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Individual Differences and Radical Propaganda Distribution: A Structural Analysis of American
Mood and Personality as a Demographic in the Age of Data

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Introduction

Christopher Wylie does not look like your typical data science whistleblower. He dresses in flamboyant fashion, sports a dyed pink buzz cut, and is usually confined to a wheelchair due to a congenital condition that compromised the development of his bone structure. But, on March 17, 2018, in partnership with *The Guardian's* Carol Cadwalladr and *The New York Times's* Matthew Rosenberg, Wylie released the news to the globe, via two simultaneously published newspaper articles, that the data firm Cambridge Analytica had nonconsensually gained access to and operationalized over 50 million Americans' Facebook data, using it to sway the election in then-candidate Donald Trump's favor.

Cambridge Analytica, a subsidiary of Strategic Communications Laboratories (SCL Group) and Wylie's former employer, worked in conjunction with hedge fund magnate Robert Mercer, right-wing media executive and *Breitbart* founder Steve Bannon, and Donald Trump's campaign to co-opt the users' data and build so-called psychometric profiles on them. By relying on traditional principles of personality psychology, they were able to cross-reference the data with key psychometric factors, such as likelihood for radicalization and susceptibility to fear-inducing messaging, to identify a core population of soon-to-be Trump supporters that transcended traditional political demographic barriers. They then utilized psychological techniques and bombarded this group of people with xenophobic and violent propaganda in order to amplify their inner biases. So, on November 8, 2016, as Americans on both sides of the political spectrum watched in awe as Donald Trump narrowly claimed victory in states like Minnesota (43,785 votes), Wisconsin (27,275 votes), and Michigan (11,612 votes) (Politico 2016), Wylie painfully watched the successful results of an elaborate, decade-long, PR campaign that he had helped design and operate. A few years later he would be walking through secret

tunnels under the United States Capitol building explaining to the country's leaders what exactly an algorithm was, and how it holds the potential to undermine our democracy.

Data science's power to totally reconstruct every dimension of society is something that is viewed flippantly by the general public. Most people conceive of microtargeting as simply a tool used to cater advertisements to them for their favorite sneaker brand or clothing company. But realistically, the failure of the legal code to adapt quickly enough to act punitively towards technology companies' collection of personal data exhaust is actively producing space for those companies, like Facebook (now rebranding to "Meta"), to egregiously violate both privacy and human rights. The story of Cambridge Analytica can be viewed as a canary in the coal mine as to the malicious capacity of data monopolization and digital advertising in an unregulated cyber-ecosystem.

It is often forgotten that data sets and algorithms are produced by humans. Computer science is often conflated with hard science and viewed in an objective light in the unapproachable and daunting land of STEM. The way computers learn to think through and solve problems is inherently a derivative of human mental processes, and their DNA is meant to reflect such. As a result, the digital world is never *truly* divorced from the one we actually live in; it is fruitless to consider either the "real" world or the "digital" world in a vacuum void of its partner. "Data" is just a reflection, albeit an ugly one, of a specific angle of collective life, or culture.

Even though they were a data consulting company, Cambridge Analytica built itself in the image of modern personality psychological theory, which is evident by its repertoire of employees and research style. However, the social tides that enabled them to empower radicalization and extremism extend far beyond the scope of the individual and into the realm of

sociological group theory. This gap encapsulates a problem with the discipline of psychology at large, and its failure to analyze humans in the context of humanity (as opposed to the context of cold lab rooms with pale white walls). People are shaped by and influenced like eroding cliffs over a seashore – countless factors contribute towards the molding of who we are, and we are mercurial and feeble molds at that. We are products of our social environments: the economic system we live in, the media we are exposed to, etc., and thus our data is as well. This context is buried deep at the core of why Cambridge Analytica’s tactics worked so efficiently and effectively.

Through this paper I want to unite the American socio-emotional structural context with individual differences and personality psychology theory, using digital data acquisition and targeting as a background to inform this connection. My reason for doing so is to disrupt traditional notions of personality psychology as a distinctly empirical and “end all be all” discipline, as well as to depict the all too relevant dimension of the cyberspace, teetering on “metaverse”, as explicitly pertaining to the future of both sociology and psychology. The paper will be broken into five parts — collectively serving to illustrate a cohesive historiographical narrative between feeling structures, the development of psychology from within the academy, and data’s impact on the interaction between those two factors.

I. I will begin by situating individual differences and personality psychology within the specific temporal period that prompted its inception, as a tool to understand WWII fascism and authoritarianism retroactively. I will also explain its more recent resurgence, which blossomed from a marketing perspective. **II.** Then, I will articulate where that theory has gotten us so far, including an in depth description of the most popular psychological theories relevant to radicalization likelihood and susceptibility to extremist propaganda. **III.** Following that, I will

provide a roadmap on the history of emotion and affect theory under the umbrella of sociology, illustrating how that theory both complicates and complements theories in individual differences and personality psychology. **IV.** Then, I will move on towards an especially critical point in the argument: establishing a timeline of personal psyche through the 2000s. This will be an analysis of propaganda's role in personality construction throughout the beginning of the century, especially looking at the role of the media and government communication in this process. Such an analysis will aim to indict the media as an active force set to intentionally craft mass personalities, contrary to the common perception of intrinsic individual personality differences. **V.** The last section will involve an explanation of data collection and psychometric profiling using the Cambridge Analytica scandal as a grounding mechanism. In it, I will explain what happened within the scandal, providing context for the psychological tools used to influence voters. What is of paramount importance in this section is drawing the connection between what data was objectively gathered by Cambridge Analytica, and how that data is produced by structural factors as demonstrated by emotion and affect theory.

Chapter 1: Brief History of the Development of Personality Psychology as a Subdiscipline

Modern-day personality psychology finds its roots, alongside many other disciplines, in Ancient Greek thought. Dating back to 370 B.C.E, Hippocrates proposed a temperamental model that included two pillars: hot/cold and moist/dry. The interactions between these pillars were said to produce four distinctive “humors”, or personality characteristics. While much of his research was pseudo-scientific and unfounded, it introduced the idea that a person’s personality could be influenced by intrinsic factors (Ford, 2013). Thinkers like Plato and Aristotle expanded this knowledge in an attempt to explain personality’s role in social structure; Plato offered a four-factor grouping model (artistic, sensible, intuitive, and reasoning), while Aristotle used more vague terminology (iconic, pistic, noetic, and dianoetic). Neither of these theories hold significant stature in the psychological community today, but they display the beginnings of a logic pathway that connected physical brain structure with personality and behavioral outcomes (Ford, 2013).

Franz Gall, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Jung

The field of personality psychology began to truly blossom at the end of the 19th century, leading into the mid-20th century, with Sigmund Freud, his proteges, and the rise of European fascism in countries such as Germany, Italy, and Spain. The groundwork was laid by Franz Gall, the father of phrenology, a discipline through which he hypothesized a relationship between different brain areas and functions. Gall’s assumptions were semi-validated in 1848 when an accident resulted in Phineas Gage, a railroad worker from New Hampshire, receiving a tamping iron through his skull. Gage survived, but it was commonly understood that his demeanor took a dramatic shift. His behavior transformed from generally poised to crass and profane (Twomey, 2010). This came in conjunction with the dawning of Sigmund Freud’s career towards the end of

the 1800s. Freud's most popularly known impact on the field of psychology was psychoanalysis — a technique he founded himself as a treatment for psychopathology. A derivative of this theory is referred to as the Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory of Personality, and involves Freud's interpretation of what he deems the id, ego, and superego: or one's preconscious, conscious, and unconscious minds. He outlined this theory in his 1923 paper "The Ego and The Id", originally titled "Das Ich und das Es". In it Freud articulates the nuances between these three classifications:

We have two kinds of unconscious — that which is latent but capable of becoming unconscious, and that which is repressed and not capable of becoming conscious in the ordinary way... that which is latent, and only unconscious in the descriptive and not the dynamic sense, we call the preconscious; the term unconscious we reserve for the dynamically unconscious repressed so that we now have three terms, conscious (Cs), preconscious (Pcs), and unconscious (Ucs). (Freud, 1923)

Essentially, the id is the innate driver of behavior, the ego is the connection between the id and reality: it is how people realistically justify and rationalize their desires, and the superego serves as the most organized part of the inner psyche and provides a moral check on these rationalizations.

While Freud did contribute to personality theory in a socialized context through different works of his, his Psychoanalytic Theory of Personality groomed the field of personality psychology in an intrinsic and individual direction. The subject of the psyche as purely a division of internal consciousness helped cement the incubative trend in the subdiscipline that the personality puzzle would be solved by approaching the question: "what are our underlying drives and motivations?". In the forthcoming years, more critical papers contributed to this trend, notably Abraham Maslow's 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation" which outlined Maslow's hierarchy of needs. His theory is most often referenced in developmental psychology, but bears great significance towards the overall field's movement towards assessing human

nature through the context of the individual. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is shaped in a pyramid fashion and works vertically from basic human needs like food, shelter, and water, towards more theoretical needs, like self-actualization and transcendence (Maslow, 1943).

A specific pupil of Freud's, Carl Jung, was instrumental in carrying the field of personality psychology in an intrapersonal direction. Freud originally viewed Jung as an heir to his newly conceived idea of psychoanalysis, but Jung's personal research and opposing vision for the future of psychological science created a rift between them. After their schism, Jung established his own method, analytical psychology, as an alternative to psychoanalysis. Jung's analytical psychology was an active attempt to inject psychology with empiricism, and in its forging Jung relied heavily on the idea of typology. Psychological typologies are classes used to identify distinctions between people; in Jung's context, they mainly act as sorting boxes for individual personality differences. In one of Jung's most influential books, "Psychological Types" (1921), he classifies people into four modes of consciousness: sensation, intuition, thought, and feeling, and two modifying attitudes: introversion and extroversion. The interaction between these modes and their modifiers, he argues, separates people into eight individual personality categories: introverted thinking, extraverted thinking, introverted feeling, etc. (Jung, 1921). In a justification for his theory of typology, Jung writes that "the two types [introvert and extrovert] are so essentially different, presenting so striking a contrast, that their existence, even to the uninitiated in psychological matters becomes an obvious fact, when once attention has been drawn to it. Who does not know those taciturn, impenetrable, often shy natures, who form such vivid contrast to these other open, sociable, serene maybe, or at least and accessible characters" (Jung, 1921).

