

Abstract

This thesis examines how people compare the president to the Antichrist online, specifically during the Trump administration. Looking at digital Antichrist comparisons as distinct communicative practices, I argue that the digital affordances and logics that allow for the rapid spread of ideas online work synergistically with the historical weight of the Antichrist as a concept, helping the comparisons to spread further and faster than they could have through other mediums while simultaneously being more impactful than other digitally-spread content due to the wealth of sources, both within religion and pop culture, which can be drawn on. In examining a Twitter trend that compared Donald Trump to *The Omen's* Antichrist, Damien Thorn, I argue that the Antichrist was used as an apt metaphor for violence connected to religion and politics, which was then able to expand the idea of Trump as the Antichrist to other moments of Trump's presidency through contamination and remix practices. From there, I look at a digital conspiracy archive that details a variety of different ways that Donald Trump could be connected to the Antichrist, where the structure of the archive allows visitors to gravitate toward the elements that are most useful to them, all of which is more effective due to the invisible presence of information about the Antichrist that has infiltrated cultural awareness. Whether public or hidden, these case studies demonstrate how well an ancient political idea continues to thrive within the digital landscape.

Keywords: Digital Culture, Antichrist, Remix, Conspiracy Discourse

Antichrist in the Oval Office:
The Rhetoric of 'Antichrist' in Online Discourse Surrounding Donald Trump

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Introduction

The year 2020, when I began this thesis, seemed to have a new disaster every day. Wildfires. Explosions. Pandemics. Racial violence. Murder hornets. In many ways, both literal and metaphorical, life seemed to stop. All the while, we were told that everything around us was “unprecedented,” a word that began to lose all meaning as a few weeks of lockdowns turned into a pandemic that raged for over a year, which still has not ended by the time of this writing. The end of the world. It felt like an apt phrase, with any number of disaster movies seeming to come to life before us, all at the same time. According to Brandon R. Grafius, it made sense for people to turn to apocalyptic thinking when the world seemed to be in constant chaos; both horror and the Bible “experience the realities of life too deeply to tell us that everything is okay when it's not.”¹ Things were not okay, and people needed a narrative to explain that to them. For those who fell into the theories and ideologies of QAnon, that narrative was that Donald Trump was the savior, sent down by God to save the righteous from the horrifying ways of the Democrats and Hollywood elite. But there was also another narrative, an opposite narrative, which relied on the religious polarization seen in QAnon but turned it the other way around. The conservative's hero was the liberal's villain, the Antichrist in the Oval Office.

This idea was not original to the chaos of 2020, but it certainly thrived there. Was Donald Trump the Antichrist? Even if he wasn't, wasn't it comforting to imagine that he was, that all of the insanity could be resolved if he could just be removed from power? The idea that everything could be attributed to him being in power fueled his first impeachment trial and the liberal imperative to do whatever was needed to make sure he didn't win the 2020 election. As the year went on, the rhetoric of Antichrist began to appear with increasing frequency, not from official sources, but in vernacular conversations, particularly those held online. Two articles, “Could American Evangelicals

¹ Brandon R. Grafius, *Reading the Bible with Horror* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, and London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020), 8.

Spot the Antichrist?” and “Should we call Donald Trump ‘antichrist’” spread like wildfire on Twitter and Reddit.² The Reddit community r/Trump666 was created on March 16, 2020 with the express purpose to “convince you that Donald Trump is the actual Antichrist.”³ On TikTok, hashtags emerged connecting Donald Trump to the Antichrist, including #trumpistheantichrist (409.5 K views), #antichristtrump (136.5K views), and #trumpisantichrist (80.6K views).⁴ In addition to these broad trends and discourse locations, there were individual posts, webpages, videos, and more that responded to these ideas on smaller scales.

As the idea of the Antichrist began to spread more popularly across the Internet, it prompted me to ask how the political discourse of the Antichrist functions within the digital environment, the guiding question of this thesis. There are excellent works that explore the use of Antichrist discourse in American politics and social commentary, or in popular culture, but the shift to the digital realm seemed to be something new, innately a product of its time. Throughout this thesis, there is a struggle over context, with my first case study relying heavily on the historical moment it was created in, while my second attempts to portray itself as being de-contextualized, existing outside of the chaos of reality in a realm where it makes its own truth. This is keenly tied to the digital realm, where context can be so easy to disguise, and where truth is so hard to know.

The critical part of my research question is the *how*. How does the digital landscape change the way that these messages are created and spread? How do individual users participate in it? How is the Antichrist as a concept different than any other conspiratorial claim? I argue throughout this thesis that structures inherent to the digital realm support the growth and spreading of Antichrist references, amplifying and spreading the idea of Donald Trump as the Antichrist beyond what

² Benjamin L. Corey, “Could American Evangelicals Spot the Antichrist? Here Are the Biblical Predictions,” *Benjamin L. Corey* (blog), June 10, 2020, <https://www.benjaminlcorey.com/could-american-evangelicals-spot-the-antichrist-heres-the-biblical-predictions/>; D. Stephen Long, “Should We Call Donald Trump ‘Antichrist?’,” *ABC Religion & Ethics*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/stephen-long-should-we-call-trump-antichrist/12335450>.

³ “Trump666,” Reddit, n.d., <https://www.reddit.com/r/Trump666/>.

⁴ View counts based on their levels on April 18, 2021.

would be possible without the digital sphere. Digital affordances and habits work together with the historical processes of naming Antichrists in a synergistic manner, with the digital realm helping the ideas spread and the history of the Antichrist providing a degree of gravity that other forms of derogatory or conspiratorial discourse could not evoke.

In this introduction, I provide a summary of the Antichrist as a concept followed up by how it has been applied to Donald Trump in major events during his presidency. From there, I discuss my methodology for this project and briefly survey what each chapter of my thesis will cover.

The Antichrist

Any discussion of the Antichrist must begin with a discussion of where the word comes from and what, Biblically speaking, it entails. Strictly speaking, the inclusion of the Antichrist (*antichristos*) in the Bible is more limited than most might expect, given popular depictions, with the word only appearing in two books, 1 and 2 John. Here, the phrase is often plural (*antichristoi*) and generalized; those who work against the efforts of Christ are Antichrists.⁵ From there, people began to associate the word with other Biblical figures to create a more easily identified composite figure. For example, it is generally accepted that the Antichrist is synonymous with the Beast from Revelation, which itself derives from the four beasts of Daniel.⁶ In addition, the Antichrist may be the Man of Sin, Son of Perdition from 2 Thessalonians and will likely be one of the false Christs (*pseudochristoi*) of the little apocalypses.⁷ For those who want to push it even further, there is the “dual-fulfillment prophecy,” which suggests that verses that speak broadly to behaviors that are unchristian are eventually going to be embodied in the Antichrist.⁸ Depending on which of these levels is considered in a given religious or popular text invoking the Antichrist, the Antichrist could

⁵ 1 John 2-4; 2 John 1

⁶ Revelation 13-19; Daniel 7

⁷ 2 Thessalonians 2. Mark 13:21-2; Matthew 24:23-4; The figure is discussed in more detail in Mark 13:5-6 and Matthew 24:4-5.

⁸ Jonathan Dane, *Rise of the Little Horn* (Jonathan Dane, 2016), 45.

be used as a phrase to describe a non-Christian or it could describe a clearly defined apocalyptic figure.

The Antichrist as a figure has evolved and changed in a multitude of ways over the course of around two thousand years, taking on important roles within the realms of religion, popular culture, and politics. Sarah Iles Johnston explains that figures which exist in multiple stories and forms of media develop “accretive” forms, which means that each individual has a different mental image based on which portrayals they have experienced and the level of impact each one had on them.⁹ Because the accretive form of the Antichrist may be drawn from theology, from novels, from films, or from television (and surely from any number of other sources), it is impossible to say precisely what each person is alluding to when they reference the Antichrist. In order to respond to this challenge, I provide a brief survey of its uses in religious representations, popular culture, and politics in the hopes that it will provide a common ground to approach the concept from before turning to its specific history of usage in respect to Donald Trump.

Within the broad realm of theology, the Antichrist tends to manifest in one of two concrete forms, changing gradually with the times, although it is always associated with “conceptions and fears about ultimate human evil.”¹⁰ One of early Christianity’s greatest theologians, Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-254), argued that the Antichrist functioned in two ways: as “every word that pretends to be the truth when it is not” and as the “son of the evil daemon, who is Satan and the devil.”¹¹ The first of these connects to the Antichrist as represented in the Johannite tradition (connected to 1 and 2 John)—as heresy and non-Christian behavior—while the second represents the apocalyptic figure. Theological belief swung between these two representations every few

⁹ Sarah Iles Johnston, *The Story of Myth* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 157-161.

¹⁰ Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 2.

¹¹ Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 64.

centuries, with neither representation fading away completely. Though major figures such as Augustine of Hippo and Pope Gregory I argued for the “antichrist within” view, which argued for Christians to examine themselves and their communities for unchristian beliefs and behaviors, the apocalyptic figure was more useful, allowing the medieval church to name any political enemy as the Antichrist, whether they believed it or not, to justify taking extreme action.¹² Moving into the modern period, the Antichrist fell out of common use, remaining popular in specific evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant groups, while largely being neglected by other Christian traditions.

While most Christian denominations neglected the literal conceptualization of the Antichrist over the last few centuries, the figure began to have a profound impact on popular culture. Neil Gerlach emphasizes the significance of pop culture figures in creating popular conceptions of the apocalypse and the Antichrist, suggesting that the apocalypse “works as a nexus point for the intermixing of religious and secular popular culture, highlighting the fluidity and mutuality of influence between the two.”¹³ If you were to ask the average person what they knew about the Antichrist, it would almost certainly be some combination of Biblical and popular information, with the Biblical references highly favoring Revelation, since that is the text most frequently highlighted in popular works. The precise mixture of this is unique to each individual, though Mathew John suggests it may also have to do with the religious leanings of the society: “In a religiously conservative society, theology dominates culture. In a secularized society, in contrast, culture overpowers and shapes theology.”¹⁴

Within popular culture, there have generally been two realms that focus on the Antichrist: Evangelical media and horror. Evangelical novels and films frequently depict the Rapture, and many

¹² Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 76-113.

¹³ Neil Gerlach, “Narrating Armageddon: Antichrist Films and the Critique of Late Modernity,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture: Toronto* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 217.

¹⁴ Mathew P. John, “Seeing the Unseen: Film as a Religious Experience,” in *Film as Cultural Artifact*, Religious Criticism of World Cinema (Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2017), 15, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1kgqtvf.6>.

include a designated Antichrist that rises to power during that time. The most influential of these was the *Left Behind* series. *Left Behind's* Antichrist is Nicolae Carpathia, a charming Romanian politician who gains power by seizing control over the United Nations and launching the period of tribulation, where Christians are persecuted and everyone must choose to worship him or suffer. He is shown to be extremely intelligent, knowing multiple languages and mastering political strategy. This created a popular image of the Antichrist as a political figure associated with the UN and other international organizations, a figure who seems—and is—too good to be true.

The horror genre, in order to create a more explicit sense of dread, projects images of the Antichrist as being identifiably *wrong*. The most influential of these portrayals was *The Omen's* Damien Thorn, the adopted son of the US Ambassador to the United Kingdom, who causes the people around him (particularly those who threaten him) to die, often aided by animal familiars such as rottweilers and ravens. Over the course of the three movies, audiences see Damien moving through the political system, seemingly adopted by the United States president at the end of the first film and taking up his adopted father's position of ambassador by the third film, where it is shown that he has a large amount of control over the presidency. The grown version of Damien from the third movie certainly has some amount of charisma, which aids him in acquiring his power, but the films always revolve around the people in Damien's life discovering that there is darkness in him and attempting to stop it, pushing the message that the Antichrist can be easily identified. Follow the bodies and see where they lead.

