**Politics, Social Media and Practical Magic**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the use of social media in politics through the twin lenses of ‘networks versus hierarchies’ and the belief systems and processes of Practical Magic. The purpose of this approach is to explore a new paradigm to explain the emergence of a breed of celebrity politicians - as exemplified by Donald Trump. For these politicians, Social Media is not only a means of communicating with their constituencies, but also a crucial source of their power, and a means of bypassing orthodox media discourse. The direct, one-to-many relationship between the leader and their followers results in the emergence of a new kind of networked political power – a power which is able to operate without recourse to many of the established or traditional political processes.

The authors examine the relationship between this networked political power and the concept of “truthiness”, and the relevance of this concept to the persistence - in new forms - of non-rational belief systems in post-technological society. They discuss how the traditional methods of Practical Magic have been able to flourish once again through the emergence of Social Media. They then analyze the use of the techniques of contagious and sympathetic magic by US President Donald Trump in his Twitter account. The authors argue that Trump’s use of Social Media as a vehicle for Practical Magic constitutes a new way of reconciling the tensions between networks and hierarchies, and therefore represents a new articulation of political power.

**Keywords**: Social Media; Magic; politicians; truthiness; network; hierarchy

**Social Media, Faith and Magic**

The impact of social media on contemporary politics scarcely needs to be emphasized. Social media has influenced the results of recent elections and referendums, and radically changed the way in which politicians interact with the public. It has changed the nature of political debate, and of political journalism. Most significantly of all, it has changed the nature of truth and trust. Social media is no longer just a tool for participating in politics: it is central to the political process.

Social media, and the digital world in general, are the main drivers for the disintermediation of hierarchical institutions. This, however, is not to say that the social media ‘giants’ such as Facebook are not in-of-themselves hierarchical institutions. Rather, it refers to the manner in which these companies provide individuals with a networked mode of ‘being’ within, and through, the Web. But it is a network in which the apparently disintermediated opportunities to ‘connect’ and ‘live our lives’ mask a dehumanised form of behavioural capitalism - run by sophisticated algorithms and, by extension, those who design and manage that code.

It could be argued that this networked power is rapidly consumed by hierarchical structures driven by late-stage capitalism. As Paul Mason points out in *Postcapitalism* (2016), the key struggles in our contemporary culture are almost all taking place between networks and hierarchies. This conflict embraces the central economic issues of our day. As Mason puts it: “the main contradiction in modern capitalism is between the possibility of free, abundant socially produced goods, and a system of monopolies, banks and governments struggling to maintain control over power and information.” (Mason, 2016, p.144). In terms of access to information, this battle is fought between the hierarchical and established institutions – the traditional media – and those who blog and use other forms of social media to disseminate and receive information. (One thinks instantly of Donald Trump’s war with the established news media).

Once upon a time, a clear hierarchy of truth existed, and illustrious newspapers, television and radio stations enjoyed the trust of large sections of the population – even (and sometimes especially) the populations of other countries. The BBC built its original mission statement on the gaining and retaining of such widespread trust. Other institutions, such as broadsheet newspapers, also feel entitled to such privileged levels of trust, which they believe (and not without reason) that they have earned.

But social media’s representation of the news challenges this perception. Suddenly, trust has become a networked rather than a hierarchical commodity. And it is in the nature of networks to organize their users according to shared worldviews. Thus ‘trust in truth’ morphs into a trust in what we might term ‘truthiness’….

What exactly is ‘truthiness’? Truthiness means that: “What I say is right, and [nothing] anyone else says could possibly be true. It's not only that I *feel* it to be true, but that *I* feel it to be true”(Stephen Colbert, 2006). In other words, truthiness is a function of identity: it expresses or reinforces who we believe ourselves to be, rather than what we have discovered the world to be. As Mark Fisher explains (Fisher, 2009, p.18), this new form of Capitalist Realism is based on Jacques Lacan’s distinction between the Real and ‘realities’ (Lacan and Granoff, 1956): ideologically-based understandings of the world that reject facts which lie outside of their interpretations. In such a climate, ‘what’ a message says is of relatively little importance. ‘Who’ delivers the message is far more significant.