In this section, Jung opines that the dichotomy between the two attitudes is enough of an explanation for their inherent existence, which I find nothing more than a shallow axiom. This is the type of thinking I find degrading towards the entire discipline of individual psychology. Despite the blatantly classist undertones of his rhetoric, Jung's analysis fails to deeply interrogate the meaning behind "introversion" and "extroversion" other than giving brief explanations of how the two are negatively related to one another. Surely, the existence of red is not the only defining factor that makes something else blue.

Evolving directly out of Jung's work came the Myers-Briggs test in 1943. It was created by Katherine Cook Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers and utilized similar typology mechanisms to Jung's. The test involves a series of 93 questions that supposedly group people into one of two options in four different categories: extraversion/introversion, sensing/intuition, thinking/feeling, and judging/perceiving. The first letter of each category is used to differentiate people into 16 personality types, i.e. ESTP, INFP, ENTJ, etc. Realistically, these binaries are incredibly limited, practically arbitrary, and ultimately useless indicators of behavioral compatibility; neither Myers or Briggs had any formal training in psychology (Stromberg & Caswell, 2015). The development of the test simply acts as evidence for the individually and intrinsically oriented direction implanted by Jung. Another example of this train of thought came from Carl Rogers, a firm believer in Maslow's theory. Rogers extended the hierarchy of needs theory to include personality psychology, arguing that the self is one's inner personality, and meeting one's needs appropriately will allow their inner personality to shine through, empowering the greatest version of themselves. He calls in the idea of the self concept, one's true belief about themselves, and states alignment with oneself allows people to unlock the status as a "fully functioning person". This includes meeting five distinct criteria: being open to experience,

living existentially, trusting feelings, being creative, reaching for fulfillment (McLeod, 2014).

Such an approach highlights the continuation of regard to personality as something that, while it might have some external factors, is intrinsically developed, and can be monitored by the individual.

Post-WWII: The Frankfurt School and The Authoritarian Personality

Another key element of personality psychology's growth is its context within the post-WWII atmosphere and the rise of fascism in Europe. Many European theorists and academics were appalled by how a such a soulless movement could gain roots and lead to mass genocide in even the 20th century. Specifically, they were interested in what factors contributed to authoritarianism; since fascism's inception collided with the beginning of personality psychology, much of the discipline's core canon came from this time period. A particularly influential text was "The Authoritarian Personality" by Theodor Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford: all members of The Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School was a Marxist think-tank founded during the interwar period in Germany, with the loose goal of expanding off of Marx's work to answer 20th century social problems through an anti-positivist framework. Because the Frankfurt School was composed of mostly Jewish thinkers during Adolf Hitler's occupation of Western Europe, their work was eerily meta.

"The Authoritarian Personality" was published in 1950, and it typically is classified as a sociological text, although much of its subject matter and empirical procedure pertains directly to the foundational elements of personality psychology. The authors forward nine interrelational traits that are a product of childhood experiences. They claim these traits (conventionalism, authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, superstition and stereotypy, power and toughness, destructiveness and cynicism, projectivity, and exaggerated concerns over sex) can

then be used to accurately diagnose the typical “authoritarian personality” (Adorno et al., 1950). The research came under extensive criticism immediately after its publication in the 1950s, but is considered fundamental because of its impact on the field as a whole. Although Adorno et al.’s categorizations do not fit as individual of a typology as Jung’s, they still narrow the assessment of the individual into a focused lens that obscures true structural critique. Even if they did not overtly intend for that narrow of a focus, their followers certainly used their underpinning logic to steer personality evaluation towards an individualist, empirical formatting.

Another key element of “The Authoritarian Personality” was the formation and inclusion of various scales, or evaluative determinants that can help predict authoritarianism in individuals. Examples include the total ethnocentrism scale (E-scale), the patriotism subscale (P-scale), the anti-Semitism scale (A-S-scale), and the fascism (F-scale) (Adorno et al., 1950). The most important of these is the F-scale), which is a 77-question-long fascism indicator test under the chapter entitled *The Measurement of Implicit Antidemocratic Trends*. While the factors embedded within this F-Scale and the nine “authoritarian traits” are not necessarily wrong or incorrect, they are simply too shallow of interpretations to warrant significant meaning. In Ian Burkitt’s work “Emotions and Social Relations” he contextualizes this tension through the presentation of an anecdote on male aggression. Burkitt tells the tale of a young British man featured on a BBC program *Wot You Looking At* who fights a woman on the Subway that refused to give up her seat for his wife. He explains that psychologists were quick to accuse the man of paranoia, because he acted so aggressively compared to the “typical” person. Overshadowed, though, were the class-based implications baked into the scenario. In the man’s terms, “his explanation of his behavior... was provoked by the fact she was looking down on him and being snobbish, [reflecting] a wider pattern of social class relations in [a] society in which [he] was

brought up]... he perceived the woman he attacked as being of a higher social class, as being snobbish and looking down on him, meaning that he felt she considered him of lesser worth” (Burkitt, 2014).

When adhering to this example, it becomes quite clear how a typologist approach can often hit the wrong target in its analysis, or even miss the target altogether. Contemporary psychologists understand aggression as a derivative of anger, not a feeling within itself. They assert, therefore, that aggression is a behavior, a way someone is predisposed to act in a given scenario. Different people have different levels of aggression, in the example of the British man it might be understood that his heightened aggression was the result of learning to behave in such a way from his father, who was a very violent man (Burkitt, 2014). Although sometimes credited with learned behavioral or tropological roots, aggression is primarily conceived as an individual difference among people in the domain of psychology. However, in this case, there are pronounced class undertones that do an arguably better job explaining the man’s actions thoroughly and without such “cut and dry” language. While a psychological examination can help explain what happened (a man attacked a woman on a train because his anger translated into an aggravated state of aggression), a more sociological lens can help us understand why it happened (20th-century class tensions in Britain and aggressive behaviors taught in lower-class communities combined to provoke a lower-class man when confronted with perceived condescension from an upper-class woman).

Imagine the disciplinary setbacks that are indebted to psychology when considering the logic presented within “The Authoritarian Personality” and this particular scenario. The behavior demonstrated by the man could easily be grouped into the F-Scale traits of power and toughness, or even authoritarian aggression. But the important sociological underpinnings are lost in the

translation from actions to paper. Instead, this behavior is interpreted as innately programmed into the DNA of the individual, as if they live an existence decontextualized from social forces and pressures. The anger he felt, that transformed into aggression, was not objective, it was a subjective product of the patterns of relationships that constructed his social reality. In that sense, typological logic might be true, but it fails to interrogate the sources of its articulations. When people try to explain social phenomena like fascism or aggression in terms of the individual, it condenses reality into an unidentifiable reflection of itself, and inspires egregious misdiagnoses of social problems. Carl Jung and Theodor Adorno are semi-dated examples, but the rationale they promoted has been regurgitated into theories still referenced today like the Big Five Personality Traits.

The Big Five Personality Traits

There was no distinct paper or book in which the Big Five Personality Theory was established, rather it was refined steadily over time into the generalized framework that it is today. In 1936, Gordon Allport and Henry Odbert listed a set of 4,500 terms that they thought related to personality traits. Then, over the course of the next half-century, their work was whittled down by psychologists such as Raymond Cattell, Donald Fiske, Lewis Goldberg, and finally Paul Costa and Robert McCrae, who presented the Five-Factor Personality theory as it stands today in their 2003 book “Personality in Adulthood: A Five-factor Theory Perspective”. Clearly, the conceptual theorization of their work stems from a typological perspective, immediately exposing the century-long knowledge roadmap that led them to the subject of their literature. The five traits that comprise both the Big Five and the Five-factor theories (extremely similar concepts that are differentiated for the sake of academic credit) are: extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and neuroticism. This is the order and

terminology that is traditionally accepted in the field. Because of the Big Five's necessitation and relevance to both the individualistic trend of personality psychology, as well as forming the backbone of propensity to radicalization (which will be discussed in the following chapter), I will outline each factor below (Goldberg, 1993).

Extraversion:

Extraversion is a direct descendant of Carl Jung's work, it is a complement to introversion. It refers to an individual's tendency to seek interaction with their environment, particularly in a social context. High extraversion translates to a high comfort level participating and asserting oneself in social situations. People that score highly on extraversion typically draw energy from interacting in social contexts.

Agreeableness:

Agreeableness coincides with trustworthiness, helpfulness, and generalized altruistic tendencies. People with heightened agreeableness often treat their relations with others with kindness, cooperation, and affection. Low scorers on agreeableness tend to be competitive, unempathetic, and even manipulative. In sum, agreeable people enjoy contributing to happiness in other people.

Openness to experience:

Openness to experience refers to an individual's connection with their imagination and insight. People who are high in this trait are usually imaginative, adventurous, and creative. They are capable of abstract thinking, and enjoy discovering and learning about new things, like places, customs, experiences, etc. People who score low on this tend to rely more on tradition and struggle with "out-of-the-box thinking".

Conscientiousness:

Conscientiousness is the ability to maintain good impulse control, execute goal-directed behaviors, and act thoughtfully. Organization, attention to detail, and timeliness, are all associated with conscientiousness. Individuals who score highly on conscientiousness tend to plan ahead, value structure, and are cognizant towards how their behavior affects others. People who score low on conscientiousness dislike schedules, make messes, and routinely procrastinate.

Neuroticism:

Neuroticism is an all-encompassing term for characteristics such as sadness, moodiness, and emotional instability. It is associated with mood swings, high anxiety, irritability, and sadness. An important concept woven into neuroticism is emotional resilience — a measure of an individual's ability to cope with a crisis and return to pre-crisis standing smoothly and effectively. Highly neurotic people experience a lot of stress and worry, and do not possess strong emotional resilience.