While those two cultural works were the most significant for decades, there is a recent shift in popular culture that might help explain why the Antichrist has been called on for political and memetic purposes so frequently in the last few years. As I discuss in a forthcoming work, there has been a surge of Antichrist or Antichrist-adjacent plotlines in television in the latter half of the 2010s, from the ones that directly state that they have an Antichrist main character (*Damien* (2016); *American*

Horror Story: Apocalypse (2018); *Good Omens* (2019)) to the ones that have season-long arcs which draw on Antichrist mythology and symbolism for not-explicitly-named Antichrists (*Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018), *Supergirl* (2018), *Supernatural* (2017-2020)).¹⁵ A major feature of these works is their ambivalence toward the Antichrist, who is generally not portrayed as innately evil, as earlier popular culture did, but is instead a good person with evil inside of them, warring with themselves as to which will win out.¹⁶ The apocalypse, the Mark of the Beast, the Book of Revelation... They are all becoming extremely prominent concepts in popular culture, so it is easy to see why these ideas would be readily available to individuals looking for a suitable metaphor for their experience of the world.

As has been hinted at through the discussions of religious and popular culture interpretations of the Antichrist, there is a long history of associating the Antichrist with political figures and enemies, particularly in the United States. Robert Fuller explores this topic in his work *Naming the Antichrist*, which details the ways in which Americans cling to the idea of their enemies being in league with the Devil himself. Fuller attributes this tendency to a desire for mythological significance which requires that Americans “[understand] themselves—and their enemies—in the mythic context of the struggle between absolute good and absolute evil.”¹⁷ Perhaps due to its historical newness, the United States has very little claim to foundation myths on the cosmic level. In its place, there are myths of religious superiority, which require Biblical good-vs-evil struggles.

The Antichrist, as a figure understood to be truly evil, is the best possible enemy for these purposes. By naming an enemy as being that evil, every political and military battle becomes sacred. This moral element makes it so that territorialism is accepted and even condoned: defining political

¹⁵ Listed dates correspond to the years in which each show focused on an Antichrist plotline, not the full length of the show.

¹⁶ Meagan Bojarski, “The Reluctant Antichrist: Moral Ambiguity and Personal Responsibility in Apocalyptic Time,” in *The End of the World on Film and Television*, ed. Barna W. Donovan (McFarland & Company, forthcoming).

¹⁷ Robert C. Fuller, *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

enemies as being literal evil makes it so that total destruction is the only correct path.¹⁸ In addition to justifying the destruction of enemies, naming the Antichrist allows Americans to “[project] onto a demonic enemy the ‘unacceptable’ tendencies that people refuse to recognize in themselves.”¹⁹ To look at this through a recent example, there were many claims that Barack Obama was the Antichrist, which functioned as wars over American identity and morality. As Michael Barkun explains, birther communities sought to legally exclude Obama from Americanness, and claims that he was Muslim intended to separate him from what was deemed to be appropriate American religion; claims that he was the Antichrist positioned Obama as so far morally othered as to be fully excluded from the self-perceptions of American morality.²⁰ These theories circulated both before and during Obama’s presidency, continually attempting to distance strongly held perceptions of what America was from Obama’s person. Likewise, the following section details moments when Donald Trump engaged in behaviors that many Americans wanted to distance themselves from, resulting in claims that he was the Antichrist.

Donald Trump as Antichrist

One of the first moments when Donald Trump was accused of being the Antichrist occurred in February 2016, when Trump and Pope Francis had a very public disagreement. In response to Trump’s central campaign promise of building a wall between the United States and Mexico, Pope Francis said, “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian.” Donald Trump struck back, calling the Pope’s comments “disgraceful” and suggesting that, “No leader, especially a religious leader, has the right to question another man’s religion or faith.” Later, he suggested that the Pope would regret it if Trump was not

¹⁸ Robert C. Fuller, *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 159.

¹⁹ Robert C. Fuller, *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 197.

²⁰ Michael Barkun, “Conspiracy Theories about Barack Obama,” in *Culture of Conspiracy*, 2nd ed., Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America (University of California Press, 2013), 183–92, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt3fh35v.16>.

elected president, as it would result in ISIS attacking the Vatican.²¹ Such a public confrontation, particularly one that included the words “not Christian,” prompted discussion that, perhaps, Donald Trump was the Antichrist.²² When the Pope and President first met in person in May 2017, press photographs showed both men apparently unhappy. These photos were then shared on Twitter and other social media platforms with figures from various (generally religious) horror franchises Photoshopped in, including *The Omen’s* Damien Thorn.²³ The frequency of applying horror figures to these images suggested that many Twitter users saw horror as an appropriate way to understand Donald Trump and to claim that there was something wrong with him.

The idea that that “something wrong” might be that he was the Antichrist circulated heavily in August 2019, after Trump Tweeted a quote about himself that claimed that the international Jewish community thought of him as the “King of Israel” and considered him to be “the second coming of God.”²⁴ Those particular phrases gained a lot of attention, as referring to himself, even through paralipsis, using messianic terminology connected him with the tradition of the *pseudochristoi*, or false Christs, warned against in the Bible. In addition, many proponents of modern religious apocalypticism believe that the Antichrist will create a pact with Israel before betraying them, so the emphasis on his actions supporting Israel raised red flags for many members of these communities.

These events led up to the popular discourse in June 2020 that will be featured in Chapter Two. Donald Trump ordered protesters to be forcefully removed from outside of a church in order to get a photo shoot, and then released a series of images, one of which seemed to be ominous,

²¹ Ben Jacobs, “Donald Trump Calls Pope Francis ‘disgraceful’ for Questioning His Faith,” *The Guardian*, February 18, 2016, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/feb/18/donald-trump-pope-francis-christian-wall-mexico-border>.

²² The biggest example of this was the front cover of the New York Daily News on February 19, 2016, which included an image of a scaled Trump surrounded by flames, along with the word “ANTICHRIST!” See “ANTICHRIST! Pope Calls out Hateful Trump,” *NY Daily News*, February 19, 2016.

²³ Matt Novak, “Trump’s Awkward Photo with Pope Francis Becomes a Horror Movie Meme,” *Gizmodo*, May 25, 2017, <https://gizmodo.com/trumps-awkward-photo-with-pope-francis-becomes-a-horror-1795535038>.

²⁴ Trump, Donald J. Twitter Post. August 21, 2019, 7:34 AM. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1164138795475881986>.

from within another church. The buildup of anti-Christian sentiments and dubious self-proclamations prompted a surge of activity on Twitter, where users responded to the ominous image by associating it, textually and visually, with *The Omen* film franchise. In addition to specific references to the images, people began to talk about his other religious flubs, including calling 2 Corinthians “two Corinthians,” rather than “second Corinthians,” the accepted religious phrasing. A series of religious confrontations and mistakes, mixed with what many thought to be nearly apocalyptic-level pandemics and rioting, further spread the idea that, just maybe, Donald Trump truly was the Antichrist.

Methodology

While this phenomenon has a long history, and has manifested in a variety of different ways in the Trump administration, I specifically view it through asking how people name Antichrists online. I look at digital communication as a practice through analyzing two very different kinds of digital texts, which provide insights into the different ways that ideas spread and take hold online. A key influence on this methodological decision was Lyndsay Gratch’s *Adaptation Online*, where she argues that scholars should examine how video adaptations change from their source texts, as the elements of adaptations that are changed or kept the same may indicate creator’s values.²⁵ From this idea, I look at how the idea of Donald Trump as the Antichrist is changed or kept the same across various texts, with the core idea that Donald Trump is like the Antichrist manifesting in a variety of different ways, based on the context of each moment and the affordances of each digital environment.

With that being said, there are several things that this thesis will *not* be doing. While I view algorithms as a critical context to digital communication, this thesis does not specifically examine how these algorithms work or precisely how frequently they favor the apocalyptic perspective. This

²⁵ Lyndsay Michalik Gratch, *Adaptation Online: Creating Memes, Splicing Movies, and Other Digital Performances* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 4.

thesis also does not include any ethnographic components. Just as Internet users often come to texts without knowing what their creators thought or felt when they posted them, this thesis only includes the information that can be found within the texts themselves.

One fundamental thing that I will not be exploring in this thesis is whether the creators believe in what they are saying, or how their audiences understand them. Though there is plenty of psychological research that explores why people believe in and spread conspiracy theories²⁶, it is difficult to determine belief simply by examining the available texts. Internet discourse, particularly in respect to non-mainstream ideologies, is plagued by a concept known as Poe's Law. Poe's Law states: "Without a winking smiley or other blatant display of humor, it is utterly impossible to parody a Creationist in such a way that someone won't mistake for the genuine article."²⁷ In other words, anyone on the Internet could create an argument for Creationism (or for a conspiracy theory) that seems believable, and the audience cannot know for sure if they are genuine or trolling. Particularly now that conspiracy theorists face political, as well as intellectual, judgment for their ideas, Internet discourse is typically created ambiguously; as Angela Nagel explains, "interpretation and judgment are evaded through tricks and layers of metatextual self-awareness and irony."²⁸ With this being the case, it is next to impossible to determine belief through textual exploration, and thus I do my best not to speculate on belief.

While I worked on this thesis, I did have to grapple with an important question involving the ethical implications of amplifying this phenomenon. As Andrew Peck explains, "Coverage of a

²⁶ A few major examples include: Michael J. Wood, Karen M. Douglas, and Robbie M. Sutton, "Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3, no. 6 (November 1, 2012): 767–73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550611434786>; Martin eBruder et al., "Measuring Individual Differences in Generic Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Across Cultures: The Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ)," *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (April 1, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00225>; Robert eBrotherton, Christopher C. French, and Alan D. Pickering, "Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (GCB)," *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (May 1, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00279>.

²⁷ Emma Grey Ellis, "Can't Take a Joke? That's Just Poe's Law, 2017's Most Important Internet Phenomenon," *Wired*, June 5, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2017/06/poes-law-troll-cultures-central-rule/>.

²⁸ Angela Nagel, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan And Tumblr To Trump And The Alt-Right* (Winchester, UK; Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2017), 31.

small-scale phenomenon distorts its prevalence while also tacitly encouraging potential imitators. In this way, amplification reifies that which is being amplified.”²⁹ Drawing attention to a phenomenon makes it seem more significant than it may actually be, but it also has the potential to *make* said phenomenon into a bigger deal than it otherwise would have been. This is because, as Phillips and Milner explain, “content spreads memetically whether participants share something to signal support, disgust, or anything on the spectrum in between.”³⁰ Spreading content, no matter the sharer’s intention, brings it to more people’s attention, who may then choose to embrace or reject the content and its inherent ideologies themselves. Thus, focusing an entire thesis on a potentially dangerous idea may have ethical risks. Despite my concerns about the implications of amplifying this phenomenon, I feel that it is a significant concept in need of further study, which influenced my decision to focus this thesis on how the ideas are spread, rather than devoting undue space to the ideas themselves.

Chapter Overviews

In Chapter One of this thesis, I provide a survey of literature discussing participatory media and remix, memetic logics, and conspiracy discourse. These three fields, while overlapping, each have distinct practices and backgrounds that are necessary to understand before approaching my two case studies. While there is not nearly enough space in this thesis, let alone one chapter, to provide a comprehensive review of any of these fields, this chapter is intended to provide readers with a primer on the areas of digital culture that are most crucial to understanding this project.

Chapter Two focuses on a Twitter trend from June 2020, where users widely spread the idea of Donald Trump as the Antichrist by developing their own versions of an image posted by Melania Trump overlaid with the aesthetics and affective qualities of *The Omen* films. During the trend,

²⁹ Andrew Peck, “A Problem of Amplification: Folklore and Fake News in the Age of Social Media,” *Journal of American Folklore* 133, no. 529 (2020): 335.

³⁰ Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online*, 1st Edition (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), 54.

participants established intertextual associations between Donald Trump and *The Omen's* Damien Thorn through contamination and remix practices, creating a wider potential for resonance in their audiences. *The Omen* Twitter trend was an extremely contextualized moment in digital communication, emerging from the chaos of early June 2020 in a way that could only have happened then. It was both public and collective, developing on Twitter as a variety of users found the same idea appealing. As the new versions of the image began to spread and gain attention, they created new interpretations of the image and its subjects moving forward.