Another way to understand the concept of ‘truthiness’ is to reflect on the centrality of magic to an age of social media driven politics. Social media is used by billions, but it is based on technologies that its users do not understand in any practical sense. They are unable to repair their hardware or its apps if they go wrong. Our technological possessions – our computers, tablets, smartphones, even our refrigerators - have become magical objects. And magic engenders an atmosphere of faith, rather than truth. Thus we live in an age of magical - or non-rational - belief systems. Examples are easy to cite. Only 40% percent of Americans believe in the theory of evolution, and this figure is far from 100% in most G20 nations. Other magical belief systems taken for granted in our supposedly science-based culture include such common superstitions as not opening an umbrella indoors, knocking on wood for luck, not walking under ladders, and generalized and widespread beliefs in the power of luck, fate, astrology, and numerology. Many so-called New Age beliefs - from homeopathy to pyramid power – are essentially magical.

Arguably, widespread ‘trust in science’ is yet another form of irrational belief, insofar as most people don’t understand and cannot explain the science itself, they simply ‘trust’ in the institutions that represent science to the public. Their trust is in the ‘truthiness’ of scientists, not in the scientific method itself. So, for many people, science functions as a form of magic. Clearly, however, the repeatability of science and its reliance on hypothesis, theory and proof makes it quite distinct for its practitioners from a faith-based world view.

Magic can be defined as an organized, non-scientific belief system. Such a system typically includes esoteric ritual processes which can be used to achieve specific ends. Such processes are known as Practical Magic.

**What is Practical Magic?**

The manner in which the network disintermediates hierarchies which previously mediated and managed truth creates an environment and a space in which magician-like figures can thrive. Social media has been characterised as a hybrid between literary and oral modes of communication. It combines forms of a vernacular oral tradition with the amplification of the literary forms via the network (see Stewart, 2016). This amplification of the individual voice, unfettered from the conformist and depersonalising effects of institutional filtering, provides the ideal milieu for figures such as Donald Trump: emblematic of the self-made man and totemic of the halcyon and - for many - a tantalising American Dream myth. Thus Practical Magic re-enters the domain of political life, through the agency of technology.

There are two main branches of Practical Magic, usually known as sympathetic magic and contagious magic. Both can be employed in social media to achieve political ends.

Sympathetic magic depends for its operation on the ‘Law of Similarity’. Sir JG Frazer describes this process as: “…like produces like, or… an effect resembles its cause… the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it.” (Frazer, 1922, p.14). Neolithic cave paintings are examples of the Law of Sympathy in use. By depicting the successful outcome of a hunt, our ancestors believed they could control or influence the outcome of the process. Sports psychologists employ very similar processes of visualization today.

The Law of Contagion, correspondingly, asserts that things once in contact are always in contact. Or, as Frazer states: “[the magician] infers that whatever he does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact, whether it formed part of his body or not.”(Frazer, 1922, p.14). One example of this form of magic would be a love charm. An object belonging to the desired person – or, even better, a lock of their hair or clippings from their fingernails – is placed in proximity with similar objects belonging to the individual casting the spell. The proximity of the inanimate objects is expected to generate an equivalent closeness between the persons associated with them. This form of contagious magic is still widely practised in contemporary Britain.1

Sympathetic and contagious magic are universal processes which shamans, magicians and sorcerers have used since before the dawn of recorded history. But a knowledge of these processes alone does not make a magician. A magician also needs to possess ‘mana’. Even the success of a relatively straightforward piece of magic - such as making a charm or talisman – is held to depend on the mana of the magician creating it. ‘Mana’ refers to the personal power which the magician brings to a magical act – and, therefore, the expectation that such an act will be successful. Magic is an art that deals in self-fulfilling prophecies.