An important note is that neuroticism is the only trait of the five that is viewed negatively in Western society, which is influenced strictly by the dominant capitalist hegemony. Some critique has surfaced about how the Big Five personality traits are not objective, but rather a product of hegemonic Western social values that influenced the originators of the theory. A telling example of this was a study done that tested the relationship between hotel employees and counterproductive work behavior (CBW). The study looked at 178 hotel employees from various departments and analyzed how their demonstrated Big Five traits related to their counterproductive work behavior, which is defined as behaviors that are intended to harm organizations or people in organizations, including: abuse, production deviance, sabotage, theft, and withdrawal (Kozako et al., 2013). The researchers discovered a negative correlation between high agreeableness and CBW and a positive correlation between high neuroticism and openness

to experience and CBW. These findings could be interpreted to portray agreeableness as a positive manifestation of the idyllic capitalist worker, distorting the idea or what it really means to be “agreeable” within a capitalist environment. Conversely, high neuroticism can be a clear sign of poor mental health, something which can be genetic and/or a product of an individual’s environment. Factors like being a member of a marginalized community, or growing up in a low-income area, put people at a greater risk of developing mental health disorders. So, when high neuroticism is classified as essentially being detrimental to the archetype of a “good worker” it naturally raises questions about the integrity of the origination of these five personality terms.

The contemporary method for analyzing a particular individual’s score on each of the Big Five personality traits was determined by Lewis Goldberg in a 1992 study and is known as the Big Five Inventory (BFI). Goldberg’s BFI consists of 44 statements. Each statement is measured on a five point Likert scale where 1=Disagree, 3=Neutral, and 5=Agree; the test-taker notates on the scale from 1-5 how much they agree with the statement, i.e. “Gets nervous easily” (John & Srivastava, 1999). The results are calculated by adding the numbers together and grouping test-takers into their respective categories. Another common version of this test can be found online via the Open Source Psychometrics Project, which provides 50 statements, ten for each personality factor. The grading for this test operates on an identical Likert scale. The results from that test are given in both individual and percentile terms.

(Fig. 1) *Big Five Inventory—Big Five Marker Test*

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
I am the life of the party.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel little concern for others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am always prepared.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I get stressed out easily.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have a rich vocabulary.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I don't talk a lot.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am interested in people.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I leave my belongings around.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am relaxed most of the time.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have difficulty understanding abstract ideas.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel comfortable around people.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I insult people.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I pay attention to details.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I worry about things.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have a vivid imagination.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I keep in the background.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I sympathize with others' feelings.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I make a mess of things.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I seldom feel blue.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am not interested in abstract ideas.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I start conversations.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am not interested in other people's problems.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I get chores done right away.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am easily disturbed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have excellent ideas.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have little to say.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have a soft heart.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often forget to put things back in their proper place.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I get upset easily.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I do not have a good imagination.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I talk to a lot of different people at parties.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am not really interested in others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I like order.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I change my mood a lot.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am quick to understand things.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I don't like to draw attention to myself.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I take time out for others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I shirk my duties.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have frequent mood swings.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I use difficult words.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I don't mind being the center of attention.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel others' emotions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I follow a schedule.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I get irritated easily.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I spend time reflecting on things.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am quiet around strangers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I make people feel at ease.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am exacting in my work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often feel blue.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am full of ideas.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Chapter 2: How Individual Differences and Personality Psychology Relate to Radicalization Likelihood and Susceptibility to Violent Propaganda

The goal of this chapter is to provide a contemporary outline for the accepted psychological literature on radicalization and terrorism. This groundwork must be laid out to allow for an eventual expansion of this theory through a sociological framework. One of the leading researchers in this field of psychological science is Arie Kruglanski, a Polish-born psychologist who studied at the University of California, Los Angeles. His work focuses on psychology and motivation of terrorists and deradicalization techniques, much of which is showcased in his 2014 paper “The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism” (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Although much of his work focuses specifically on violent extremism, the general theories are easily adaptable to the context of this paper.

Kruglanski et al. operates on the working definition of radicalization as “the process of supporting or engaging in activities deemed (by others) as in violation of important social norms (e.g. the killing of civilians)” (2014). The model he presents in the paper is broken into three components:

(1) the *motivational* component (the quest for personal significance) that defines a goal to which one may be committed, (2) the *ideological* component that in addition identifies the means of violence as appropriate for this goal's pursuit, and (3) the *social process* of networking and *group dynamics* through which the individual comes to share in the violence-justifying ideology and proceeds to implement it as a means of significance gain. (Kruglanski et al., 2014)

The underlying motive that unifies these is what he deems a *quest for significance* — an all-encompassing term for more vague values traditionally associated with radicalization such as: honor, loyalty to leader, etc. To elaborate further on the concept, the quest for significance alludes to the human motivation for esteem, achievement, meaning, competence, and control

(Kruglanski et al., 2014). The study also discusses the process of radicalization from a psychological angle. The study presents three main ingredients: arousal of the goal of significance, identification of terrorism violence as a mean to significance, and finally a commitment shift to the individual goal, leading to superiority of that goal and simultaneous devaluation of goals that are not compatible with terrorism. This funnel insinuates that a quest for significance naturally correlates with the beginning of the radicalization process. Three important questions are raised through this framework: (1) what individual differences in personality naturally predispose individuals to experience a quest for significance/predisposition towards radicalization, (2) what is the role of private and public propaganda efforts in the lubrication of the radicalization funnel, and (3) what sociological factors contribute to the conditions behind the individual differences mentioned in question one. The first two will be answered through further analysis of psychological research, and the third will be discussed in depth in the following chapter.

It is important to note that modern psychological research on terrorism largely came in response to the 9/11 attacks, which were perpetrated by Islamic extremists. This tends to bias the concepts of terrorism and radicalization through that context, which is a significant limitation unto the research. Especially for this study, it must be understood that there are gaps when considering this type of literature in relation to white nationalist terrorism, which was the dominant form present in the 2016 election propaganda campaign.

The Psychology of Radicalization and Terrorism by Willem Koomen and Joop Van Der Pligt is an instrumental text in outlining the commonly accepted psychological literature that forms the knowledge base of radical terrorist individuation. Post-WWII, researchers began to analyze Nazi cooperators' personality scores in comparison to average peoples' scores. Before

this research was conducted, it was thought that Nazis displayed abnormally high levels of traits such as violence, power hunger, and apathy (traits that fall under the umbrella term *Machiavellianism*, part of the Dark Triad). But when Nazis' psychological personality scores were compared to regular people's retroactively there were no significant differences in these variables. This phenomenon undermines the popular idea that terrorists possess some sort of abnormal personality or heightened level of psychopathy (Koomen & Van Der Pligt, 2015).

Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation

Koomen and Van Der Pligt discuss two crucial individual differences in personality that they believe have a tangible impact on the predisposition towards radicalization and terrorism: authoritarianism and social dominance orientation. The combination of these two factors is said to increase one's likelihood to develop a strong prejudice towards other out-groups, a key element of the radical personality. Their definition of the authoritarian personality serves as a direct descendent of Adorno's: individuals that showcase high regard for "traditional standards and values, [a] respect [for] authority and its figureheads and [that] direct their aggression against targets sanctioned by that authority" (Koomen & Van Der Pligt, 2015). Because of the interconnected nature of their definitions, it is understandable that a multitude of psychological research studies have found a positive correlation between authoritarianism and prejudice.

As a quick side note, the authors speculate on this dynamic in an interesting way. They comment on the marriage between authoritarianism and prejudice in the following statement, "underlying this orientation are probably feelings of uncertainty and a sensitivity to threat — factors that, as stated earlier, can play a role in the process of radicalization and the path towards terrorism" (Koomen & Van Der Pligt, 2015). Although this may seem like a shallow or inconsequential comment at first read, it functions as an idyllic vehicle for importing sociological

theory into psychology. I will refrain from diving too deeply into this, since it will be covered comprehensively in the next chapter. But consider the dramatic structural impacts behind what could inspire uncertainty and threat sensitivity within a particular individual, especially in the modern context of information and media campaigns and the level at which the government and powerful private parties can construct popular narratives. The concept of uncertainty is frightening to most people, so much so that delving headfirst into it is usually revered with high levels of social admiration. But the scope of uncertainty's effect on people has a drastic spectrum. There is a large difference between uncertainty felt through something casual, i.e. feeling nervous about the uncertainty as to how a first date will go, and the uncertainty that is baked into the fabric of certain demographic personalities through social norms, power hierarchies, coordinated media efforts to implant narratives, etc. Situating psychological theory at this angle offers a more holistic insight into individuals' character, personality, and motivations, all domains typically restrained to a single dimension of analysis in psychology. This revolves back to the meta-argument of this paper that personality and emotion are not intrinsic values, but are rather social constructs and derivatives of interrelational human interaction.

The second predictor of radicalization, social dominance orientation, refers to the extent to which individuals (A) the preference for some groups to dominate others and (B.) a preference for non-egalitarian intergroup relations. Research has been done in various countries, like Canada and Israel, that ties social dominance orientation to ethnic prejudice. At its heart, social dominance orientation is shown in people that are predisposed to reject the notion that all people are equal. Once again, authoritarianism involves the tendency to submit to authority and discomfort with changing social values and standards.

Koomen and Van Der Pligt propose a mechanism for quantifying the other half of the uncertainty coin, sensitivity to threat, with the Belief in a Dangerous World Scale developed in 1988 by Canadian psychologist Robert Altemeyer. The scale includes items along the lines of “There are many dangerous people in our society who will attack someone out of pure meanness, for no reason at all” and “Any day now chaos and anarchy could erupt around us. All the signs are pointing to it” (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). There are obvious implications underscored within the phrasing of the first example item that act as a euphemism for race-baiting tactics, and are therefore subject to sociological analysis. Additionally, the second example item signals piqued levels of anxiety, a concept woven into conservatism and news media that will be elaborated on extensively in Chapter Four.

Experimental research utilizing the Belief in a Dangerous World Scale has concluded that when a self-protection goal is activated within white participants, they perceive Black and Arab male faces as angrier than other demographics (Maner et al., 2005). The methodology used in this particular study involved a two-step process. First, the researchers screened participants with film clips meant to elicit a fear-specific emotion. Then, the participants were shown photos of different racial and sex demographics and were asked to judge the emotions they believed those faces were expressing (Maner et al., 2005). This empirical research helps tie together the connections between ethnonationalism, authoritarianism, threat sensitivity, and prejudice, although it does feel like a tip of the iceberg analysis.