Chapter Three switches focus from a hyper-contextualized, collective form of digital communication to a de-contextualized, authoritative text. In this chapter, I look at a digital conspiracy archive that details the ways in which Donald Trump is like the Antichrist, ranging from popular culture references and jokes to examinations of prophecy. I examine the digital conspiracy archive as a structural system intended to promote conspiracy beliefs online through persuasive features and a lack of known context. The particular digital conspiracy archive (DT666) that I analyze benefits both from the structure of the digital conspiracy archive and from the historical conceptualization of the Antichrist to allow visitors to discover more information and then generate future content, serious or not, that connects Donald Trump with the Antichrist.

Finally, the thesis includes a brief concluding section in which I summarize my key findings and arguments, consider the limitations of my study, discuss future work that might be done on this subject, and finally reflect on the implications that may come from my study. There is a wealth of examples of what might come from fringe ideas on the Internet concerning good and evil, not least of which includes the storming of the Capitol that haunts my every discussion of Donald Trump, the election, and conspiracy discourse. It is my hope that this thesis provides a useful discussion of how these kinds of ideas grow and spread, and provides a window into the sacred polarization of Donald Trump.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

The idea of the Antichrist has been around for thousands of years, which means that it is an idea that has been transplanted into the digital realm, rather than one that was originally created there. Its earliest origins may not even be known to us, a product of oral history and folklore, evolving and adapting to each new medium as it went along. From oral history to scripture, theological texts, novels, film, and now the Internet, the idea has demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt to new environments and maintain significance through each. With that being said, the ways in which it presents itself in each medium is slightly different, and its successes within them rely on the specific structures inherent to each medium. The digital landscape, likewise, brings important new frameworks and logics that the idea of the Antichrist must adapt to, which is what this chapter focuses on.

Digital culture is, in its most basic form, the bits of culture that are produced by and for digital contexts. The critical part of that definition, especially for my purposes, is the emphasis on “produced *by*.” Digital media is distinctly different from analog media, in large part because of digital affordances, the abilities and structuring forces of the Internet that influence how we use it. As Phillips and Milner put it: “while digital media allow a great deal of freedom, they’re also limited by a curated set of tools for navigation and play. The affordance of these tools direct what we are able to do—indeed, what even occurs to us to try to do—as we traverse the landscape.”¹ We often assume that we are fully in control of our actions online, but we are guided in our actions and receptions by hidden affordances. Phillips and Milner suggest that, in general, digital culture is characterized and controlled by the ability to change or remove parts of existing wholes, the ability to use existing

¹ Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2021), 185.

content for new purposes, and larger structures of archivability and accessibility that direct how content is stored and accessed.²

Getting more specific, particularly in regard to the spread of information, the digital landscape is controlled by algorithms and ideologies that can result in the collapsing of easily accessible context. Because there is too much information for anyone to sort through on their own, we rely on algorithms, which I discuss in more depth in Chapter Three, to tell us what to look at. These algorithms, as Phillips and Milner explain, “direct our eyes to *this* at the expense of *that* without telling us what we’re not seeing as a result.”³ Algorithms show us what they think we will respond to, rather than directing us to truth, as we often assume they will. Because they do not classify information based on its verifiability, any given search for information could provide a mixture of reliable and unreliable information, which is presented as being equally valued. This, as Phillips and Milner explain, “prime[s] the landscape for context collapse and its messy commingling of audiences.”⁴ Without visible context, ideas and information online are produced and spread in particular ways that break down traditional authorities and determine the value of information by its utility to the individual, rather than any larger structure of evaluation.

Below, I explore three specific subsections of digital culture to make it clearer how the digital landscape operates and how this contributes to the spread of pseudo-apocalyptic claims that will be discussed in Chapters Two and Three. As this landscape is a critical foundation for the case studies in the following chapters, this chapter is intended as an introduction to three components of this landscape: participatory culture and remix, memetic media, and conspiracy discourse. This chapter is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of any of the topics examined. Rather, it is an

² Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online*, 1 edition (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), 45.

³ Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2021), 160.

⁴ Phillips and Milner, 186.

opportunity to present fundamental components of the digital landscape that are necessary to understand the context surrounding my case studies and how I have approached them.

Participatory Culture and Remix

A critical framework for understanding how digital culture works is the idea of participatory culture, which Jenkins et al. define as a system in which “one sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined.”⁵ Participatory culture involves understanding audiences as active participants in consumption, as well as creators and framers of new, derivative works. A few examples of this broadened participation include the power and proliferation of fan cultures, collaborative knowledge production through websites like Wikipedia, and the everyday production and sharing of content on social media platforms.

While a critical part of digital culture, participatory culture is not original to the digital world, drawing from many artistic and textual fields that involve creative engagement with pre-existing works. Nicolas Bourriaud defines the process as postproduction in the context of art, explaining, “artists who insert their own work into that of others contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work.”⁶ David Greetham looks at this process in textual studies, explaining that cultural texts often “contaminate” new productions, intentionally or unintentionally, which is “seditious, ironic, fun, sometimes invisible, and a sign of the human mind at work;” it is also characteristic of “an age in which the unsullied, pure text, devoid of interpenetrations by other texts, is chimerical.”⁷ These concepts, while not existing solely within the digital context, thrive online, where all users have the

⁵ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York ; London: NYU Press, 2013), 2.

⁶ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2007), 13.

⁷ David Greetham, *The Pleasures of Contamination: Evidence, Text, and Voice in Textual Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 10-12.

potential to create and consume, and can operate at a speed that pushes social production to new levels. As far as my research is concerned, this foundation is critical because the ability to participate in domains that were traditionally controlled by authoritative figures provides a platform for vernacular political discourse of all kinds to be produced, seen, and shared.

Within participatory culture, active audiences play a key role in determining what is valued and valuable by choosing whether or not to share what they have seen. This is a fundamental concept within what Jenkins et al. call the “spreadability mentality,” which encourages creators to develop texts that audiences can engage with in their own ways, for their own reasons, rather than in mandated, authorized structures of engagement and response.⁸ This perspective pushes back against concepts of virality, which suppose passive audiences being ‘infected’ by the media they engage with, instead focusing on *what* audiences engage with and why: “their choices, investments, agendas, and actions determine what gets valued.”⁹ By emphasizing the importance of audience needs and variability, the spreadability mentality acknowledges that successful digital content may not be the best content; instead, it is often “that which most powerfully speaks to the desires and fears of the participating community.”¹⁰ Spreadability thus allows us to understand content as not necessarily being good or bad, but rather as being resonant or not to a particular audience in a particular moment. If it resonates, then it will be spread; if it does not, then it will not.

One way that individual users can take advantage of the participatory framework of the Internet is through widespread, vernacular remixing. As Jenkins et al. explain, “As material spreads, it gets remade: either literally, through various forms of sampling and remixing, or figuratively, via its

⁸ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York ; London: NYU Press, 2013), 6.

⁹ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York ; London: NYU Press, 2013), 21.

¹⁰ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York ; London: NYU Press, 2013), 218.

insertion into ongoing conversations and across various platforms.”¹¹ Remixing as a way of engaging with resonant texts may involve remixing as a practice or remix as a product. In the first case, Annette Markham explains remix as an intuitive, epistemological process: “As we surf, we create momentary meaning structures, mini-remixes that get remixed again and again, every time we surf similarly, with different outcomes.”¹² Remix as a practice is a way of constantly reevaluating and rearranging our understandings of the world based on new inputs or evaluations. This is particularly significant within the digital context, because users generally do not engage with texts in the chronological order of their production; instead, texts appear based on a complicated combination of algorithmic direction, active searching, peer sharing, and luck.

The decision to transform that process into a product allows individuals to remake the materials that resonate with them as they perceived them, presenting their interpretations to a wider audience. As Lyndsay Gratch explains, “Remixes rearrange, combine, and/or recontextualize fragments of the original, and offer an alternate version of the text.”¹³ These alternative texts then have the potential to fundamentally impact how their audiences think of the source text(s) moving forward. From remix’s origins in music, the creative selection of texts to mold into new forms is known as sampling, which Scott H. Church describes as follows: “Sampling as a musical practice rejects linear order and focuses instead on aesthetic appropriateness, which is governed by opportune timing, or *kairos*.”¹⁴ The key to a successful remix, Joanna Demers explains, is to mix the

¹¹ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York; London: NYU Press, 2013), 27.

¹² Annette Markham, “Remix Cultures, Remix Methods,” in *Global Dimensions of Qualitative Inquiry*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Michael D. Giardina, International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (Walnut Creek, CA: Routledge, 2013), 71, <https://libezproxy.syr.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=508118&site=ehost-live>.

¹³ Lyndsay Michalik Gratch, *Adaptation Online: Creating Memes, Sweding Movies, and Other Digital Performances* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 16.

¹⁴ Scott H. Church, “A Rhetoric of Remix,” in *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*, ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough (Routledge, 2014), 46, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315879994>.

sampled texts “in such a way as to make their combination seem necessary, almost inevitable.”¹⁵ This aesthetic goal in the musical context also serves a rhetorical purpose: the inevitability of the remix allows the alternative version of the text to thrive, perhaps superseding or achieving more engagement than the source material.

This practice becomes especially significant rhetorically when the alternative texts are understood as arguments about one or more of the source materials. Olivia Conti argues that political remixes function as arguments by “calling up and subverting institutional texts,” which then may lead their audiences to “interrogate the primacy of hegemonic discourses.”¹⁶ Entertaining remixes can be particularly effective at this because their entertainment value is frequently perceived before any deeper argument. As Paulo Peverini explains, “The strategic use of remix therefore consists of planning targeted use of intertextuality and interdiscursivity, at first sight camouflaging the true semiotic nature of the protest campaign, with the aim of bypassing the public’s inurement to the canonical forms of political discourse.”¹⁷ This can make it so that remixes may send political messages that would receive a large amount of push-back if stated more directly.

Participatory culture and the remix practices that emerge from it allow more people to respond to authoritative texts and have their perspectives be seen. They help content reach large audiences, despite their creators not having established platforms of their own. These ideas filter throughout this thesis, but will be particularly applicable in Chapter Two, where users respond to one of Melania Trump’s posts on Twitter, a platform that relies on mass participation. The original post was shared from the First Lady of the United States Twitter account, marking it as an

¹⁵ Joanna Demers, *Listening Through the Noise: The Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 57.

¹⁶ Olivia Conti, “Political Remix Video as a Vernacular Discourse,” in *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*, ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough (Routledge, 2014), 332–337. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315879994>.

¹⁷ Paulo Peverini, “Remix Practices and Activism: A Semiotic Analysis of Creative Dissent,” in *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*, ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough (Routledge, 2014), 323. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315879994>.

authoritative text. Utilizing participatory strategies, Twitter users removed one image from the authoritative source and remixed it to spread their own messages.

Memetic Media

One of the most central elements of online discourse, and a product of participatory culture and remix, is the creation and distribution of online memes. The word “meme” was first coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976 to refer to bits of culture that survive in popular consciousness through replication.¹⁸ Though Dawkins’s original concept functioned within culture at large, I am focusing more specifically on the Internet meme, which Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner define as “evolving tapestries of self-referential texts collectively created, circulated, and transformed by participants online.”¹⁹ Internet memes are constantly transforming, changing, and being shared, generally following a “memetic template,” which allows new creators to copy, edit, and share their own versions of the meme which are recognizably tied to the original.²⁰

Memetic media is characterized by the simultaneous enactment of sameness and change. Focusing first on the reproduction of sameness, Milner explains that, as memetic content spreads, “so do the shared phrases, references, in-jokes, and assumptions that constitute it.”²¹ This allows for memetic templates and characters to be recognizable, while also reproducing the deeper meanings of memetic content, whether the poster is aware of them or not. This is one way that politically charged memes have become so pervasive: they can be spread by those who do not hold those beliefs but may be unaware of the ideologies that the memes support.

Despite the importance of the fixity of certain structures and ideologies within memes, the ways in which they change provide windows into what the creators and sharers think and value.

¹⁸ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

¹⁹ Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online*, 1 edition (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), 30.

²⁰ An Xiao Mina, *Memes to Movements: How the World’s Most Viral Media Is Changing Social Protest and Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 33.