**Donald Trump: The Politician as Magician**

Donald Trump is clearly a practicing magician, whether he is aware of this or not. The success of his political career has largely been the result of applying the rules of practical magic within the new sphere of social media. Trump’s use of magic has allowed him to influence others through powerful networks based on shared belief systems. His use of magical processes simultaneously strengthens his network and organizes the belief systems of his followers. And, as social media obeys the same rules as other forms of magical communication, Trump’s magic works.

Trump starts with a lot of ‘mana’ – the product of his wealth and media profile. As Damon Winter has stated in the *New York Times*:

“He [Trump] got people to buy into a success mythology in which he was a wizard. In this mythology, ethics, honor and truth are casualties. Everything is going to be the greatest and the best and the most successful simply because he deems it so.” (Winter, 2017).

Trump’s mass rallies and the energy (or mana) which they generate exemplify a long-established strategy of the magician, or politician-sorcerer. The magician’s control of the crowd is both a display of power and a source of power – of mana. As Marcel Mauss observes, in *A General Theory of Magic*:

“In this way, the magician receives continual encouragement from outside…. Everything happens as though society, from a distance, formed a kind of huge magical conclave around him. This is the reason why the magician lives in a kind of specialized atmosphere which follows him everywhere… However cut off from the real world he may seem to others, it does not appear the same to him.” (Mauss, 1902, p.170)

Trump has pioneered new ways to practise ritual magic through social media: most strikingly, through Twitter. Trump’s sympathetic magic works in precisely the same way that a practitioner of voodoo sticks pins into a doll that represents their victim. If you hurt the representation – the simulacrum - you hurt the real person. Trump regularly employs of the Law of Sympathy in his twitter posts:

“The failing @nytimes gets worse and worse by the day. Fortunately, it is a dying newspaper.” (Trump,19/08/2016)

“My lawyers want to sue the failing @nytimes so badly for irresponsible intent. I said no (for now), but they are watching. Really disgusting.” (Trump,17/09/2016)

The use of the world ‘failing’ repeatedly in connection with the *New York Times* performs the same function as the painted images of successful hunting expeditions fulfil on a Neolithic cave-wall. The word or image represents the successful completion of an action, and therefore – through the operation of the Law of Sympathy – influences the outcome. If you assert that the *New York Times* is ‘failing’ enough times, people will start to believe you - and you will have created a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Trump’s tweet of 17 September 2016 evidences two uses of the Law of Similarity. The *New York Times* is described as ‘disgusting’. Trump’s lawyers are said to be desirous of suing the NYT, but are also announced to be doing nothing about it. No law suit was ultimately filed, but the words *New York Times* and ‘sue’ have been manoeuvred into the same sentence, and that is where the sympathetic magic happens.

Social media affords many such ways to stick virtual pins into virtual dolls. The operation of the internet in general has prepared us to be responsive to the Law of Sympathy. For example, the ‘Like’ function on Facebook is in itself a form of sympathetic magic. Facebook separates its users into bubbles which connect them to other users who share similar interests, views and prejudices. So ‘like’ produces ‘Like’ – in the Facebook sense of the word.

Trump also makes consistent use of the Law of Contagion in his tweets. Consider the following two tweets in association:

“More radical Islam attacks today - it never ends! Strengthen the borders, we must be vigilant and smart. No more being politically correct.” (Trump,16/01/2016)

“Incompetent Hillary, despite the horrible attack in Brussels today, wants borders to be weak and open-and let the Muslims flow in. No way!” (Trump,23/03/2016)

The emotionally-loaded phrases ‘politically correct’ and ‘radical Islam’ are introduced into the same tweet, without any attempt to establish a logical connection between them. Trump exploits the enforced brevity of his tweets as a strategy to bypass logical processes in the readers mind. The very rules of tweeting make the utterances too short to include evidence or connective logic. Ideas simply occupy space in the same tweet: the reader is invited to make a connection. And once these loaded phrases have been placed in the same 140 characters, the Law of Contagion ensures that they continue to interact, long after the literal content of the tweet has been forgotten.