Another indicator of social dominance orientation is the adoption of a competitive mindset regarding one’s positioning within society. A common scale used to measure this is the Competitive-jungle Worldview Scale. This scale contains items such as: “Winning is not the first thing; it’s the only thing”, and “If it’s necessary to be cold-blooded and vengeful to reach one’s

goals, then one should do it” (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). Such motivation is usually generally classified as Machiavellianism and bears serious ramifications as tangential to social dominance orientation. As Koomen and Van Der Pligt mention, individuals that view the world as threatening, dangerous, and highly competitive, and are thus desirous of power, status, and success, are more likely to have heightened levels of authoritarianism and social dominance orientation and thus are predisposed to the radicalization pipeline (Koomen & Van Der Pligt, 2015).

A common question that arises in these discussions is the impact heredity has on the outcome of personality and individual differences: the nature versus nurture debate. A 1993 study by Abraham Tesser called “The Importance of Heritability in Psychological Research: The Case of Attitudes” seemed to indicate that both authoritarianism and social dominance orientation could be partially inherited. However, nature and nurture intertwine; it seems incredibly unlikely that the profound social structures that make up the DNA of Western society, particularly in the United States, have little impact in regards to authoritarianism and social dominance theory.

The deep irony baked into this domain of academia is that researchers discovered these traits in hopes to provide an explanation to the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany in WWII, but those very same traits are sponsored at the heart of the archetypical “American” personality. Think about the synonymous nature between competitiveness and capitalism that feels like a close cousin of social dominance orientation. Machiavellianism in American economic society is viewed as a necessary evil, if it is even viewed as an evil at all. People are rewarded for their drive, it is a fundamental aspect of the American Dream. Additionally, in the corporate structure of America, regard for authority and non-deviation are viewed as positive attributes.

Radicalization processes have evolved significantly since the colonization of America by white Europeans, especially recently with the emergence of the internet, but authoritarianism and social dominance orientation have been a consistent thread in the heart of white America. This concept will be further discussed in Chapter Four with the conversation on the evolution of the American psyche, but it is imperative to lay the foundation now as to how theoretical psychological models can be expanded upon sociologically.

Susceptibility to Propaganda in the Radicalization Process; Anxiety

Let us forward a slightly more nuanced description of radicalization that encapsulates a functional and descriptive approach. In a study, McCauley and Mosklenko opined that functionally, radicalization involves advanced preparation for intergroup conflict and an accentuated engagement to it, while descriptively, the terms refers to a change in beliefs, feelings, and behaviors that justify intergroup violence (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). Another researcher, Wiktorowicz presented the idea of “cognitive opening” in the radicalization process: a specific moment or event where an individual faces discrimination, socioeconomic crisis, or political repression, and previously held beliefs are dislodged, opening the door for an influx of radical ideology (Wiktorowicz, 2005). While the type of radicalization that forms the basis of this paper mostly excludes violent action, approaching radicalization from this angle helps illuminate propaganda's potential to decorate the radicalization funnel.

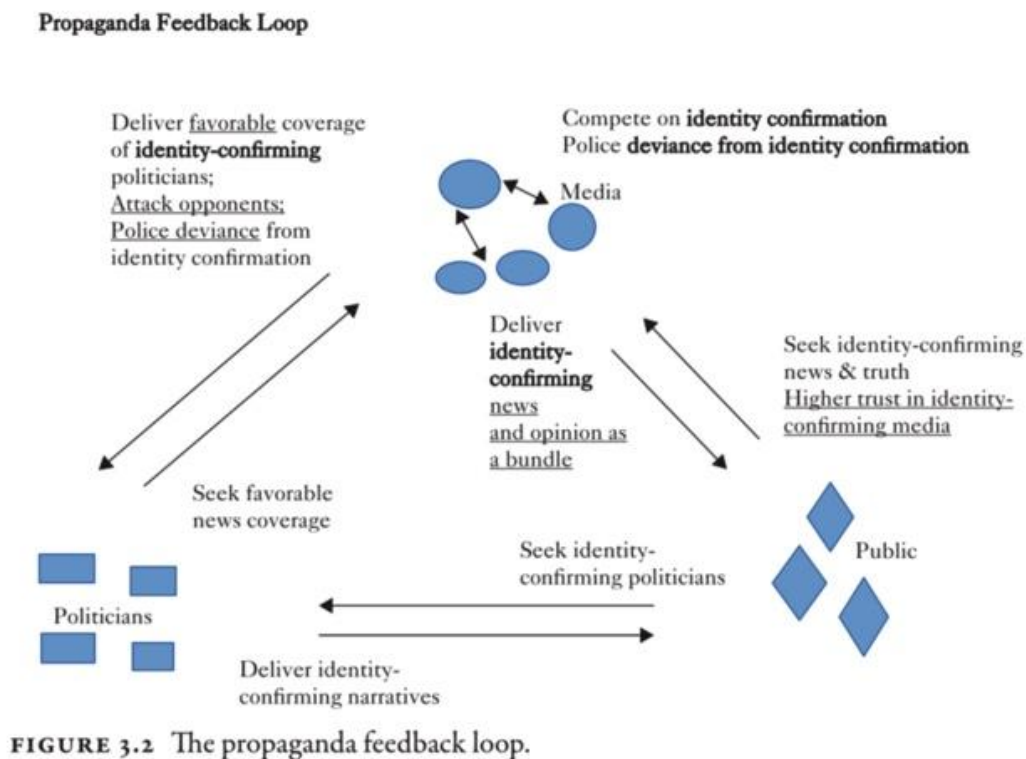
A 1954 paper by a researcher at Yale University, Irving Janis, titled “Personality Correlates of Susceptibility To Persuasion” was one of the first to detect a link between low self-esteem and acute neurotic anxiety with susceptibility to persuasive communications efforts (Janis, 1954). For the purpose of this paper, propaganda will be used interchangeably with terms like: persuasive communication, persuasive communication efforts, disinformation, etc, because

at its core, propaganda is, “a manipulation for the purpose of changing ideas or opinions, or making individuals “believe” some idea, and finally of making them adhere to some doctrine – all matters of mind” (Ellul, 1965). Janis’ work inspired a wave of research on the connection between anxiety and persuadability. Susan Millman conducted research in 1968 that found high-acute-anxiety manipulation raised persuadability (Millman, 1968).

Additionally, researchers at Edge Hill University in England found an interesting dichotomy in that “Fearful” personality profiles (a close sibling of anxiety) is associated with a “following the crowd” mentality, while “Socially Apt” profiles are more easily persuaded to do or believe something that is consistent with their previous beliefs (Wall et al., 2019). These personality profiles were constructed by the researchers on account of participants’ scores on the aforementioned Big Five Personality Scale, as well as the Dark Triad and Type-D (distressed) personality scales. The Dark Triad consists of three traits: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychoticism. The Type-D personality test screens for levels of social inhibition and negative affectivity (Wall et al., 2019). These were then cross-referenced with Robert Cialdini’s Six Principles of Persuasion: reciprocity, scarcity, authority, commitment/consistency, liking, and consensus (Cialdini, 2001). These items can be quantified through the use of the Kapstein’s Susceptibility to Persuasion Scale (Kaptein, 2012), which is a 28-item questionnaire graded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “completely disagree” to “completely agree”. Another key finding embedded in this data is that neuroticism was significantly associated with greater persuasion by authority as it is defined by Cialdini, adding more ammo to the arsenal for the connection between those two concepts (Wall et al., 2019). This analysis will admittedly become more profound when approaching anxiety, and eventually depression, from a structural angle, but such reservations are indicative of psychology’s shortcomings.

An important concept to take brief note of while on the subject is propaganda's status as a cyclical cognitive operation, and how that relationship is enforced by traditional psychological theory. Consider the diagram below, which is an excerpt from Benkler et al.'s (2018) "Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics".

(Fig. 2) *Propaganda Feedback Loop*



The feedback loop itself is intuitive, but it hinges on some important foundational concepts that are vital for a fluent interpretation of propaganda from a psychological perspective.

Important Psychological Concepts Regarding Digital Propaganda Intake

The overarching argument in this paper deals mainly with exploring when and where psychological versus sociological analyses can properly diagnose mood and personality construction. Ultimately, the conclusion seeks to indict psychological analyses as generally

underwhelming and inadequate as tools for structural analysis (partially because there is common confusion as to what is precisely individual and what is structural in personality and mood theory), it is still important to have a foundational understanding of the mental processes enacted by individuals when exposed to digital media. This will help make the connection between American events in that last half-century and generalizable personality and mood construction. These types of processes act as mediators towards understanding larger structural phenomena and therefore must be explored.

Heuristics: Availability, Confirmation Bias, etc.

In psychology, a heuristic is a mental shortcut performed for problem-solving purposes that is optimized for immediacy rather than rationalization. They are often responsible for irrational conclusions drawn by people through limited access to specifically catered information that affects everything from what we buy at a grocery store to cultural attitudes formed through media intake. Heuristic thought processes are not an “end all be all” solution to the core question of this paper, because they only outline a theoretical process (they have no inherent value or context). While heuristics might act as a function, this paper is focusing on what determines the individual variables, in relation to intake of digital propaganda and what drives personality and attitude construction at a structural level. Nevertheless, they are critical to the understanding of propaganda and digital media intake, and will be referenced when discussing how neoliberalism and the media have influenced a collective anxious personality. For that reason, I will elaborate on a few imperative ones.

Availability Bias

Availability bias is the tendency for an individual to make decisions based on the information available to them rather than what is statistically likely. An example is the

hyper-coverage of plane crashes in the media; people sometimes develop a fear of flying because of said coverage, despite the extreme statistical improbability of being involved in a plane crash. As will be discussed in the following chapter, this heuristic has been weaponized by American mainstream media with the deliberate catering and dispensary of selected information to the populace.