²¹ Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, The Information Society Series (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016), 109.

Lyndsay Gratch explains this phenomenon through video adaptations and digital performances, stating, “Memes, as performances of adaptation and/or re-performances—even when they aim for fidelity toward their source—*always* change the original performance in some way.”²² Even a reproduction that attempts perfect fidelity to its source involves new contexts, bodies, visual elements, and/or voices, which will always change the performance. Gratch argues that, in order to better understand the meanings that various groups have gleaned from a text, it is useful to “[study] how people are adapting (and by extension *reading*) a video within specific social and historical constructs,” because “prevailing motifs and aesthetic commonalities among the adaptations of a single video might indicate what creators specifically value and/or oppose in the video they have chosen to adapt.”²³ Likewise, examining which elements of any memetic framing change and which remain the same provides perspective on how these components may be valued by their producers and sharers.

A great strength of memetic media is the speed at which it changes and spreads, which prompts emotional, instinctual reactions from those viewing it. As Woods and Hahner explain, “The speed of the meme is part of its rhetorical power.”²⁴ This speed is one of the affordances of the digital realm, where thousands of people can see, share, and/or reproduce a meme in no time at all. However, this speed is not a neutral feature. As Clay Shirky explains, “As a medium gets faster, it gets more emotional. We feel faster than we think.”²⁵ When scrolling through the deluge of information and content that is available on social media, people rarely take the time to fully think through what they see. This is then significant because, as Heath et al. found in their study of how

²² Lyndsay Michalik Gratch, *Adaptation Online: Creating Memes, Sweding Movies, and Other Digital Performances* (Ilanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 7.

²³ Lyndsay Michalik Gratch, *Adaptation Online: Creating Memes, Sweding Movies, and Other Digital Performances* (Ilanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 4.

²⁴ Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner, *Make America Meme Again: The Rhetoric of the Alt-Right* (New York: Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2019), 9.

²⁵ tedchris, “Q&A with Clay Shirky on Twitter and Iran | TED Blog,” TEDBlog, *Q&A* (blog), June 16, 2009, https://blog.ted.com/qa_with_clay_sh/.

emotional responses influence the remembrance of memetic rumors and urban legends, “In general, when rumors or legends transmit across people, the aspects of those ideas that are selected and retained are likely to be the ones that evoke consistent emotional reactions.”²⁶ All together, the speed of the digital context fosters emotional reactions, which in turn influence how viewers remember stories and potentially how they retell them.

However, the structure of the Internet makes it difficult to know much of anything concretely, which makes any foray into unfamiliar digital communities difficult to understand. As Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner explain, “There’s just not enough context to determine exactly who is playing, exactly who is serious, and exactly what difference that might make. ... Sometimes all you have to work with is the content rolling past you on the screen, and sometimes all you can do is ‘\(_/\)’ as it goes.”²⁷ This fundamental ambivalence means that, despite having a text in hand, it is difficult, if not impossible, to be certain how any individual producer, sharer, or audience member understood the text or what their intentions about it might have been.

While it is next to impossible to concretely determine how an individual responds to memetic media, that does not make it insignificant rhetorically. Woods and Hahner, in their work *Make America Meme Again*, argue “that memes function as a key form of political communication, that they are rhetorically effective, and that they challenge foundational deliberative norms.”²⁸ This is because memes have concrete functions. They “may provide an audience momentary coherence despite diffusion and dislocation,” and, as engagement-provoking forms of media, “memes ask users to become producers or at least re-creators of content.”²⁹ Beyond their power to create collectives

²⁶ Chip Heath, Chris Bell, and Emily Sternberg, “Emotional Selection in Memes: The Case of Urban Legends,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81, no. 6 (December 2001): 1031, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.81.6.1028>.

²⁷ Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online*, 1st Edition (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), 53.

²⁸ Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner, *Make America Meme Again: The Rhetoric of the Alt-Right* (New York: Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2019), 212.

²⁹ Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner, *Make America Meme Again: The Rhetoric of the Alt-Right* (New York: Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2019), 142-3.

based upon digital engagement, An Xiao Mina explains that they also have political function, as they can “act as signals of identity and belief” for individuals, while possessing “narrative-shifting, emotion-affirming power [that] is a major contribution to movements, a contribution that can help sustain movements” on a larger scale.³⁰

The idea of Donald Trump as the Antichrist functions memetically, changing as it moves through various digital spaces and adapts to current events. Both of my case studies involve specific manifestations of that larger idea, presenting the idea differently based on their digital location and function. Looking at the case studies more specifically, the different kinds of Twitter posts that developed on June 3rd and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two show the evolution of that idea in a specific moment in time, with familiar ideas and structures taking shape. While the digital conspiracy archive analyzed in Chapter Three is not a collective process, and therefore is not intuitively functioning memetically, it does contain a variety of different information that can then be adapted to various different purposes later, many of which will involve some sort of memetic spread.

Conspiracy Discourse

Moving from a very visible part of digital culture to a more secretive, but no less common, phenomenon, I finally turn to digital conspiracy discourse. Before going any further, it is important to delineate three important components of conspiracy discourse: conspiracy, conspiracy belief, and conspiracy theory. A conspiracy, as defined by Young and Nathanson, is a series of actions performed by groups that are highly coordinated, opposed to the common good, and involve secret planning and decision-making.³¹ These kinds of actions undoubtedly do happen, although not necessarily as frequently or in the exact ways that conspiracy theorists imagine them to. Conspiracy

³⁰ *An Xiao Mina, Memes to Movements: How the World's Most Viral Media Is Changing Social Protest and Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 27-77.

³¹ Katherine K. Young and Paul Nathanson, *Sanctifying Misandry: Goddess Ideology and the Fall of Man*, 1st edition (Montreal: Ithaca, NY: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

belief, then, is defined by Michael Barkun as “the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end.”³² It is likely that a large number of people have some amount of conspiracy belief, but it is difficult to gauge until they put it into words or actions. A common way to express conspiracy belief (or to mock it) is by sharing a codified narrativization of that belief, a conspiracy theory. Samory and Mina explain that a conspiracy theory must include the following critical components: “the group of conspiratorial agents, their secret and malevolent actions, and the targets of the conspiratorial plot.”³³ In order to count as a conspiracy theory, a statement must contain all three components, which can clearly be defined and then explained in more detail to interested parties.

While these definitions require conspiracy theories to follow a certain amount of logic and structure, conspiracy belief and discourse often falls prey to the cultural assumption of falseness. As Daniel C. Hellinger explains, “‘Conspiracy theory’ is not a description of certain ideas; it is a term of disqualification.”³⁴ Most often, we use the term to discount ideas that do not follow our typical narratives of life and history, particularly when they use evidence that is not generally considered valid. We say that rational people believe what we have evidence for; conspiracy theorists believe things that have no evidence. This makes it so that, before engaging with them, audiences are provided with the assumption, as Bjerg and Prescorn state, “that the claims advanced by the theory are not true.”³⁵ This perspective goes as far back in academic scholarship as conspiracy theory studies do, with Richard Hofstadter’s *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* suggesting that conspiracy

³² Michael Barkun, “The Nature of Conspiracy Belief,” in *Culture of Conspiracy*, 2nd ed., *Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (University of California Press, 2013), 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt3fh35v.5>.

³³ Mattia Samory and Tanushree Mitra, “The Government Spies Using Our Webcams: The Language of Conspiracy Theories in Online Discussions,” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 2, no. CSCW (November 1, 2018): 152:3, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3274421>.

³⁴ Daniel C. Hellinger, *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in the Age of Trump* (St. Louis: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 10.

³⁵ Ole Bjerg and Thomas Presskorn-Thygesen, “Conspiracy Theory: Truth Claim or Language Game?,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 144, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276416657880>.

theorists are delusional and pose a danger to public trust.³⁶ However, Adam Enders, a political scientist who studies conspiracy theories, suggests that conspiracy thinking is actually part of a spectrum we are all on.³⁷ Extreme conspiracism is dangerous, but the other end of the spectrum can be just as bad, with complete acceptance of what we are told. In addition, the willful mockery of conspiracy discourse may be just as dangerous as the theorizing itself, because, as Friedberg explains, “The longer an infectiously bad idea goes undetected and undebunked, the more likely it is to spread and develop social importance.”³⁸

In order to push beyond the immediate dismissal of conspiracy beliefs and theories, many scholars have devoted themselves to understanding how conspiracy belief and discourse works. Barkun describes three key principles for conspiracy rhetoric: nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected.³⁹ These are three necessary components to being sufficiently vigilant against powerful, secretive enemies, and thus they become elements of the conspiracy theorists’ base assumptions about life. The resulting hyper-vigilance prompts three processes: searching for monsters, compiling evidence against them, and constructing theories. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock explains that, due to a modern disassociation of monsters from identifiable physical markers, “the monster can be anyone and anywhere, and we only know it when it springs upon us or emerges from within us.”⁴⁰ The Antichrist, as a monstrous figure that has historically been tied to deception, benefits from this concept especially well, as the personification of evil could be anyone. This then frees us from the obligation of humane interactions and

³⁶ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Reprint edition (New York: Vintage, 2008).

³⁷ Zack Stanton, “You’re Living in the Golden Age of Conspiracy Theories,” *POLITICO*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/06/17/conspiracy-theories-pandemic-trump-2020-election-coronavirus-326530>.

³⁸ Brian Friedberg, “The Dark Virality of a Hollywood Blood-Harvesting Conspiracy,” *Wired*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/opinion-the-dark-virality-of-a-hollywood-blood-harvesting-conspiracy/>.

³⁹ Michael Barkun, “The Nature of Conspiracy Belief,” in *Culture of Conspiracy*, 2nd ed., *Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (University of California Press, 2013), 3-4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt3fh35v.5>.

⁴⁰ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “Invisible Monsters: Vision, Horror, and Contemporary Culture,” in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 373.

treatment. As W. Scott Poole explains, “A monster is however, beyond the ken of human experience. Monsters cannot be treated and rehabilitated, only destroyed.”⁴¹

The process of identifying monsters, and the broader belief in conspiracies, may happen for a variety of reasons, depending on the individual’s positionality to power. Douglas et al. found that those who lack socio-political control are more likely to believe in and spread conspiracy theories, and Uscinski et al. found that, on a more individualistic sense, failing to attain political power can do the same.⁴² Thus, those who feel they have been kept from achieving a maximum amount of agency often look at those who seem to have more than them, or those who they dislike, to explain what they lack. In addition, many groups develop belief in conspiracies based on very real historical examples of conspiracism, particularly amongst minority groups. As Kathryn Olmsted explains, “The message of Trump and Jones—that you cannot trust the establishment leaders of either party or the legacy media—resonated with so many Americans because of the revelations of real government conspiracies since the 1960s and the consequent erosion of trust in public officials.”⁴³ Even those public officials themselves may turn to conspiracy discourse when they perceive the world as being deeply uncertain, particularly where their own power is concerned. Scott Radnitz explores this situation within unstable countries, although he notes that it has become more common since 2016 for political leaders in the United States and Western Europe to knowingly espouse conspiracy theories or exaggerate threats against themselves to justify their actions in putting down minor threats.⁴⁴ Depending on how much power the individual has, they may situate

⁴¹ W. Scott Poole, *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 151.

⁴² Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka, “The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26, no. 6 (December 1, 2017): 538–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261>; Joseph E. Uscinski, Casey Klofstad, and Matthew D. Atkinson, “What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions,” *Political Research Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 57–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912915621621>.

⁴³ Kathryn Olmsted, “Fringe Paranoia Goes Mainstream,” *Modern American History* 1, no. 2 (2018): 246.

⁴⁴ Scott Radnitz, “Why the Powerful (in Weak States) Prefer Conspiracy Theories,” in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (Oxford University Press, 2018), 347–59, <https://oxford->

their monsters differently, but they are almost always defined by their ability to remove power from the individual and prevent them from taking it back.