Similarly, Trump’s tweet of 23 March 2016 introduces Hillary Clinton’s name into the same sentence as the terrorist attack in Brussels. The tweet uses contagious magic to bypass cause and effect, linking the Brussels attack in some unspecified way to Clinton’s immigration policies, which - Trump asserts - would allow Muslims to ‘flow in’. Logic is irrelevant to such thinking: the emotional and magical association of ideas is everything.

Some of Trump’s tweets are displays of, or attempts to access, mana. His tweet of 23 March 2016 articulates, even for Trump, a grandiloquent claim:

“Another radical Islamic attack, this time in Pakistan, targeting Christian women & children. At least 67 dead, 400 injured. I alone can solve.” (Trump,237/03/2016)

Presumably, the claim “I alone can solve” is intended to refer to a future time after Donald Trump has been elected US President. The demagogic nature of the claim – that as President, Trump will deploy what amount to almost superhuman powers – is brought into uninflected contact with the numbers of dead and injured in the attack. So, in a magical reversal of logic, Trump adduces the severity of the problem as evidence of the power – the mana – that he, as magician, will deploy in solving it. The magician channels the mana of an overwhelming and vexatious problem, and thus influences all those around him to regard him – in a phrase once used to describe Adolf Hitler – as an ‘instrument of history’.

The following tweet also clearly concerns mana:

"Maybe the millions of people who voted to MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN should have their own rally. It would be the biggest of them all!" (Trump,24/02/2017)

Trump decided - for reasons which make no sense in traditional politics - to commence his re-election campaign barely a month after taking office, with a mass rally. In terms of magical practice, the rally makes complete sense – as both a gathering and a display of Trump’s mana. The reference to the size of the proposed ‘MAKE AMERICA GREAT’ rally is both a display of mana (only Trump can do this) and also a source of mana (this mass of people will provide the power to re-energize the Trump Presidency). The Law of Sympathy dictates that like will produce like: thousands of supporters will transfer their mana to Trump, and thus empower him to achieve his political ends.

**A New Magical Hierarchy**

Magical powers occupy an unusual – perhaps unique - position in the conflict between networks and hierarchies. Engagement with social media allows the magician direct and personal access to a decentralized network of supporters and believers – which become the magician’s source of mana, or power. The magician is able to draw off power from the network and use it to control the network’s discourse. The social media magician communicates directly with their followers, without the need for mediation through the traditional media. Thus, a form of hierarchy is re-established - but one based on connected individuals, not on institutions. A new form of political power is created, magical in its essence, but which could not exist without the technology of the internet to support it. But magical powers are fickle, and mana constantly needs to be renewed. Like a god who must touch the earth to retain his strength, President Trump needs regularly to draw magical power from his supporters and from events such as his rallies. Such events are a source of power for the new networked hierarchy, even as they emphasize the one-to-many nature of these new power relationships.

Social media provides the orality and institutional disintermediation that allows magical figures to operate at a national and international scale. In effect, social media is the perfect medium for the expression and the amplification of our irrational and superstitious tendencies which ‘science’ will never quash (and which in some senses a non-scientific ‘belief’ in science maintains). This networked medium gives power, or voice, to an emergent form of digital mystic, of which Donald Trump is a prime example. This digital power is beyond broadcast and beyond celebrity. It taps into our collective need to believe. The power of social media also works to shift the locus of belief from self-regulating (while self-serving) institutions and systems to idolatrous and magical individuals who catalyse the business models of disingenuously ‘neutral’ Silicon Valley entrepreneurs.

The magician pursues power for its own sake: power is a measure of magical prowess. Clear and consistent policies are no longer vital. Truth counts for little. Logic doesn’t matter. What does matter, above all, is the power and charisma of magical figures and personalities. If we are not vigilant, these will rule our world.

**Endnotes**

1. A visit to the so-called ‘Celtic Chapel’ near Madron in Cornwall, is one place to see Practical Magic in use on contemporary Britain. The withered trees on this site support a bewildering number and variety of love charms (or ‘clouties’), and similar objects used in sympathetic and contagious magical practice.

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