Confirmation Bias

Confirmation bias refers to an individual's favoritism of information that confirms previously existing beliefs and biases. This is heavily interconnected with availability bias in the sense that it operates in conjunction with information gathering and processing. It also exists in a feedback loop in the context of polarized media outlets; it can be cited as an explanation for the initial establishment of said outlets (in tandem with capitalist motives and the elite's suppression of information), and it simultaneously is reinforced by the programming on said outlets.

Confirmation bias can interrelate with prejudice. For example, a common stereotype driven by news outlets, especially conservative ones, is that Black men are more likely to commit crime. Someone who digests that information regularly might see a Black man acting normally, but interpret it as aggressive or criminal behavior.

Automaticity Bias

The automaticity bias is the human tendency to treat computerized evidence, usually perceived as data, with a higher degree of factuality and objectivity. It is also why people are so keen to believe what they read on the internet, something that will become incredibly important during the discussion on examples of electoral digitized propaganda.

Dual Process Theory

A close cousin of heuristics, the dual process theory is a model for how people receive information. The dual process model involves two pathways, often referred to as the hot and cold pathways. The hot pathway is involuntary and automatic, and the information processed when this is activated usually lacks specificity. This stands in contrast to the logical, cold pathway, which uses more cognitive resources to thoroughly process information. The hot pathway is commonly exploited during advertising, when people are attempting to save cognitive resources. That is the reasoning behind the loudness, colorfulness, and quick cuts of advertising: to make them memorable to the hot pathway viewer. Social media has recently begun to populate the same space in people's days that traditional media used to, explaining the recent surge of sponsored advertisements to platforms like Instagram. Notably, the hot pathway is also activated during anger and fear responses. These emotions are important because they are both inextricably related to anxiety through the speculation of perception of threat. Imagine how powerful it could be if someone was scrolling through social media, already prone to a hot pathway response through that, and they encountered a fear-inducing advertisement that also confirmed an idea they consumed on a traditional news outlet previously that week. That is the power of propaganda in the digital age.

Social Identity Theory (In-grouping and out-grouping)

Lastly, social identity theory is what defines the relatively vernacular terms: in-group and out-group. Originally purported by the Polish social psychologist Henri Tajfel, the theory states that the groups people belong to help bolster their pride and self-esteem. Therefore, to protect identity and self-concept, in-groups (us) mentally develop out-groups (them). This process leads to both an exaggerated perception of differences between groups and perceived homogeneity of

the out-group. Such thinking opens up pathways for stereotyping and prejudice, made worse by exposure to anger-inciting propaganda.

I will finish this chapter by briefly outlining a series of conclusions drawn from select psychological studies, all of which sought to expose the relationship between individual differences in personality and susceptibility to propaganda/disinformation from slightly different angles. Shortland & McGarry (2021) dealt with Behavioral Approach System (BAS) factors, and by using the “EXTREME inventory” (EXperimental Test of Radical EMotional Engagement), they found that BAS traits were positively associated with willingness to engage radical online content designed for political activation. Another study, Calvillo et al. (2021), aimed to elucidate a connection between the aforementioned Big Five factors and disinformation susceptibility. The major results of the study were that conscientiousness and openness to experience were both positively correlated with news discernment, at ($p = .006$) and ($p < .001$), respectively. News discernment was positively associated with agreeableness, at ($p < .001$), and not correlated with extraversion or neuroticism, at ($p = .391$) and ($p = .447$), respectively. They also found a negative correlation between political conservatism and news discernment, as well as political conservatism as a predictor towards less perceived accuracy of true stories (Calvillo et al., 2021). Pennycook & Rand (2019) centered the availability heuristic as a mediator in the receptivity of fake news. In their theoretical framework they outline the Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT) — a derivative of dual-process theory that measures an individual’s likelihood to take cognitive shortcuts, also known as heuristics. They claim CRT relates to fake news perception through the human mind’s propensity to take a logic pathway of minimal cognitive effort in problem solving and content analysis. The researchers found that accuracy of fake news was positively correlated

with both bullshit receptivity scores and the tendency to overclaim, as well as negatively correlated with CRT performance by utilizing a multiple regression analysis.

The phrase “bullshit receptivity scores” is likely to be an eyebrow-raiser among pretty much anyone, whether involved in the academic community or not — and for fair reason. The fact is, the scales and tests that support a good portion of the conclusions within studies like those mentioned above are a short leap away from being entirely fabricated by the researchers. Sometimes the metrics used are even invented for the sake of an individual study. There are two reasons for this propensity to include a different Likert scale in nearly every single study on personality psychology. First and foremost, over the last half-century, researchers within the discipline have displayed a dire need to inject psychology with empiricism and objectivity. To borrow a term from the field, it seems as if psychology has been indebted with attachment insecurity towards the social sciences and humanities, a dimension that it grew out of, and I argue, should never have left. Since one can, technically, transform answers from Likert scales into numerical values, they can then be tested for variance, correlation, and be used to run regressions.

What this process really entails is the superfluous decoration of nonsense with even more nonsense. It is squeezing the juice of subjectivity ingrained within individual responses and experience into a lifeless “objective” pulp. It was established and fortified by a group of people with the intention of equating the fact that every person has 46 chromosomes with the fact that to *everyone* a “4” on a 1-5 depression questionnaire symbolizes the same feeling. Of course researchers are not oblivious to this and have adopted mechanisms to try and counteract it, such as including individual responses in the limitations section of studies, or by manipulating statistics to try and find a stationary point of reference from which they can work from. But

writing off such a grand misgiving as simply another bullet point in a limitation section does not do justice to the issue at hand.

The second reason for this choice to rely on various Likert scales as an assessment for individual differences in personality is that researchers have no other option. Because this technique has been so baked into the standard methodology of experimental psychology, other analytical tools are frowned upon and not treated with respect and validation. Realistically, there is an intense dissonance created amongst the fusing of psychology with individualistic empiricism, one that beckons for a structurally attuned resolution. This naturally leads to Chapter 3, which will conduct a genealogy of sociology's emotion and affect theory, ultimately offering it as a useful tool in complementing personality psychology. In turn, it also gives us a more comprehensive and useful perspective to view the social world of data through.

Chapter 3: Sociological Affect and Emotion Theory as a Complement to Individual Psychological Theory: Feelings as Structures/Relationships

There is an old parable about three blind men who encounter an elephant; one touches its trunk, another its side, and the third its tail. Each claims to know what the elephant is holistically, despite their limited interaction with it. The lesson is that sometimes to gain true perspective it is important to zoom out and get a larger look at the context. Ian Burkitt fits this particular parable within this argument by writing that, “attempts to reduce the understanding of emotion to psychological, physiological, neurological, or even social situations in themselves, will only ever be partial and unsatisfactory” (2014). This has been a concept that has been repeated consistently throughout this piece, because it is integral to the ultimate conclusion that: *in order to understand new age digital propaganda (especially far-right movements in America), who and how it affects, and who is susceptible to it, one must consider structures and sociological concepts of emotion, personality, and mood, not just psychological theories.*

An important starting point from which to begin this assessment of sociological methodology is to first offer two opposing definitions of emotion. Then, I will transition into the notions of mood, affect, and feeling — eventually leading into an explanation of how some sociologists ponder phenomena like anger, anxiety, depression, etc. Maner et al. (2005) gives an emblematic and synoptic psychological definition of emotion: “Emotions promote specific motivational states (defined by the engagement of goal-consistent physiological and cognitive reactions) facilitating behavioral responses that are functionally relevant to the solution of those problems or satisfaction of those goals”. The way this definition is worded is explicitly functional and machine-centered. It situates emotions as a means to an end as a problem solving vehicle. It treats them as essentially a signaling device, developed with the purpose of uniting the

mind and body in swift action to alleviate a perceived problem, or accomplish a set goal. Absent from this train of thought is how emotions can exist relationally, or within contexts. The overarching thesis of sociologist Burkitt's book is set to enhance this, as he defines emotion as, "the means by which we meaningfully orient ourselves within a particular situation, as well as in relation to others who are part of that situation" (2014). This imbues emotionality with the interrelational, rather than static individual isolationism. As such, Burkitt notates this as an *aesthetic* definition of emotion.

Personality is another concept that is conceived of differently between psychology and sociology. In psychology, personality is defined as the characteristics that differentiate individuals from each other, leading them to act in patterned, predictable ways. Sociologically speaking, personality is a patterned body of habits, traits, attitudes, and ideas of an individual, organized externally into roles and statuses, and internally towards goals and motivations. Additionally, sociologists like to consider how those factors affect the organization and role of an individual within a group. Let us pause to consider a theoretical background story on an individual participating in one of the aforementioned psychological studies on radicalization likelihood or susceptibility to digital propaganda. The test will most likely account for the person's general demographic data: their race, sex, age, etc., but those statistics will be used for nothing more than to run correlational tests at the end of the study. The complex nature of this person's identity will be vacuum sealed into their results on a few tests with names akin to "bullshit receptivity".

Imagine a study is testing for extraversion as a predeterminant contributor towards radicalization likelihood. In a scenario like this, there could be potentially deep underpinnings as to different levels of extraversion among different demographics of people. To begin, if the

researchers are older straight white males (believe it or not this happens a lot) the extraversion questionnaire might be drafted to identify hegemonic extraversion, which in America would mean a straight, white, masculine extraversion. Another angle on this same idea is that extraversion has distinctive ties to behavior under capitalism, and different cultures value it to different degrees. Given the inextricable ties between whiteness, masculinity, and capitalism, just the term “extraversion” is incredibly loaded, and bears much more significance than simply one fifth of the Big Five theory. Without proper sociological interpretation, in psychology it is easy to get stuck on demographic analysis as being just a part of standardized analysis, lucky if it earns a few sentences in a limitations section.

So what does this have to do with data, social media, and the internet? The important point here is that individual differences and emotions have their roots in structures, and can be processed both in the physical world, and in the online one. What we *know* is that there was a concerted effort by Donald Trump and other far-right groups in tandem with data firms to bombard specific people with sculpted content psychologically proven to *affect* them using micro-targeting and digital breadcrumbs. But even if the tools those data firms used to accomplish this project extended no further than intense demographically driven micro-targeting, understanding *how* and *why* it worked cannot be accomplished by using the same methodology.