Once a monster has been identified, people begin constructing theories and compiling evidence, processes which may happen in either order or simultaneously. For those focused on constructing theories, they may engage in Raab et al.'s conception of narrative construction, a process that "allows an individual to construct a story for a given event (e.g., the terrorist attacks of 9/11) by selecting and compiling pieces of information related to this event from different content categories."⁴⁵ For those who haven't fully mapped out the theory, or for those who want to make a theory more persuasive, they may focus exclusively on collective evidence for others' theories to draw from, evidence that resides in more or less tangible conspiracy archives. Because this thesis is concerned with how ideas about political enemies being the Antichrist are shared and spread online, my thesis focuses on the conspiracy archive, rather than focusing on any specific conspiracy theories. Conspiracy archives function simultaneously as products and processes, consisting of accumulations of evidence to support a belief that are constantly being updated with new information. Jenny Rice looks into these conspiracy archives, explaining that they "are generative and are continually re-created through inventive action."⁴⁶ The process of creating a tangible archive (or discovering information that contributes to intangible, personal archives) adds to an individual's certainty of the information within it. As Rice put it, "For conspiracists, building the archive—that activity itself—is beautiful. And for that reason, it is always right. Even when it's wrong."⁴⁷ Many of these archives are primarily composed of "stigmatized knowledge," which Barkun defines as "claims

universitypressscholarship-com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/view/10.1093/oso/9780190844073.001.0001/oso-9780190844073-chapter-23.

⁴⁵ Marius Hans Raab et al., "The Sarrazin Effect: The Presence of Absurd Statements in Conspiracy Theories Makes Canonical Information Less Plausible," *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00453>.

⁴⁶ Jenny Rice, "The Rhetorical Aesthetics of More: On Archival Magnitude," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 50, no. 1 (2017): 27, <https://doi.org/10.5325/philrhet.50.1.0026>.

⁴⁷ Jenny Rice, "The Rhetorical Aesthetics of More: On Archival Magnitude," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 50, no. 1 (2017): 42, <https://doi.org/10.5325/philrhet.50.1.0026>.

to truth that the claimants regard as verified despite the marginalization of those claims by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error—universities, communities of scientific researchers, and the like.”⁴⁸ The knowledge, which is rejected by official sources, is affirmed by the conspiracist’s belief in it and their certainty that everything within the archive is significant.

A specific subsection of conspiracy discourse that is critical both to my case studies and the broader social mindset they have emerged from are religiously fueled conspiracy theories, which at their core argue that their chosen monsters are evil in an eschatological sense. In their broadest form, David Frankfurter refers to these theories as myths of evil conspiracy, which, while unique to each historical moment they arise in, can be identified by distinct patterns such as:

‘something’ about abducted and abused or sacrificed children, ‘something’ about a secret counterreligion bent on corruption and atrocity, ‘something’ about people whose inclinations and habits show them to be not quite people, and ‘something’ about the authoritative way these stories are presented.⁴⁹

These theories have a heightened power in comparison to non-religiously-motivated theories, because they draw on the extreme emotional and spiritual weight of their conceptions of evil.

Within the context of Donald Trump’s presidency, one of the most prominent examples of a myth of evil conspiracy can be seen in the rise of QAnon. In 2017, one or more individuals began posting a series of clues and prophecies to the /pol/ message board on 4chan, claiming to be an inside source within the Trump Administration. According to the poster(s), who went by “Q”, Donald Trump was in the process of taking down a massive group of Satanic pedophiles, primarily

⁴⁸ Michael Barkun, “Millennialism, Conspiracy, and Stigmatized Knowledge,” in *Culture of Conspiracy*, 2nd ed., Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America (University of California Press, 2013), 26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt3fh35v.6>.

⁴⁹ David Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 5.

within the Democratic Party and the Hollywood Elite.⁵⁰ Believers in QAnon may not all agree to the same details, with some only resonating with specific angles of the broader theory, but they all rely on extreme polarizations, marking Trump as a savior and the Democrats as evil. As Whitney Phillips explains, they fall back on “deep memetic frames [that] establish the identity of the bad “them,” as opposed to the valiant “us,” and prescribe what can or should be done in response.”⁵¹ QAnon exploded as a movement in 2020, when, as Jack Bratich explains, the presidential election combined with the COVID-19 pandemic to provide a time in which many needed clear villains, heroes, and endings.⁵² The comfort of this narrative came from its extremity; flawed politicians could not solve all problems, but, as Thomas notes, QAnon “elevates the conspiracy to a matter of cosmic good versus monstrous evil.”⁵³ In such battles, cosmic good always wins. For those who needed an assured happy ending, the heroization of Trump provided that comfort narrative, with the assertion that all would be well once Trump vanquished all evil.

The case study that I explore in Chapter Three manifests in many ways as the opposite of QAnon, reversing the heroes and villains to provide a similarly comforting narrative: that Trump the Antichrist will eventually be destroyed. What marks theorizing about Donald Trump as the Antichrist as being different from QAnon, and what makes it so significant to my thesis, is that the idea is deeply historically grounded, as demonstrated in the Introduction. QAnon, while drawing on historical precedents such as blood libel accusations, was constructed within and for a digital context. In contrast, the Antichrist is an ancient concept that has been transplanted into the digital

⁵⁰ Abby Ohlheiser, “Evangelicals Are Looking for Answers Online. They’re Finding QAnon Instead.” *MIT Technology Review*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/08/26/1007611/how-qanon-is-targeting-evangelicals/>.

⁵¹ Whitney Phillips, “We Need to Talk About Talking About QAnon,” *Wired*, September 24, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/we-need-to-talk-about-talking-about-qanon/>; More information on deep memetic frames and their connection to conspiracy theories and disinformation can be found in Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2021).

⁵² “Rutgers Expert Explains QAnon,” *Rutgers Today*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.rutgers.edu/news/rutgers-expert-explains-qanon>.

⁵³ Paul Thomas, “How QAnon Uses Satanic Rhetoric to Set up a Narrative of ‘Good vs. Evil,’” *The Conversation*, October 20, 2020, <http://theconversation.com/how-qanon-uses-satanic-rhetoric-to-set-up-a-narrative-of-good-vs-evil-146281>.

landscape, benefitting both from its historical weight and from the affordances and structures of the digital realm. The ways in which conspiracy discourse have become so common in the current moment in history, joined with the ubiquitousness of participatory culture, remix, and memetic media, presents a landscape where the traditional accusations of political enemies as being the Antichrist can flourish in a variety of ways across broader audiences.

Conclusion

With Donald Trump moving so much political discourse into the digital landscape through his frequent usage of Twitter for official communications, he created an environment where political commentary also had to move online. Based on the significant role of participatory culture in the digital sphere, this allowed more voices to come to the table in order to critique any given moment in his presidency. As political discourse became more open through its presence online, it took on the characteristics of the digital landscape that have been discussed above. According to *Politico*, the 2016 election was “World War Meme,” with voters being influenced by memes that spread around the Internet, sharing ideas and building microcommunities.⁵⁴ Likewise, they defined 2020 as the “Golden Age of Conspiracy Theories.”⁵⁵ Political discussions were being increasingly influenced by digital culture and taking place within the digital landscape.

Within the explosion of political discourse online, accusations of political enemies being the Antichrist followed suit. From struggles between the papacy and medieval kings to modern presidential elections, the Antichrist is a religious motif that continues to come up in political conflicts within predominantly Christian cultures. With that being the case, Antichrist accusations had to contend with the same change in communicative landscape that other forms of political discourse did, spreading through the structures of participatory culture, appearing within remixes

⁵⁴ Ben Schreckinger, “World War Meme.” *Politico Magazine*, March/April,” *Politico*, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/03/memes-4chan-trump-supporters-trolls-internet-214856>.

⁵⁵ Stanton, “You’re Living in the Golden Age of Conspiracy Theories.”

and memes, and being the subject of conspiracy discourse on both sides. Naming the president as the Antichrist online is a distinct new communicative practice, and one that I explore in more depth over the course of the next two chapters.

Chapter 2

On June 2, 2020, the President and his wife visited the St. John Paul II National Shrine in Washington D.C. After their visit, the First Lady posted four images of the pair at various locations around the shrine to the FLOTUS (First Lady of the United States) Twitter account, along with a caption honoring Pope John Paul II's "passion & dedication for religious freedom."¹ The next day, June 3rd, one of the four images, which I will be referring to as the shrine image in this chapter, began to spread around Twitter, being referred to as ominous, like a scene out of a horror movie. This sequence of events makes very little sense without the context that the President was Donald Trump and that his visit to the shrine was an attempt to bolster religious support during a period of widespread protests against police brutality.

With that context, however, something about the situation made perfect sense to thousands of Twitter users who grasped onto the image as a way to respond to the chaotic political background. Something about that image in particular resonated with these Twitter users, who eventually settled on the idea that the image made sense as a scene out of *The Omen* series. Once the connection was established, some users edited the source image to overlay horror aesthetics onto it, while others created compilations of images from various moments in the Trump presidency that visually associated Donald Trump with the series' Antichrist, Damien Thorn. The phrase 'The Omen' began to trend on Twitter, with over 13.5 thousand Tweets using the phrase to describe the shrine image by 4:00.²

This particular moment was significant because it represented a public and collective association between a US President and the Antichrist. As was discussed in the Introduction, there is nothing particularly unique about associating the President with the Antichrist, or even specifically

¹ Melania Trump. Twitter Post. June 2, 2020, 5:20 P.M. <https://twitter.com/flotus/status/1267929157654269955>.

² This number of Tweets is based on my observation of the Trend as it developed on June 3rd. All measurements of engagement after this point are based on the levels of engagement that were visible on April 18, 2021.

associating Donald Trump with the Antichrist. However, apocalyptic associations between a President and the Antichrist are generally made within self-contained groups, often who are openly scorned by the public, and public jokes connecting the two are almost always individual actions. As an example of the former, fundamentalist leaders made frequent comments associating Franklin Delano Roosevelt with the Antichrist, either directly or as someone who was preparing the way for Armageddon, but these views never strayed far beyond their contained communities.³ The opposite situation, where a statement was made very publicly, but strictly individually, was a joke made by Conan O'Brien in 2016 that Trump's lead on Hillary Clinton was reported "2,000 years ago in the Book of Revelation."⁴ *The Omen* Twitter trend, on the other hand, took place on a public social media platform, reaching enough popularity that it became visible to widespread audiences when it was listed on the day's Trends. The trend involved not just a wide viewership, but also a large number of participants, commenting on popular posts and creating their own that strengthened these associations. Because of the public, collective nature of this moment, it is important to examine the trend in more depth to understand how the Antichrist has been used for political discourse in the digital age.

The Twitter posts that emerged as a part of this trend relied on intertextuality and remix, bringing together textual and visual references to the film series with the decontextualized shrine image, and, eventually, other images from the Trump family's time in the White House. I argue that, through engaging in contamination and remix practices, participants were able to establish multiple points of connection between Donald Trump and the Antichrist beyond this specific moment that had a wider potential for resonance among viewers. The more participants blurred the lines between

³ Matthew Avery Sutton, "Was FDR the Antichrist? The Birth of Fundamentalist Antiliberalism in a Global Age," *The Journal of American History* 98, no. 4 (2012): 1052–74.

⁴ Billy Bollotino, "Samantha Bee/Eugene & Dan Levy/Nothing But Thieves," *Conan* (TBS, May 24, 2016).

the fictional world of *The Omen* and the reality of the Trump presidency, the stronger the connection between Donald Trump and the Antichrist was.

This chapter examines how Twitter users engage in creative adaptation practices to respond to the shrine image and foster and expand connections between Donald Trump and Damien Thorn. For each of these practices, there are two ways that they present themselves, with those who engage in contamination presenting the shrine image first through the lens of horror and then more specifically through the lens of *The Omen*, and those creating remixes either engaging specifically with the source image or moving beyond it. In each case, as the posts foster connections between an increasing number of texts, the trend moves from responding to a very specific moment to moving into associations between Donald Trump and the Antichrist more broadly.

