the absence of an explicit political platform, this affective pivot—between rugged machismo and welcoming femininity—substitutes politics for selective aesthetics given substance by implicit cultural norms.

Microfascism and Utopia Online

To make sense of the provocations coming from @ballerinafarm and their opaque political insinuations, it is useful to take a step back and observe their wider continuity. Bratich (2022), writing on the resurgent rightist movements he deems “micro-fascism,” identifies an undercurrent oriented toward masculinist, autogenic sovereignty. Playing on mythologies of feminine transgression (Eve, Jezebel, etc.), Bratich charts an affective circuit that posits femininity as a signifier of dissolution and debasement that must be overcome through patriarchal domination. Fear of the maternal or menstruating body initiates a turn toward impossible logics of self-creation and bodily autonomy as the condition of positive identification as a man, yet, crucially, a “failed autogenesis generates a dynamic of flight and return, a circuit that casts abstractions back on to the world as ordering forces” (Bratich, 2022, p. 30). Mythologies must be maintained through constant force. In this way, Bratich posits a circular course of feeling whose aims are unsatisfiable, but whose bad objects are always emergent as targets of aggression. However, while Bratich’s analysis, which takes Theweleit’s (1985) study of Weimar Germany as its jumping-off point, provides an overview of gender as a determinant in microfascist formations, it is limited by its focus on violence. Though the violence of the meat industry was never far from the minds of the research team guiding Ian, the accounts that defined his experience were not driven by animosity.

Instead, the welcoming, often wholesome atmosphere of the accounts presented to Ian offered a kind of utopia. In between close-up shots of succulent smoked meat and decontextualized screeds against factory farming, this digital pastoral granted Ian access to community, to seemingly open-ended opportunities in the countryside, and, most crucially, to positive identification. This identification operates beyond the purchasing power presented by these accounts, imposing a structure of desire that cannot be satisfied by buying branded merchandise or aiming at the shaky economic logic of the modern homestead. Staged through the collective contemplation of how Ian’s life experiences would inform his online preferences, the persona method offered a powerful tool to consider how captivating this content could become. Rather than naturalizing a lifestyle inaccessible to most of their followers, the dyad of @ballerinafarm and @hogfathering presents the joyous realization of sexual difference as an ordering economic force. Such ideas are certainly not new, nor are they harmless. Sontag’s (1975) gloss on the persistence of fascist aesthetics remains a touchstone here. Reviewing the work and career of Nazi propagandist Leni Riefenstahl, Sontag (1975) offers this formula for parsing fascist focus on the body:

Utopian aesthetics (identity as a biological given) implies an ideal eroticism (sexuality converted into the magnetism of leaders and the joy of followers). The fascist ideal is to transform sexual energy into a “spiritual” force, for the benefit of the community. (para. 41)

In this formula, sex acts as the realized teleology of social and individual life, a purposefulness that is at hazard from erotic excess. This is an excess that must be transferred to dispel its temptations and reroute

its energies. Though Sontag singles out political icons as the loci of this transference, it is also applicable to the out-of-this-world lifestyles peddled by influencers like @ballerinafarm and @hogfathering. Their well-financed return to the land, to tradition, to big families with well-defined gender roles, all under the penetrating gaze of Instagram, echoes Benjamin's (1969) enduring assessment of fascism: Politics are aestheticized, while property relations are preserved (p. 19).

Discussion: Platform Mediation and Desensitization

In some ways, Carolina's experience of TikTok and Ian's experience of Instagram conform to Munn's (2019) description of radicalization pipelines:

The idea tumbler of the internet provides the perfect environment for image or language play, for absurd juxtapositions and insider jokes . . . Inundated in this way, the mind responds by becoming desensitized. Content and claims begin to wash over the user. (para. 18)

Carolina, however, has, to date, not settled in (or, really, near) an extremist viewpoint as a result of such inundation. For his part, Ian saw his resentments stoked and his appetites titillated without being inexorably led into fringe-political commitments. Although these personas' experiences cannot be insinuated into the reactions of a real social media user in the online spaces in which they were deployed, it is significant that the emergent patterning defining the personas' algorithmic personalization stops short of simply feeding them constant misinformation. Rather, the logic of the platform leads them into information environments affectively charged with apathetic attachments. As such, their experience points to new questions for misinformation and disinformation research: What differentiates misinformation-infected mediation that results in extremism? Besides extremism, which other effects of such mediation might be salient and concerning?

As to effects short of extremism that might concern us, these may be obvious, if no more obviously soluble. Munn's (2019) observation of desensitization via YouTube mirrors Ian's experience on Instagram. Even without subscribing to the political subtext of the accounts he found, Ian's experience illustrates the danger ambivalence poses to climate action. While far short of an extremist pipeline, Instagram offered an affective cul-de-sac, channeling interests driven by climate anxiety toward maladaptation and an insular return to tradition. In place of climate fascism, this desensitization highlights profound challenges to addressing the climate crisis online. If anything, this caveat is even more applicable to TikTok: If the affordances and temporality of Instagram allow a steady slide toward parochial inaction, then TikTok greases the chute. As a result, the user buffers the flow of information, forming a habit of holding input at bay unless and until something truly interesting appears, but desensitization is fraught in democracy—to function, citizens require awareness and willingness to engage with pertinent information.