Cambridge Analytica, Steve Bannon, etc. were able to finger the American pulse effectively, but they were not the inciters of the energy. *So, how have large events in the living memory of individuals come to shape a popular mood in America, what are third party groups looking for in propaganda distribution, and how and why is what they are looking for a symptom of social relationships, as opposed to inherent personality/emotional factors?* Those are complicated, interwoven questions, and can be confusing. To provide further explanation,

imagine anxiety as a variable. A psychological anxiety questionnaire would likely poll participants on how much anxiety they feel on a daily basis, categorizing them into low anxiety, mid anxiety, high anxiety, etc. groups. Maybe that study would also ask for demographic data, but as previously mentioned, researchers would not do anything substantial with it. But how is anxiety relational? Imagine what demographic traits have to do with development of anxiety, not as much as an emotion, but as a personality trait. Perhaps people have different spikes in anxiety before taking a difficult test, that could be considered an emotional response. But imagine the specific, intersectional experience of being a Black man in America and growing up in the presence of state-sanctioned police violence against you and other pervasive acts of racism. Or imagine being a middle-aged male consistent viewer of Fox News, who is constantly exposed to what is framed as attacks from the left aimed at taking away their way of life. Those are both forms of anxiety, but which would you be interested in if your job was to get Donald Trump elected?

This is the tip of the iceberg of what Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 encapsulate; before diving deeper into this, it is crucial to hammer home the notion of the construction of emotions and personality through structures through various references to texts. Two concepts integral to this are mood and structure of feeling — outlined clearly in Jonathan Flatley's Glossary as part of his work "Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism". As Flatley puts it, "moods are the fundamental ways in which we find ourselves disposed in such and such a way. Moods are the how according to which one is in such and such a way" (2008). He describes moods as a sort of weather, something through you, not within you. This is an important distinction because mood's impact an individual's subjective lens with which they use to view the world, but cannot be monitored from within. Another concept he outlines, which is a first

cousin of mood, is structure of feeling. The term was originally coined by Raymond Williams, and, “it enables us to describe those structures that mediate between the social and the personal that are more ephemeral and transitory than set ideologies or institutions” (Flatley, 2008).

Structure of feeling refers to the affective clay that has not yet hardened into set ideology, but is actively being crafted by structural social forces that puppeteer our lives. The reason structure of feeling is such a useful term in regards to this paper is its ability to link affective forces with demographics, which is a hop, skip, and a jump away from what Cambridge Analytica was able to do with psychometric profiling. In this sense, they can exist within an individual, but are more commonly present within a group or community. Such conditions allow us to ponder, “particular working-class structures of feeling, or masculine ones, or Russian ones” (Flatley, 2008). While ideologies can serve to guide our decision making in or out of tune with a hegemonic social order, structures of feeling are responsible for the affective attachment to things, people, concepts, etc. within that order. I laud structure of feeling for its specificity, for instance, while mood encapsulates the vague idea of depression, structure of feeling can elucidate, “the depression of the residents of a decimated New Orleans after Katrina” (Flatley, 2008).

In 2018, the Museum of Random Memory in Cork, Ireland put up an exhibit called the “Sound of Forgetting”; it was meant to make participants question why and what the conditions of “sharing” and “listening” are, especially during the era of datafication (Pereira, 2018). They cite Williams’ structure of feeling as informing the work, and argue that works of art are embedded within the tension he describes. While an artist produces a work, that work’s digestion and appreciation by another is what ultimately consummates its existence as art. The aforementioned tension is unearthed by the nature of subjectivity in a society: the parts of experience that exist free from the bondage of a society's autobiographical definitions. This

particular understanding is an interesting one, because it underscores the relational nature of art, culture, and the production of ephemeral feelings within the same umbrella. Williams' structure of feeling appears to be an appropriate tool in uniting these concepts and getting at the intersection of what is forgotten or missed in traditional psychological, and sometimes sociological, analyses of mood, emotion, and personality.

Cultural Differences: Willpower and Ego Depletion

The next section will focus on two combating studies on ego depletion. By isolating cultural differences as the impetus for this particular individual difference, we can subsequently produce a dialogue that suggests a structural root for phenomena typically viewed as individualistic. Ego depletion is a psychological concept asserting that humans have access to a finite “mental resource” which is depleted as they engage in concentrational tasks. The Western literature behind ego depletion forwards that a subject will perform worse on a subsequent task after being asked to complete a mentally rigorous one. This ethic is reflected in Inzlicht & Schmeichel (2012), a study which proposed (and “found”) that initial acts of self control shift individuals from a restraint towards a gratification mindset. The implication buried at the heart of this study is that self control in tasks is a zero-sum concept, and that once energy is expended towards one difficult task, the next task is inevitably doomed to have a lower performance outcome. However, other research has shown the contrary — the significance being that said research was performed exclusively on Indian participants. Considering this, it is reasonable to interpret an undertone of capitalistic economic logic seeping into the generalizations Western psychology tends to make about behavioral and personality psychology.

The research in Savani & Job (2017) showed that Indian people experienced more energy and will power after engaging in a difficult task. They tested this by dividing participants into

two options: a strenuous and non-strenuous task, and subsequently asking them to complete a word completion task. After completing the strenuous task, Indian participants did better on the word completion in comparison to the non-strenuous counterparts (Savani & Job, 2017). In a series of follow up studies, the researchers found that this “reverse ego depletion” did not generalize to American participants, and that personal beliefs about will power affected the outcome of ego depletion. When approached from this angle, it becomes clear that cultural influences have a clear impact on what has been determined individualistic by the domain of psychology. Since people from Indian and American cultures exhibited opposing orientations, this raises the question of what ideology baked at the core of American culture has had an impact on the collective social mood.

**Chapter 4: Neoliberalism, Propaganda, and the Construction of the American Psyche
Throughout the Late 20th and 21st Centuries**

“If terror and torture may be defined as that which distorts the target’s ability to accurately interpret reality, to communicate with the outside world, or to fully locate one’s own individual or collective identity, then certainly mass media perform this function.”

-Jared Ball, *I Mix What I Like*

The world of marketing, PR, and communications is thinly blurred with that of propaganda and disinformation, especially in the context of government-induced campaigns. The last half-century in America has seen a particularly gruesome case of this with the decline of empire and the series of anxiety dispelling structures that have come with it. Although not all-encompassing, there are a list of significant social changes and events that have contributed to a mass anxiety among the American populous. This chapter will consist of an analysis of a select number of events, with the intention of providing a link between those events at large, America’s propaganda machine, and the resulting anxious personality prototype that blossomed out of that fusion. Such a strategy is aimed to elucidate how the American personality has been intentionally manipulated and primed in an anxiety-inducing direction, so that it can more easily be understood how digital propagandists effectively capitalizes upon that anxiety.

Neoliberalism, Financialization, and the Decline of Empire

The last half century in the West has been dominated by an ideology called neoliberalism, an elusive phrase that profoundly impacts the lives of the individual, yet the average person would struggle to define. In his article for *The Guardian*, “Neoliberalism — the ideology at the root of all our problems”, George Monbiot provides a relatively comprehensive outline of what exactly the phrase means. He accredits it as a Keynesian idea, produced as a response to the

Great Depression in 1929, intending to cement the link between consumer demand and economic growth. Consumerism and the free market were critical to the foundation of Keynesian economics, but quickly began to unravel with the hyper-financialization with the leadership of Ronald Reagan in America, and Margaret Thatcher in England. In sum, neoliberalism is a logic pathway, executed via policy and social norm construction, in which free-market capitalism is inextricably interwoven with democracy. Freedom and choice are earned through money, people become merely consumers, competition is glorified and losers are punished, and the market becomes the unilateral heartbeat of life (Monbiot, 2016). Consequently, individual autonomy and agency are emphasized. This causes a generalizable anxious mood, because people become stuck in harmful structures while simultaneously being told that the conditions of their life are their individual fault. Through this a cycle is formed where neoliberalist policies are enacted, there are predictably economic ramifications, people are told that they, not the structures around them, are at fault, which introduces more anxiety, and finally this anxiety is harnessed by political leaders who forward neoliberal policies under the guise of populism or economic nationalism.

While the case can be made that neoliberalism had a time and a place, the social conditions under which it was necessitated have changed dramatically. Since America has not adjusted to a new interpretation of capitalism, or other economic theory, we are now living with what Monbiot repeatedly refers to as a “zombie” — something that we have outlived yet continues to feed on us as a sort of unstoppable parasite. For instance, as neoliberalism began to show its teeth in the 70s and 80s, “inequality in the distribution of both income and wealth, after 60 years of decline, rose rapidly in this era, due to the smashing of trade unions, tax reductions, rising rents, privatization, and deregulation” (Monbiot, 2016). The worst part is, we are so trapped within this ideology that it has taken over popular rationalizations in almost all aspects of

life. Governments turn to neoliberalist solutions to solve neoliberal problems, perhaps most notably in the economic sector.

A close cousin of neoliberalism, arguably the term for neoliberalism in the context of the American economy, is financialization. In a *Time* article, Rana Foroohar offers a useful summary for the phrase:

It's an academic term for the trend by which Wall Street and its methods have come to reign supreme in America, permeating not just the financial industry but also much of American business. It includes everything from the growth in size and scope of finance and financial activity in the economy; to the rise of debt-fueled speculation over productive lending; to the ascendancy of shareholder value as the sole model for corporate governance; to the proliferation of risky, selfish thinking in both the private and public sectors; to the increasing political power of financiers and the CEOs they enrich; to the way in which a "markets know best" ideology remains the status quo. (Foroohar, 2016)

Let us dig into the immense implication of this statement. Since the 70s, finance as a sector has transitioned from funneling money into productive services to serving individuals' wealth. Over time, it has become a vital organ to the overall American economic system, breathing life into phrases like "banks too big to fail". Now, the economic system has morphed closer and closer to a zero-sum enterprise in which the successes of a few financial wealth holders is pitted against the rest of America. When examining the backbone of modern day finance, it quickly becomes clear that it is situated upon rocky ground at best. Debt drives a large portion of exchanges, and relying on securities creates instability and can spark uncertainty and anxiety about the financial market. Financial anxiety translates almost flawlessly into real life anxiety; there are a series of other changes prompted by a neoliberal agenda that have also raised anxieties in the lives of Americans.