Creative Adaptation

In order to examine how *The Omen* Twitter trend functioned, I look at two ways that Twitter users adapted the source image to their own purposes: contamination and remix. Contamination, as discussed by David Greetham, occurs when “an external or precedent text invades the composition (consciously or unconsciously) of the current text.”⁵ Once the contaminating text becomes a part of the current text, it changes the ways in which viewers can see the current text moving forward. While the word ‘contamination’ carries some negative linguistic baggage, Greetham’s theory is critical to understanding what happened in this situation. The layering of *The Omen* over and into the shrine image fundamentally changed how people engaged with it moving forward, and allowed them to go further into creative manipulations of the source material.

The most frequent creative manipulations that developed as part of this trend adapted the shrine image and *The Omen* series through multimodal versions of what Eduardo Navas referred to as “selective remix” and “reflexive remix”. Selective remix involves “adding or subtracting material

⁵ David Greetham, *The Pleasures of Contamination: Evidence, Text, and Voice in Textual Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 10.

from the original composition,” but not substantially changing the source material or its aura.⁶ Navas’s concept of the aura is based in part on Walter Benjamin’s use of the word, which denoted authority and uniqueness to works of art that was damaged through mass reproduction in a way that allowed art to take on political and collective functions.⁷ Maintaining the aura of the source material meant that the authority of the source text and its creator remained at least partially intact. Reflexive remixes, on the other hand, are changed substantially enough that the new text “claims autonomy even when it carries the name of the original.”⁸ While Navas’s discussion of remix is predominantly focused on music in this instance, the distinction between remixes that alter the source material yet preserve its aura and remixes that take on some kind of autonomy is useful for this case study. Once the idea of associating the shrine image with *The Omen* took hold (through contamination), some users selectively altered the shrine image to amplify the horror aesthetics they were drawn to in the source image, while others used the shrine image as a launching-off point to create a remix of external texts that go beyond the shrine image itself.

Because the distinctions between contamination and remix as concepts can become murky, I will linger for a moment to explain how I will be using them in this chapter. Contamination is a matter of framing, providing viewers with a way of looking at the source text that requires them to do some of the cognitive work, identifying the contaminated elements based on the textual suggestion that they are present. On the other hand, remix practices, both selective and reflexive, involve creative reconstitutions of the source text(s) that make the connections between the texts visible. The further these remixes alter the visual presentation of the source image, the more they go

⁶ Eduardo Navas, “Regressive and Reflexive Mashups in Sampling Culture,” in *Mashup Cultures*, ed. Stefan Sonvilla-Weiss, 2010, 160, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-7091-0096-7>.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>.

⁸ Navas, 161.

from passing judgment on the shrine image to using the shrine image as a component of a larger political message.

As posts that utilized contamination and remix practices thrived, they functioned through the successful use of memetic logics and appropriate incongruity. Ryan M. Milner describes five overlapping logics to memetic media: multimodality, reappropriation, resonance, collectivism, and spread.⁹ Multimodality refers to the use of multiple ways of representing meaning, such as text, images, audio, video, and more, which allow participants to engage in more complex conversations than they would with just one.¹⁰ Many times, this multimodality takes the form of reappropriation, which involves mixing old and new texts and contexts, with the creative work happening in the ways that the texts are blended with each other to make new meanings.¹¹ While these first two logics have to do with the creation of memetic media, the next three have to do with the ways in which people respond to the texts. Milner's third logic is resonance, the personal meaning in a text that causes participants to create and circulate memetic media.¹² The proof that a text has resonated with viewers comes from their decision to react to a text, spread it, or create their own versions. As texts resonate, they help individuals to find and connect with social groups and identities through a process of collectivism, Milner's fourth memetic logic.¹³ Memetic media is always a product of and a player in collective creative work; it cannot exist without the collective. If a text functions collectively and is resonant to a large number of people, then it will often achieve spread, "the

⁹ Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, The Information Society Series (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016), 23.

¹⁰ Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, The Information Society Series (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016), 24.

¹¹ Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, The Information Society Series (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016), 26.

¹² Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, The Information Society Series (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016), 29-30.

¹³ Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, The Information Society Series (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016), 34.

pervasive circulation and sharing of resonant media texts.”¹⁴ For content to be considered memetic, it must spread throughout a mediated environment to and from participants that find the material resonant.

Those who resonated with the memetic content within *The Omen* Twitter trend likely did so because they found the posts to engage in appropriate incongruity, which Elliott Oring defined as elements of a concept that seem like they should not work on first glance, but do, and are humorous because they do, when looked at in a less conventional way.¹⁵ There is something fundamentally incongruous about the First Lady of the United States posting an image of herself and the President that looked ominous to so many people. In fact, several Twitter users left comments saying that they thought the source image was a Photoshopped joke, rather than an official image of the President.¹⁶ Whether these were serious misunderstandings or sarcastic comments, they expressed disbelief that the source image could have really been posted by Melania Trump. From a public relations standpoint, it seemed like a ridiculous failure. But given the context of five years of dislike, suspicion, and hatred, the idea of Donald Trump being comparable to a horror movie villain made a certain kind of sense to those who disliked him. The humor from connecting these dots helped the idea to spread and expand as new participants added layers to the concept.

Recognizing and appreciating the appropriate incongruity of this trend required some degree of contextual awareness, which provided viewers with reasons to spread the posts that they found most resonant. As Jenkins et al. explains, “when it depicts a controversy a community cares about at

¹⁴ Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, *The Information Society Series* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016), 37.

¹⁵ Elliott Oring, “Parsing the Joke: The General Theory of Verbal Humor and Appropriate Incongruity,” in *Joking Asides: The Theory, Analysis, and Aesthetics of Humor* (University Press of Colorado, Utah State University Press, 2016), 16–32, https://www-jstor-org.libezproxy2.syr.edu/stable/j.ctt1dwsszg.5?pq-origsite=summon&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

¹⁶ For some examples, see: Marz. Twitter Post. June 3, 2020, 6:08 PM.

<https://twitter.com/Marz34/status/1268303678039080963>

Jennifer Mudge. Twitter Post. June 3, 2020, 5:40 PM.

<https://twitter.com/JenniferMudge/status/1268296628076711936>.

the precise time it is looking for content which might act as its rallying call ... material becomes spreadable because it articulates the sentiment of the moment, a situation people have experienced but couldn't easily explain, or an insight people hadn't quite been able to put into words."¹⁷ *The Omen* Twitter trend was one such situation, appearing and spreading because it fit the moment so well, and because it made sense of a situation that was chaotic for a great number of people. Because its context was so crucial to its development, I explore the historical moment the trend was created in below.

Context

The Omen Twitter trend functioned as a response to both the image in question and the chaos of the times it was produced in, requiring its participants to have some degree of knowledge of what had been happening. While some digital media thrives in ambiguous contexts, allowing the text to be relevant at many moments in time, the events of late May and early June 2020 provide a necessary framing for why so many people would react this negatively to the President visiting a church. As Jenkins et al. states: "Content spreads, then, when it acts as fodder for conversations that audiences are already having."¹⁸ The events in early June 2020 that prompted the Twitter trend functioned as a particularly resonant synecdoche for larger conversations that were happening at the time, primarily about power, violence, and fear.

On May 25, 2020, Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis police officer, knelt on George Floyd's neck for nearly eight minutes, resulting in the man's death. This, as well as several other cases of police brutality against Black men and women, resulted in massive protests around the country. Amidst the protests, violence and looting began to take place, giving conservatives support for their argument that the protests be shut down by force. This policy was supported by Donald Trump, who Tweeted "when the looting starts, the shooting starts," a statement that was taken by many of those who

¹⁷ Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*, 215.

¹⁸ Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*, 199.

supported the protesters as a call for further violence, or at least, an implicit acceptance of violence done to the protesters.¹⁹ In a time where people were responding to violent power differences with grief and fear, Donald Trump sent a message that he would use his power violently, and that people should fear him.

An important secondary context was the fact that 2020 was an election year, when Donald Trump was relying on his religious base to help him win in November. While there were many conservative Christians, particularly Evangelicals, who continued to support Trump's hardline approach to the protests, there were also clear signs that subsections of Trump's religious base were wavering in their support. A survey by the Public Religious Research Institute found that white Evangelical approval ratings had dropped from 77 to 62 percent between March and May, and white Catholic approval fell from 60 to 37 percent over the same time period.²⁰ A great deal of this drop in approval ratings likely had to do with the impact of COVID-19 on the country, and the ways in which it was portrayed in the media, but the protests prompted questions of whether or not Trump could handle a crisis, as he didn't appear to have a good sense of control over either situation. While there were many Evangelicals who supported Trump no matter what happened, any loss of support from his religious base, which had been so critical to his 2016 win, could be a danger to his reelection.

In order to strengthen his base of supporters, Donald Trump attempted to make two major shows of religiosity in the form of church visits. The first church visit took place on June 1st, with Trump visiting St. John's Episcopal Church, a major D.C. landmark where every sitting president has attended service at least once since the church was built in 1816. The church was an important

¹⁹ Donald J. Trump. Twitter Post. May 29, 2020, 12:53 AM. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1266231100780744704>.

²⁰ "Trump Favorability Slips Among White Catholic and Non-College Americans During National Unrest," *PRRI* (blog), June 4, 2020, <https://www.prii.org/research/trump-favorability-white-catholic-and-non-college-americans-national-unrest-protests/>.

symbol of presidential Christian devotion, but also served as a rallying point for those who opposed the protests due to a small fire that was started in the church's basement during the protests the night before. According to reports from White House officials, the decision to visit the church was made earlier that day due to Trump's frustration at negative media coverage of his time spent in the White House bunker during the protests, a conversation with the Floyd family that he portrayed positively while they portrayed it negatively, and his ability to keep Washington D.C. under control in the midst of protests and riots.²¹ He intended to send a message of strength and control, while also reclaiming the moral high ground from the protesters, who had burned the historic church. Trump visited the church after giving a speech in the Rose Garden denouncing the riots, holding up a Bible for a photo opportunity outside the church. The next day, Donald and Melania Trump visited the St. John Paul II National Shrine, touring the facility and posting four images from their visit to the FLOTUS Twitter page.

While these symbolic moments may have been extremely effective in other circumstances, the execution of both church visits further linked Donald Trump with fear and contempt, with religion becoming a critical point of connection for it all. Trump's insertion of religion into this political moment was likely a motivating factor in the particular manifestation of digital protest (Antichrist associations) that would take place on Twitter two days later. President Trump ordered that a path be cleared of protesters to allow him access to St. John's Episcopal Church, which resulted in the police forcefully removing peaceful protesters using tear gas and other riot control devices. The violent removal of protesters clashed with both Trump's claims to support peaceful protesters and his attempt to show himself as a good Christian. The visit was further weakened symbolically by the fact that Donald Trump did not pray during his visit, only holding up a Bible

²¹ Ashley Parker, Josh Dawsey, and Rebecca Tan, "Inside the Push to Tear-Gas Protesters Ahead of a Trump Photo Op," *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/inside-the-push-to-tear-gas-protesters-ahead-of-a-trump-photo-op/2020/06/01/4b0f7b50-a46c-11ea-bb20-ebf0921f3bbd_story.html.

outside of the church in a move that the Bishop of Washington D.C. said seemed like he was using the church as a “backdrop” and the holy book as a “prop.”²²

While the June 1st photo shoot was intended to show Donald Trump’s devotion to religion, it backfired when religious leaders and conservative figures condemned his actions. Rt. Rev. Michael Curry, the presiding bishop of St. John’s Episcopal Church, spoke to the division that this action sowed, stating, “he used a church building and the Holy Bible for partisan political purposes. This was done in a time of deep hurt and pain in our country, and his action did nothing to help us or to heal us.”²³ While Reverend Curry was vocal on his progressive leanings, conservative communities knew him for officiating the funerals of former presidential candidate John McCain and former US President, George H. W. Bush, which granted him some degree of bipartisan authority. Despite Trump’s claims in defense of this moment that, “it’s only the other side that didn’t like it. You know, the opposing – the opposition party,” there was conservative opposition as well.²⁴ Michael Gerson, who had served as a speechwriter for former US President George W. Bush, discussed the photo shoot as “truly sacrilegious,” and a current senior White House official anonymously reported that they had “never been more ashamed... I’m really honestly disgusted.”²⁵ These critical reports, in addition to the massive amount of liberal outrage created through the incident, certainly seemed to be an influencing factor in the visit to St. John Paul II’s National Shrine the next day.