Carolina has not necessarily been led to despise her fellow citizens; she may not even take seriously ideas that any of them are aliens or know secrets about UFOs, but neither does she care that much about them. Following the habits of thought that she indulges in online, she tends to see them as far away, brainlessly dooming each other to climatic and other types of crisis, occasionally entertaining, but not that

important to her. Inasmuch as her online behavior relates to her climate anxiety, it comports with Clayton's (2020) prediction of "a state of tension between the motivating and paralyzing effects" thereof (p. 4). Likewise, Ian's encounters with the nexus of content radiating around @ballerinafarm were always downstream of a looming anxiety about the sustainability of the food system, yet rather than confronting climate-based pressures on food supply, this material routinely fell back on parochial fantasies of self-sufficiency. These attitudes are unlikely to support any meaningful social or political action. At the same time, this is what drove Carolina to TikTok and Ian to Instagram: release from the responsibility of real relationship. Again, there will be others who undergo similar mediation but remain engaged and sensitized.

Conclusions

Intervening in the kind of mediation that produces experiences like Carolina's and Ian's is not simple. In studying the ways platform mediation impacts users, Gillespie (2018) proposes five transformative improvements to online moderation, from designing for deliberate and actionable transparency to putting real diversity behind the platform (pp. 198–201). All of these have merit, and some would even force fundamental changes in social media companies' business models, but zero would affect the way misinformation affects users like Carolina and Ian. The baseless and misleading claims they encounter do not directly provoke identity-based harms; they do not constitute traumatic imagery or content; they do not advocate hatred or behavior likely to harm public health directly. They are not even necessarily taken to heart. Their impact lies in the affective states they affirm. In exchange for her investment of time watching TikTok, Carolina gets the comfort of "knowing" everything is absurd, so nothing matters anyway. This affective salve is extremely valuable to her moment-to-moment life, even though it may poison her eventual well-being and impact on society. For Ian, misinformation is far from the forefront. In this space, what was offered was an implicit solutionism grounded in a perceived return to patriarchal, land-based lifestyles. Unlike the "red-pillers" who Chun (2021) describes, for whom misinformation alluringly promises access to deeper truths, no real heroic narrative is at play here, but none is needed; the affective impact is just as great without one, and (as Chun notes) conventional countermeasures like fact checking and moderation are just as impotent against it.

Such impotence has to do with the affective nature of these impacts and their emergent dynamic. If emergent social media phenomena are not directly predictable, neither can they be controllable, either by insiders (TikTok personnel) or outsiders (users, bot farms, campaigns). This does not mean, however, that they cannot be influenced. Tech enterprises are well-positioned to run experiments on their products cheaply, easily, and (to them) legibly; by manipulating an app's substructures and comparing its interactive patterns pre- and post- (often with a designated subset of users), software creators can indeed form an idea of how to impact those patterns—which, in turn, condition users' human-scale experiences—one way or another.

Thus, while platform companies deliberately obfuscate some aspects of how their products create information effects among users (Doctorow, 2021; Pasquale, 2015), they must mitigate an ineluctable black box of their own that obscures the precise relationships between their product choices and their social impacts. Their ability to do so to some extent implies a (limited, but persistent) responsibility to understand and act on disposing of such social impacts toward sustainable justice. Besides this, the longstanding critique

of the media platform black box is inadequate to substantiate intervention against subtle, hypodermic manipulations of affect that may, over time, perpetrate obfuscation as effectively or more than traditionally perceived forms of mis- and disinformation.

As for users, they (we) in theory have recourse to modulate the microstructures of their (our) own participation in the coproductions of social media. At the same time, an app's personality inevitably influences this ability as well: In the midst of TikTok's habitual rapid-fire presentation of superficial content, any serious purpose of our own seems contra-indicated, and in such conditions reform is unlikely. After all, if we are trying to deliberately effect some positive change in a relationship, why are we here? Carolina, for one, would almost certainly find the idea anathema to her desired (if questionable) use of TikTok as a responsibility-free and relationship-free zone.

It is illuminating to compare the alienation and isolation that our personas experience with the visions of those at the utter opposite end of the social media ecosystem, the tech billionaires who ultimately profit from her likes, ad clicks, and follows. These have increasingly conformed (Rushkoff, 2022) to high-end survivalism—removal to bunkers, to mid-ocean seasteads, to Mars in flight from the fall of civilization. No greater prospect for real relationality or community seems possible in this world than in the one experienced by the doom-scrolling teen or the fantasy homesteader. For both, the world and its resources may be valuable in the abstract, but not necessarily as anything to share or celebrate. While this mindset is qualitatively different from one that admits to or embraces violent extremism, it may be insidious for civil society in a different way: Social relationality is a precondition of democracy. Opting out via technology or determining that democracy and freedom are incompatible (Thiel, 2009) are not themselves atrocious or cataclysmic, but experienced at scale, such affective behaviors blunt democratic human response to mitigate or prevent atrocity and cataclysm.

Needed in the face of such drift—by social media manipulators and their manipulated alike—away from meaningful social engagement, are interventions that reward 1) introspection and apprehension of affect before or in the moment of its attempted capture or mediation, 2) cooperative social efficacy in identifying threats to sustainable life and justice and in overcoming such threats via reasoned collective behavior, and 3) temporal and spatial perspective beyond the buffered immediacy of outformational social media feeds and quarterly reports. Some work along these lines is described by other contributions in this issue. It is also desirable for forthcoming and alternative social media to consider how they can foster affective pathways that empower users to locate their own embodied experience in a shared civic space, one that cares for and honors their individual experience in turn, and can intervene at scale to seek both individual and civic-level sustainability and justice.

We hope that identifying how popular social media mediate affects to the detriment of democratic engagement can inform efforts to affirmatively liberate and empower affective engagement toward meaningful connection and action. By modeling the comparative pathways enabled by a novel digital research method, we hope to provoke further attention to qualitative methods that can endure the evolving dynamics of access to online landscapes.

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