It is important to clarify that neoliberalism is a global concept in nature because it is practiced in an international context. Examples of globalist neoliberal policies include the

deregulation of capital markets and industries, lowering trade barriers, lowering taxes and tariffs, and privatizing government functions. In a way, neoliberalism is a version of democracy in which capital markets are revered as “above-all”.

The policies and priorities drafted by neoliberalist agendas have made a tangible effect on the mood and structure of feeling in America, raising anxiety and depression levels as a result of insecurity and instability. Before advancing into the nuances of these policies, it must be publicized that the adoption of neoliberal ideologies in America was initiated by Reagan, a Republican, but then furthered by Bill Clinton, a Democrat. Thus, neoliberalism was offered as a bipartisan evolution in American domestic and international policy. Brett Heinz describes this process elegantly, writing that during the 1980s a coalition was formed called the Democratic Leadership Council (including Clinton), and “when Clinton eventually won the presidency, he cemented neoliberalism as the law of the land by making it clear that the Democrats would not challenge the new fundamental doctrine of limited government involvement in many parts of the economy” (2017). But despite its apparent popularity among American political actors, “neoliberalism and accompanying globalization have resulted in inequality and poverty for significant portions of the population” (Heinz, 2017) both domestically and internationally.

Reaganomics and NAFTA

Reaganomics was a direct response to FDR’s post-depression New Deal policies and provides the foundation for modern day conservatism. It operates off of a six pillar system: (1) cutting taxes for wealthy individuals and corporations combined with a freezing of tax code updates, (2) a re-privatization of social welfare programs which had fallen under federal oversight during New Deal policies, (3) shifting social welfare responsibility from federal government to state government, (4) deregulation of federal oversight on businesses, banks, labor markets, and

other related entities, (5) immobilizing social movements positioned to resist these changes, (6) a restoration of “family values” paired with the production of a “colorblind” social order to negate the various civil rights movements of the time (Abramovitz, 2014).

The first four of these provisions are distinctly economic, while the later two are social; they interact in particularly devious ways against the working class and BIPOC populations. An example of policy under the umbrella was the Economic Recovery Tax of 1981, which lowered the top marginal tax bracket from 70% to 50% and reduced corporation tax to save an astounding \$150 billion over a five-year period (Rostenkowski, 1981). The true motives behind Reagan’s economic plan are dubious, but the contract of economic prosperity for the nation was not even achieved. In fact, “instead of generating economic growth as promised, the data show that neoliberal strategies increased economic insecurity, poverty and inequality as well as privatization of social services, and efforts to discipline the poor” (Abramovitz, 2014). Overall, Reagan’s staple achievement as president was drafting and executing policy that exacerbated the wage gap between ultra-rich and working-class Americans under the guise of “trickle down economics”. Flash forward forty years and that money is still waiting to trickle down, social support for the middle and lower classes has been gutted, and the ingredients for a data-driven Trump campaign cocktail are beginning to reveal themselves.

Reagan was by no means the only proponent of damaging policies, here merely jump started the neoliberal car. George H. W. Bush’s presidency oversaw the beginning of financial bailouts that culminated with the devastating 2008 Great Recession. In 1989, he, “bailed out the heavily deregulated Saving and Loan industry, to the tune of about \$124.6 billion in taxpayer funded money” (Johnson, 2018). He also introduced and promoted the bill that would function as a rally cry in the 2016 election: NAFTA. NAFTA has become a hot-button issue on both sides of

the spectrum because it has been used as an end-all-be-all explanation for the loss of blue-collar jobs. Realistically, neoliberalism has inspired all sorts of anti-blue-collar legislation, but NAFTA has certainly not helped the cause. Through the stifling of the bargaining power of working-class Americans seen in the post-WWII era, NAFTA led to, “20 years of stagnant wages and the upward redistribution of income, wealth, and political power” (Faux, 2013). Additionally, “In the United States, NAFTA and other “free trade” apparatuses like the World Trade Organization contributed to privatization and the decline of environmental protections, jobs, wages, and workers’ rights” (Johnson, 2018).

NAFTA was officially enacted in 1994 after being signed by Bush’s successor Bill Clinton in 1993. And whether or not you agree with its culpability in the process, it absolutely correlated with a decline in blue-collar manufacturing jobs. Increasing automation and globalization have led to a decline in employment in this type of work, as 7.5 million jobs were predicted to have been lost since 1980 (Hernandez, 2018). The locus of these jobs is importantly situated in the rural midwest where, “as outsourcing production and jobs to other countries continues, such business and job opportunities are increasingly more difficult to secure” (Monchuk et al., 2005). Call to mind the 2016 election, and it is these very counties that were the grand difference makers. Remember, what is important is not just that these policies were enacted, rather the implications they have on instigating a culture of anxiety derived from economic insecurity and global change.

Cultural Reaganomics and the Development of Profitable News Media

While the political and economic results of Reaganomics and other neoliberal agendas were ravaging the middle class and creating superb comfort for the nation’s elite, another dimension of neoliberalism was taking root. As aforementioned, the cultural plan for America

was not just to dispel Keynesian economics. It also included a calculated suppression of social movements that opposed the traditional American WASP vision. Phrases such as “family values” and “fear of crime” became placeholders for the proactive advocacy of white supremacy. *White America was further conditioned on the intergenerational fear of the domestic boogiemán: anyone who was not white, religious, straight, etc. And it was through this fear conditioning that they became uniquely vulnerable to messaging, control, and manipulation from authority — authority that was now armed with the most powerful propaganda tool ever created: television news media.*

On June 1, 1980, Ted Turned launched Cable News Network (*CNN*), the first 24-hour television news program. *CNN* completely reinvented the news cycle, nationalizing it from a previously hyper-localized media (Brancaccio et al., 2020). For almost two decades *CNN* and its sister channel *Headline News* stood alone in the field of 24-hour coverage until 1996 with the launch of both *Fox News* and *MSNBC*. Established under the neoliberal veil of heightened consumerism, these networks soon discovered that dramatization and political polarization were quick avenues to profitability. Neoliberalism’s touch on the commercialization of media has two major repercussions. First, it has been devastating for the mental health of consumers. Ironically lodged in a digital *NBC* article, clinical psychologist Dr. Jana Scrivani writes, “being tuned in to the 24-hour news cycle may fuel a lot of negative feelings like anxiety, sadness, and hopelessness” (Spector, 2017). We can all quickly bring to mind the image of the middle-class liberal glued to their television as *CNN* “breaking” news headlines flash by into the early hours of the morning.

However, that individualized response is part of a bigger picture operation that circles back to the social aspects of Reagan’s cultural plan. The groundwork of Reaganomics was laid

before the 24-hour news cycle had fully sharpened its teeth, but that does negate the fact that important news media precedents were set that were greatly exacerbated by future actions.

A specific source of panic for especially white America was the media representation of the War on Drugs, closely interwoven with America's "tough on crime" messaging and legislation. Both the War on Drugs and "tough on crime" were direct responses to the proactive maintenance of Reagan's white supremacist vision of "family values". They were also clear opportunities for neo-yellow journalists to capitalize on a frightened and malleable white America. In what feels like a quasi confession from the U.S. Department of Justice, they wrote, "seduced by the dramatic possibilities for drug coverage and reluctant to look beyond public officials for information and perspective, journalists traded independence and professional skepticism for the chance to ride along with police on "crack-house" raids" (Beckett & Sasson, 1998). President Richard Nixon officially declared the War on Drugs in 1969, and the crack epidemic exploded through the 80s and early 90s. With it came a slew of legislation aimed at dismantling Black families and criminalizing Black people. The drug was explicitly targeted because of its association with Black America in the popular imagination and was even penalized at 100 times the rate of its white-consumed counterpart: cocaine (Coyle). As the *L.A. Times* Editorial board writes, "the race-tinged national panic over crack reshaped and reinvigorated the "war on drugs" that President Nixon declared" (L.A. Times Editorial Board, 2020).

With the rise in crack came an increase in violent crime and the rise of mass incarceration. For the first time in American history, the first draft of history was the final draft. There was a real time feedback loop between what was happening and what people were seeing. This instigated a despicable collaboration between the political and media elite responsible for birthing a national hysteria at the expense of Black Americans. This constant exposure helps

explain research obtained in studies such as Pfefferbaum et al. (2015) that connected so-called “disaster television” with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. It also recycled age-old American tropes into modern news media, setting the pace for the racial disparity in coverage between the 2000s “urban” heroin addiction and “rural” opioid epidemic. Overall, the television news media has functionally become a megaphone for political agenda keeping, intent on achieving profit and status through mentally frazzling the populace into a state of obedience and fear.

Fox News

A 2017 study by Mitchell Bard was designed to determine whether *Fox’s* messaging aligned more closely with rhetorical concepts of persuasion or propaganda. Centering their discourse on health-care reform in 2009 and 2014, Bard found that *Fox’s* primetime programs employed a series of nonfactual narratives that aligned with traditional conceptualizations of propaganda, not journalism (2017). The truth is the distinction between those two terms, propaganda and journalism, has narrowed incredibly within the neoliberal occupation of media. As unbridled consumerism continues to snowball, media corporations have capitalized upon a lifeless and uncritical population.

Fox was incorporated by the Australian-American mogul Rupert Murdoch for the stated reason of launching a conservatively oriented news channel. Its genealogy can be traced back to the imagination of Richard Nixon’s administration, which dreamed of a news network with which they could spoon feed the American public. As William Falks writes, “in 1970, political consultant Roger Ailes and other Nixon aides came up with a plan to create a new TV network that would circumvent existing media and provide “pro-administration” coverage to millions” (2019). While *Fox* took years beyond that to fully develop, mainly because of Nixon’s

involvement with the Watergate scandal and the subsequent ramifications, it was under his reign that the foundation was laid. So, *Fox* was the brainchild of the same administration responsible for this infamous quote from Nixon’s Assistant to Domestic Affairs, John Ehrlichman:

‘You want to know what this [war on drugs] was really all about? The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I’m saying? We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.’ (Vera)

It was through this filter that *Fox* was implemented, and the Nixon-Reagan “family values” and “tough on crime” euphemisms were injected into the conservative public consciousness.