The formal reason for Donald and Melania Trump to visit the St. John Paul II National Shrine was unclear, which made it seem more likely that the visit was intended as a do-over for the

²² Christina Wilkie, “Trump’s Response to George Floyd Protests Could Complicate Efforts to Shore up His Christian Voter Base,” *CNBC*, June 2, 2020, sec. Politics, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/02/trumps-response-to-george-floyd-protests-complicates-efforts-to-shore-up-his-christian-voter-base.html>.

²³ Wilkie.

²⁴ Eric Albeen, “President Trump on the Brian Kilmeade Show,” *FOX News Radio* (blog), June 3, 2020, <https://radio.foxnews.com/2020/06/03/president-trump-on-the-brian-kilmeade-show/>.

²⁵ Michael Gerson. Twitter Post. June 1, 2020, 7:16 P.M. <https://twitter.com/MJGerson/status/1267595833001771010>. Martin Pengelly, “A Photo Op as Protests Swirled: How Trump Came to Walk to the Church,” *The Guardian*, June 2, 2020, sec. US news, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/02/trump-washington-walk-to-the-church-photo-op>.

previous day's controversial church visit. The shrine released a statement, explaining that Trump's visit had been planned long before the previous day's controversy for President Trump to "sign an executive order on international religious freedom," however, the order did not end up being signed at the shrine, but instead was signed back at the White House later that day.²⁶ Contradicting that statement, a White House official explained that the couple had visited the shrine to honor the 41st anniversary of St. John Paul II's pilgrimage to Poland, a statement that seemed questionable given that neither the shrine nor the Trump Administration made any formal remarks about the anniversary.²⁷ The resulting uncertainty regarding the purpose of the visit, and the fact that neither purpose seemed to be fulfilled while the couple was there, made it seem more certain that the visit was primarily being used to demonstrate the couple's religious leanings.

Unfortunately for Trump, the shrine photo shoot was also not well executed, because the image taken inside the worship space could be viewed as, at best, ominous and, at worse, deeply sacrilegious. In the image, the grim-faced Trumps stood amongst empty pews and iconography that seemed to be looking down on them, a combination of features that seemed eerie to many Twitter users. The problems with the image go deeper when the placement of the altar is considered. Several Twitter users pointed out that, in order to compose the image in this manner, the photographer had to have been behind the altar, in what is widely considered to be a sacred space, only to be accessed by the clergy.²⁸ As one Twitter user, Rosie Russoniello, put it, "Wow more sacrilege,. The alter is a sacred space, it's not for photographers to get a creepy horror movie angle."²⁹ In addition, as Kurt

²⁶ Saint John Paul II Shrine. Twitter Post. June 2, 2020, 12:54 P.M.
<https://twitter.com/JP2Shrine/status/1267862270098452481>.

²⁷ Daniel Burke, "Trump's Religious Photo-Ops Aren't about Piety. They're about Power," *CNN*, June 3, 2020,
<https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/03/politics/trump-church-visit-religion-burke/index.html>.

²⁸ Helen Kennedy. Twitter Post. June 3, 2020, 1:22 P.M.
<https://twitter.com/HelenKennedy/status/1268231633334927360>.

Walter Shaub. Twitter Post. June 3, 2020, 10:06 A.M.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20200603235024/https://twitter.com/waltshaub/status/1268227548317614080>

²⁹ Rosie Russoniello. Twitter Post. June 3, 2020, 8:42 A.M.
<https://twitter.com/litlerednj/status/1268161129475432450>

Eichenwald pointed out in a Twitter thread about the visit, the staging of the image centralizes the Trumps, blocking out the images of Jesus and relics of various saints that were featured in the sanctuary, literally centering Donald Trump to the exclusion of Jesus himself.³⁰ Between the way the image was shot and what it chose to focus on, the shrine image seemed to demonstrate that, despite what they might say, the Trumps saw Christianity as a useful background, but not as a central part of their lives.

For those looking to find fault with Trump, nearly everything that could have gone wrong did, fundamentally linking Donald Trump with violence and sacrilege. This difficult context may have been responsible for the sense-making strategies that Twitter users turned to, using pop culture texts and remix strategies to make the chaos around them comprehensible. The combination of religion with fear, violence, and uncontrollable power naturally led to the Antichrist, which has popularly been a perfect representation of all of those things. Just within *The Omen* films, violence and disasters, particularly in association with churches, were critical signs in identifying Damien Thorn as the Antichrist, a character who eventually was shown to have acquired a considerable amount of control over the US political system. With these critical motifs brought to the surface through the images and the wider context of racism and abuse of power, the idea of Donald Trump as the Antichrist became incredibly resonant, launching an explosion of Twitter posts the next day. These Twitter posts used the creative application of contamination and remix practices, each of which will be explored in more depth below.

Contamination

Contamination is a process of intertextual mingling that works especially well online to merge popular texts and change their meanings. As Greetham explains, contamination functions as “a sort of phenomenological filter (like a filter on a camera) in which the original lens now sees

³⁰ Kurt Eichenwald. Twitter Post. June 3, 2020, 10:30 A.M.
<https://twitter.com/kurteichenwald/status/1268188197634355203>

otherwise as a result of the presence of the filter.”³¹ In this chapter, there were two critical forms of contamination that took place involving the shrine image: contaminating the image with horror affects and more specifically contaminating it with *The Omen*’s particular cultural elements. The first of these functioned to amplify the visibility of the source image and suggest that there was something wrong with it, while the second cemented *The Omen* film series as the critical lens through which to read the image. These processes took place as various users removed the image from its original digital context, using textual captions and comments to discuss the unsettling feelings that they got from the shrine image, and proposing different popular culture references that seemed applicable. These posts contaminated the source material, providing framings for later viewers that led them to the horror genre broadly and *The Omen* series more specifically.

Contaminating the Image with Horror

The most popular individual posts in *The Omen* Twitter trend did not mention the horror franchise outright at all. Instead, they involved popular liberal political commentators acknowledging the foreboding feelings they encountered in the image and asking their followers how they felt about it. Ana Navarro-Cárdenas (@ananavarro), a political commentator for CNN and *The View* posted the image at 9:26 the next morning with the caption: “Scary. Maybe it’s their blank faces, or the barren church....I don’t know why this reminds me of the last scene in a movie about the Nuclear Apocalypse. I guess the communication geniuses at White House thought this makes a great photo-op or something. They were wrong. Again.”³² The description of the image as “scary” and the explicit references to apocalyptic cinema primed viewers to see the image through those lenses, preparing them to look for the eerie elements (blank faces, barren church, etc.) in the image before they had the chance to engage with it in any other context. As the single most influential Tweet

³¹ Greetham, 22-3.

³² Ana Navarro-Cárdenas. Twitter Post. June 3, 2020, 9:26 A.M. <https://twitter.com/anavarro/status/1268172118908383234>.

within the trend, with 9201 Retweets, 3167 Quote Tweets, and 47.8K Likes, Navarro-Cárdenas's Tweet became a powerful location for users to first encounter the image and receive the suggestion that the image was fundamentally horrific. For comparison, Melania Trump's post, which staged this and the other images from the shrine as demonstrating the couple's devotion to religious freedom, received only 5130 Retweets, 836 Quote Tweets, and 29.3K Likes. With roughly double the overall engagement of the official context, Navarro-Cárdenas had the ability to control wider audiences' first impressions of the image.

Similarly to Navarro-Cárdenas, Claire McCaskill (@clairecmc), a former Senator from Missouri and current NBC and MSNBC political analyst, brought attention to the source image and provoked questions about its innate affective qualities by posting the image along with the comment, "This is the weirdest photo op of all time. How does it make you feel?"³³ While McCaskill's amplification of the image did not explicitly tell viewers to see the image as horrific, it did suggest that there was something wrong through designating the image as "the weirdest photo op of all time" and prompted viewers to consider emotional responses to the image by asking about their own feelings toward it. Like Navarro-Cárdenas, McCaskill's Tweet received a fairly large amount of direct engagement, with 3388 Retweets, 2901 Quote Tweets, and 22.3K Likes, roughly on par with Melania Trump's Tweet. The comments, which were full of references to fear and horror, suggest that amplification and mild prompting were all that was needed to establish horror as a critical framing for the shrine image.

Between Navarro-Cárdenas and McCaskill, thousands of Twitter users had the opportunity to see the image and consider what kinds of feelings it brought up for them. Both Tweets were relatively vague, allowing Twitter users to come to their own specific understandings of the image in the comment sections. These comments, which primarily referenced horror films, contaminated the

³³ Claire McCaskill. Twitter Post. June 3, 2020, 1:05 P.M. <https://twitter.com/clairecmc/status/1268227282390462465>.

image with a fearful affect, which allowed commenters to bring horror into what otherwise might be considered strictly political discourse. From there, Twitter users refined what kind of horror they saw in the image, with *The Omen* series eventually winning out and providing a new layer of contamination through visibility.

Contaminating the Image with The Omen

Tweets that directly referenced *The Omen* film series began to spread rapidly as more users were exposed to the source image. While the earliest Tweet in the trend predated Navarro-Cárdenas and McCaskill's influence, it did not have significant enough engagement to spark the trend on its own. Just under five and a half hours after the source images were posted on Melania Trump's Twitter page, Oliver Willis (@owillis), the senior writer for the progressive news website *The American Independent*, posted the source image along with the caption "This sequel to *The Omen* feels off."³⁴ Willis's post did not ask its audience to consider their own feelings about the image, simply stating that the image was a "sequel to *The Omen*." Simple as this strategy was, however, the Tweet was the first to explicitly associate the film series and the image, providing a textual filter to the image that primed viewers to consider how well it matched with their understandings of *The Omen's* aesthetic and affective features.

Following Willis's Tweet and Navarro-Cárdenas and McCaskill's, individual Tweets with very low engagement began to pile up, each establishing the connection between *The Omen* and the shrine image themselves for their own social spheres. In addition to the thousands of comments and Quote Tweets that were some variation on "It looks like a scene out of *The Omen*!", two unverified users commented on the shooting of the original image, each receiving over 3000 likes and 800 Retweets. While these are not overwhelming numbers on Twitter, they demonstrate the resonance of their commentary, which may have led others to make their own posts. At 10:30 AM, Cyndi

³⁴ Oliver Willis. Twitter Post. June 2, 2020, 10:46 P.M. <https://twitter.com/owillis/status/1268011084163801088>.

Borowski (@BorowskiCyndi) shared the original image along with the caption: “Why would they consider this a flattering photo? Standing there looking like Damien in the Omen part 6? <Flushed face emoji> CREEPY AS HELL!”³⁵ The Tweet defined the image as unflattering and creepy, as well as distinctly connecting Donald (and perhaps Melania) Trump explicitly with Damien Thorn, thereby establishing both the affective and aesthetic problems with the image. At 1:05 PM, BrooklynDad_Defiant! (@mmpadellan) shared the same image with the caption: “Look closely: the religious art figures look clearly shocked that The Omen is being filmed in their church.”³⁶ This Tweet also made a direct reference to *The Omen* through the image’s aesthetic elements, both mocking the way that the religious artwork made the image aesthetically concerning and suggesting that the same religious figures would be “shocked” by the Trumps’ presence in the church being captured in this way. Both spoke to the composition of the original image, using *The Omen* as a means of mocking the image and the fact that somebody thought it was a good idea to shoot and post it in the way that they did.

The contamination of the source image within this Twitter trend provided a way for various users to respond to both the image and the wider cultural context in a lighthearted manner, appropriating the horror franchise and Antichrist figure more broadly to make sense of a confusing moment in time. By removing the image from its official context, participants enabled the contaminating texts to foreshadow Melania Trump’s post, reframing the shrine image for those who would encounter it after them. As the trend became more widespread, the earliest and most popular interpretations of the image became new contexts that influenced the ways in which later users would engage with the image.