According to research by the Pew Research Center done in 2014, 72% of conservatives said *Fox News* was the only outlet they trust (Mitchell, 2014).

In *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, Benkler et al. provide a chapter on Donald Trump’s alliance with *Fox News* and the coordinated effort the two played in his election (Benkler et al., 2018). They purport that, “by [2017] *Fox News* had become the lead player in what had become the president’s personal propaganda network in his battles against the intelligence community, the media, and, increasingly...his make-or-break struggle against the very idea of professionalism in law enforcement and through it the rule of law” (Benkler et al., 2018). Their central claim in the chapter, *The Fox Diet*, is that throughout Trump’s campaign and presidency, *Fox* strategically unleashed disinformation campaigns — on “deep state” rhetoric, the murder of Seth Rich, and the Uranium One controversy — to deflect interrogation on the central issue of Trump’s presidency: the Mueller investigation. Other notable figures, including *Vox*’s Sean Illing (2019) and *The New Republic*’s Alex Shephard (2017) have even made the claim that Trump uses *Fox*

like a typical state media, referring to their intense interplay and coordinated communication campaigns. Trump's personal use of *Fox* media is emblematic of his simultaneous treatment of social media, providing a segway into the final piece in our puzzle, a discussion connecting these social and systemic forces with Cambridge Analytica and psychometric profiling in the 2016 election.

Chapter Five: Data Collection, Psychometric Profiling, Cambridge Analytica, and Radical Third-Party Communications Efforts in the 2016 Presidential Election

“We showed that there were relationships between personality traits and political outcomes, and that we could not only predict certain behaviors but also shift attitudes by framing the language of messages to correspond to psychometric profiles.”

-Christopher Wylie, *Mindf*ck*

On March 17, 2018, Christopher Wylie coordinated with *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* to release information on Cambridge Analytica’s coordination with the 2016 Trump presidential campaign and Facebook and launch the largest data-crime investigation in history. This final section will provide a brief explanation of what happened with brief interjections. The point of these interjections will be to finalize two ultimate conclusions of the paper: (1) that in order to understand digital propaganda and who is susceptible to it, you must examine structures and sociological concepts of emotion and mood, not just psychological theories; (2) how the construction of the American social mood over the last half-century has been capitalized upon by data companies for profit and radicalization purposes.

The London-based data firm Cambridge Analytica (CA) was a subsidiary of Strategic Communication Laboratories (SCL) that existed before the 2016 election, and even before the primaries. The firm, run by CEO Alexander Nix, was conceived through donation money from Republican donor and hedge fund manager Robert Mercer. SCL attracted both Mercer and *Breitbart’s* then-acting chairman Steve Bannon (the first chief strategist in Trump’s White House) through its success in campaigns targeting elections in the Global South, as well as in suppressing and instigating radical social movements. CA was the division of SCL that operated specifically in England and the United States of America, and was involved in the Leave.EU

Brexit campaign, both Ted Cruz and Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaigns, as well as in 42 other U.S. political campaigns (Wylie, 2018). The goal of CA's psychological manipulation was prefaced on Bannon's overwhelming hunch that there was a dormant anger in America — a mood akin to that described in Chapter 4. The two most important concepts in illustrating their methodology are microtargeting and psychometric profiling.

Microtargeting and Psychometric Profiling

In politics, the concept of microtargeting was first utilized in the 2008 presidential election, particularly from the Barack Obama campaign. It is a form of marketing that isolates behavior in specific individuals or small groups, with the goal of knowing them well enough to perfectly craft messaging for them. At the beginning of Obama's campaign, what that meant was monitoring behavior like household television data. As Lois Beckett writes, "In Ohio, [Obama's] campaign worked with FourthWall Media, a data and targeting company, to get television viewership data for individual homes, which had 'anonymous but consistent' household ID numbers...this allowed the campaign to track household viewing behavior over time" (2012). But they soon veered into the land of predicting voter behaviors based on individual profiling. The Obama team developed a "persuadability score" for constituents in swing states, a four-pronged approach that sought to identify exactly how individual voters could be best messaged. Voters were assigned a score from 1-100, which was meant to be an estimate of their voter behavior (Beckett, 2012). This completely reinvented the concept of demographic targeting, as "understanding the voting population on an individual level enabled campaign leaders to go beyond standard political party-oriented messages and communicate with voters about specific topics in order to influence the voter's decision" (Tucci, 2013). This concept provided the conceptual framework from which CA's version of psychometric profiling evolved.

As mentioned in the introduction quote, CA's vision was to decipher a relationship between personality characteristics and political outcomes, through behavior prediction and manufacturing attitudes. Uncovering personality characteristics is a process called psychometric profiling, something CA was responsible for spearheading in politicized digital communications. CA did extensive studying on American susceptibility to propaganda, unearthing the exact structure of feeling that Bannon described. They began to make connections, like associating high conscientiousness and low openness with political conservatism. This insinuates that many conservatives in America value consistency above all. Understanding this helps explain the phenomenon of Trump's seemingly intensified rhetoric over time not isolating, but rather empowering his voting base (Wylie, 2018).

The missing piece to their research was filling in individual personality profiles for all constituents in swing states, which until the invention of social media was an impossible task. This is where the actual data crime portion of their operation came in. CA software programmers came up with a Facebook app called "This Is Your Digital Life", which was an in-app game styled off of a typical Big Five Inventory test. Through it, CA gained the personal data of not only the app users, but also their Facebook friends, leading them to acquire the data of about 87 million users. Their extensive research had pinpointed exactly who was susceptible to radicalization — which was previously discussed in Chapter 2. The major connection to make here is that the credentials for radicalization and effective propaganda distribution are products of social forces that extend beyond individual autonomy.

Once CA gathered this data, they launched an entire digital infrastructure hinged upon the aforementioned heuristics. Before the launch, "Cambridge Analytica began developing fake pages on Facebook and other platforms that looked like real forums, groups, and news

sources...the firm did this at the local level, creating right-wing pages with vague names like Smith County Patriots or I Love My Country...when users joined CA's fake groups, it would post videos and articles that would further provoke and inflame them (Wylie, 2018). This helped create mini fish bowls of groupthink, leading to what Wylie terms *digital cognitive segregation*. Under this pretense heuristics are activated; information is controlled, exacerbating availability and confirmation bias, dual-process theory is used by enraging viewers into an angry state, social identity theory aids in the group members ideas of "us versus them", and given the digital context of the information, automaticity bias makes users more likely to interpret the information as objective.

On a "60 Minutes" interview Trump's senior advisor for data and digital operations, Brad Parscale, admitted that he knew from early on Facebook was how Trump was going to win (Benkler et al., 2018). And he was right. Facebook provided the perfect interface for this, as Benkler et al. write, it, "allowed campaigns to target specific voters, geographic regions, or demographics or to send ads to hyper-specific segments of the population based on this personal data" (2018). Now that CA had discovered personality as a demographic, the Trump campaign was able to break up traditional voting blocks like "white suburban women" — a meaningless category composed of individuals with a wide array of values, motivations, and personalities. Bannon's cultural thermometer not only revealed an American cultural truth, but entirely reconceptualized the way political campaigns think of and communicate with demographics. CA's data targeting mission brought Obama's social media prototype to a completely new level, customizing messaging down to the precise individual and manipulating behavior pathways.

The actualization of Bannon's dream of CA came from his shared philosophy with Andrew Breitbart, that, "politics flows from culture, and if conservatives wanted to successfully

dam up progressive ideas in America, they would have to first challenge the culture” (Wylie, 2018). The common idea of culture is that it just is. But what Bannon and the team at CA discovered was that culture is just a collection of individual ideals, a set of norms and interests practiced in tandem. What that means is that, with the power of data and psychometric microtargeting, individuals can slowly be swayed, in turn influencing culture as a whole. Bannon and CA sensed the mood of frustration and anxiety in America as described in Chapter 4, and wielded it to generate a complete remodeling of the RNC communication structure. They fortified the transition from old media to new media in regards to exercising a firm grip on the control of thought and behavior in political ideation and action. The most important message behind this is that the cultural mood of anxiety that enabled this cultural manipulation is not an aspect of individual personality, but rather a calculated and purposeful government and media campaign, with the intent of achieving as much control as possible over the autonomy of individual thought.

Conclusion

In her book *Propaganda and Counter-Terrorism: Strategies for Global Change*, Emma Briant asks the question: if the government is led by unadulterated public opinion, then is propaganda inherently anti-democratic (Briant, 2014). Buried within this question is a fundamental realization that while propaganda may be antithetical to democracy, it is necessary for capitalism. This intersection speaks as to why it is crucial to examine any attempt at suppression of thought with absolute scrutiny.

The story of Cambridge Analytica was portrayed through the Netflix documentary *The Great Hack* and through the articles in both *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. But even with the public presence, the concepts of microtargeting and psychometric profiling remain unknown to a vast amount of people. As social media use continues to increase exponentially, people leave more of a digital footprint — breadcrumbs that allow companies to predict their behavior to a tee. What is the point of having freedoms when ideation can be so easily puppeted by political elites and technology monopolies?

CA dissolved after Wylie came out as a whistleblower, and CEO Alexander Nix was subject to intense questioning in the British governmental system. However, comprehensive legislation is yet to be passed to protect the privacy of user data on the internet. Companies like Propria LLC and Auspex International employ many of the same characters involved at SCL and CA. And the introduction of Facebook as a self-proclaimed metaverse, especially considering new virtual reality (VR) technology, pronounces the truth: that ideas of social media data demographic targeting are only just beginning.

This paper is meant to question the role of individual psychology in the analysis of psychometric data targeting, arguing that a thorough investigation can only occur with

sociological concepts in mind. Beyond that, this paper serves as a tool to understand data as purely an iteration of the human condition under the structures that more powerfully influence our being: economic landscape, class relations, the decline of empire and neoliberalism, and media content. Wherever digital demographic technology may take us as a society it is paramount that we fight for our rights and understand how corporations, including political groups, are manipulating culture in their favor. Always question why people want you to behave or think in a certain way.

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