³⁵ Cyndi Borowski. Twitter Post. June 3, 2020, 10:30 A.M.
<https://twitter.com/BorowskiCyndi/status/1268188336327458818>.

³⁶ BrooklynDad_Defiant! Twitter Post. June 3, 2020, 1:05 P.M.
<https://twitter.com/mmpadellan/status/1268227355144851456>.

Twitter doubled down on the contamination by listing “The Omen” as a trending phrase, bringing even more attention to the image by applying the horrific framing before users saw the image at all. Because these contaminating posts established the connection between the image and *The Omen* through a Twitter trend, they literally changed how people found the image and what they took from it. Once the connection had been established, the number of Tweets referencing the image and horror series together increased exponentially, inspiring the creative visual remixes that will be discussed in the next section.

Remix

Moving a step beyond contamination, several Twitter users developed creative compositions that responded to the shrine image and the contaminated idea of it in association with *The Omen* films using remix strategies. As Joanna Demers explains, in musical remix, remix artists must make extremely dissonant songs merge “in such a way as to make their combination seem necessary, almost inevitable.”³⁷ It is less a matter of convincing audiences that two concepts work together, and more an artistic transformation, leaving audiences wondering how they could ever have been apart. A good musical remix restructures the audience’s thought processes so that one piece is irrevocably tied to the other because it seems necessary; likewise, those creating remixes that linked the shrine image to *The Omen* visually removed the necessity of persuasion by making the connection seem inevitable.

For the purposes of this section, I look at two forms of remix: selective remixes, which add or accentuate aesthetic elements of *The Omen* series within the shrine image, and reflexive remixes, which include the shrine image or *The Omen* trend as part of a larger tapestry of moments that the poster suggests fit within the Antichrist Trump interpretation of the universe. The selective remixes I highlight in this chapter continue to mock the image and the cultural moment as the contamination

³⁷ Joanna Demers, *Listening Through the Noise: The Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 57.

posts did, adding aesthetic features to the image that exaggerate the critical elements that already exist within it. The reflexive remixes take on agency and authority of their own, decentering the Trump administration’s messaging by placing the shrine image as one piece in the larger narrative of Trump as *The Omen’s* Antichrist.

Selective Remix

Taking connections between the shrine image and *The Omen* from a primarily textual practice into a visual manifestation, the selective remixes began the work of making the connections between Donald Trump and the Antichrist (or at least, *The Omen’s* Antichrist) seem inevitable. The earliest, and most significant, selective remix came from user Father Drinks McGee (@drinksmcgee), whose remix will be the critical focus of this section. He posted an edited version of the shrine image with the caption, “The Omen reboot looks terrifying.”³⁸ The edited image added black edges, creases, and spots to make the source image simulate an old photograph (see Figure 1).³⁹ In addition, the poster superimposed *The Omen’s* title at the top of the image. While these were relatively minor changes, they strengthened the incongruity of the image, seeming to test audiences on whether they still found some degree of appropriateness in the more extreme image. It is difficult to say whether they

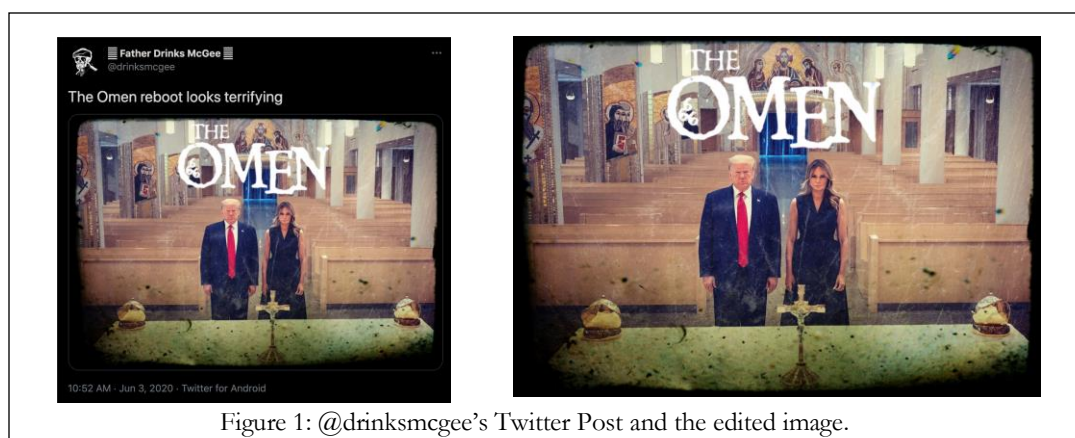


Figure 1: @drinksmcgee’s Twitter Post and the edited image.

³⁸ Father Drinks McGee. Twitter Post. June 3, 2020, 10:52 AM. <https://twitter.com/drinksmcgee/status/1268193818849009665>.

³⁹ Tweet and image reproduced with the permission of their creator.

completely agreed or not, but the people who gave the post 915 Retweets, 45 Quote Retweets, and 2563 Likes, as well as those creating similar images, certainly seemed to resonate with the selective addition of horror aesthetics to the source image.

The edited image demonstrated its memetic potential when Twitter users went beyond direct engagement with the Tweet to insert the new image into other conversations. The image itself had spreadability, which Jenkins et al. defined as “the potential—both technical and cultural—for audiences to share content for their own purposes, sometimes with the permission of rights holders, sometimes against their wishes.”⁴⁰ In response to a contamination post connecting the shrine image to *The Omen* films, Randy McCall (@onlytoottrue) posted Father Drinks McGee’s image, along with the caption, “Not mine, but...”⁴¹ The user SuperRetroThrowback (@SuperRetroTBR) also claimed the image, without attribution, and shared it in response to a contamination post, adding the theme from *The Omen* to further evoke the horror film in a more multimodal format.⁴² The engagement levels of the Tweet itself were not nearly as high as many of the contamination posts or the primary reflexive remix that I will be discussing in the next section, but Father Drinks McGee’s image itself, detached from its creator, spread well.

A significant component of Father Drinks McGee’s edit, and others like it, was the fact that the structural elements of the shrine image remained the same, while the horror elements were used to amplify the aesthetic elements and affective responses that already seemed present in the image and had been publicly discussed through the contamination posts. The structural elements of the shrine image (Donald and Melania Trump, the altar facing the photographer, the iconography behind them, etc.) were preserved in these posts, but editing technologies allowed participants to

⁴⁰ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York ; London: NYU Press, 2013), 3.

⁴¹ Randy McCall. Twitter Post. June 3, 2020, 4:03 P.M. <https://twitter.com/onlytoottrue/status/1268272176093974528>.

⁴² SuperRetroThrowback. Twitter Post. June 3, 2020, 2:54 P.M. <https://twitter.com/SuperRetroTBR/status/1268254741869576194>.

add recognizable aesthetics from *The Omen* to make new versions of the text. By maintaining the components of the image that were designed by the Trump administration, just editing them to exaggerate what was already present, the selective remixes continued to function as responses to an authoritative text and a specific moment in time, rather than trying to claim authority of their own.

Reflexive Remix

Reflexive remixes, on the other hand, used a broader range of source texts to move beyond the authority of the shrine image's creators and context. These posts fully embraced the logic of sampling, which, as Scott H. Church explains, "rejects linear order and focuses instead on aesthetic appropriateness," by including additional images, either from Trump's presidency or from *The Omen* promotional materials, that fit the aesthetic of the Antichrist Donald Trump idea beyond the moment that originally made it trend.⁴³ In doing so, the shrine image was devalued from being the center of attention to simply being one component of a larger composition. These creative compositions drew on the popularity of the shrine image and *The Omen* trend on June 3rd to make broader associations between Donald Trump and *The Omen*'s Damien Thorn, amplifying other images that audiences may not have been aware of or at least had not thought about recently. While the contamination posts discussed in the last section prompted the associations between the shrine image and *The Omen*, and the selective remixes strengthened that association visually, both of these processes were innately reactive to Melania Trump's post. The reflexive remixes, on the other hand, began to make active arguments of their own through remixing the trending phrase and/or the shrine image with other images. These remixes established new associations, which then began the process of contaminating other moments of the Trump presidency, bringing them into the larger narrative of Trump as the Antichrist.

⁴³ Scott H. Church, "A Rhetoric of Remix," in *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*, ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough (Routledge, 2014), 46. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315879994>.

The earliest and most influential of these remixes was posted by Saint Brian the Godless (@AWorldOutOfMind), who posted the shrine image, an image of Trump amongst a field of white crosses that came from his visit to Suresnes American Cemetery in France on November 11, 2018, and a promotional image of Damien Thorn surrounded by white crosses (see Figure 2).⁴⁴ Along with these, he added the caption: “That little shit from ‘The Omen’ sure grew up fast.”⁴⁵ By placing the images side-by-side, the post necessarily prompts comparisons, and the similarities of the two images in cemeteries are eerie, particularly when connected with the shrine image, which had at this point been discursively linked to *The Omen* series as a whole. The presence of the shrine image and the phrase “The Omen” allowed this post to be visible and understandable within *The Omen* Twitter trend, but by including an image from 2018 that most closely resembled *The Omen*’s promotional materials, it expanded the idea of Trump being like Damien Thorn to include other points in his presidency. The chronological expansion of source texts broke away from the tendency to simply respond to the moment and the shrine image, and instead allowed Saint Brian the Godless to discuss the presidency as a whole. In doing so, the poster was able to put forward their own message (that

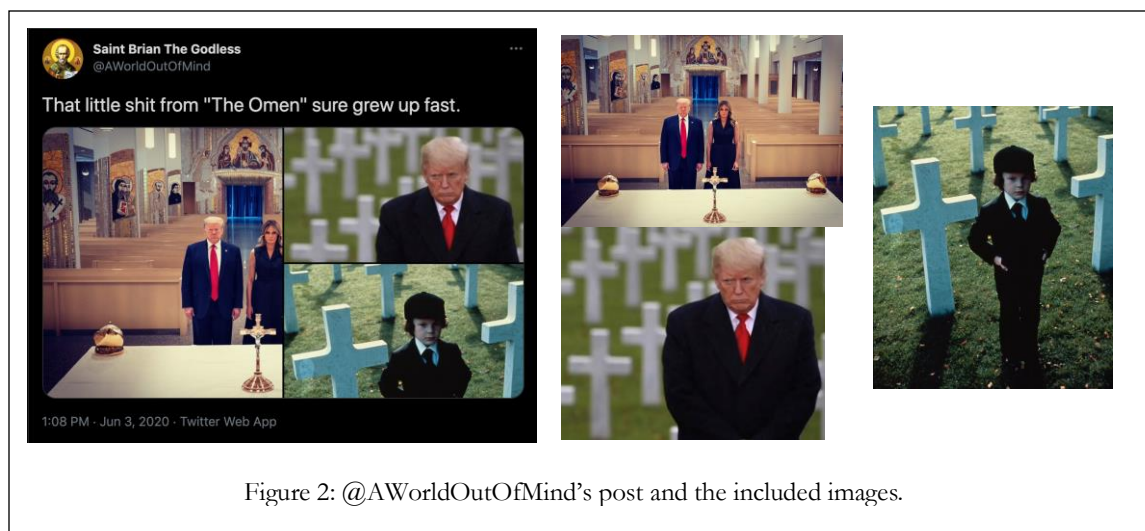


Figure 2: @AWorldOutOfMind’s post and the included images.

⁴⁴ Tweet reproduced with the permission of its creator.

⁴⁵ Saint Brian the Godless. Twitter Post. June 3, 2020. 1:08 P.M.

<https://twitter.com/AWorldOutOfMind/status/1268228183238868992>.

Donald Trump was the adult version of Damien Thorn, or at least was *like* Damien Thorn) rather than negotiating the effectiveness of the source text. The successfulness of this strategy can be demonstrated by the fact that this post received the most engagement of any Tweet that explicitly linked the shrine image to *The Omen* by far, with 2640 Retweets, 204 Quote Tweets, and 10.6K Likes.

Once the association between Donald Trump and *The Omen* had been established, it was possible for various Twitter users to create remixes that expanded the number of texts that were part of the broader concept of Donald Trump as the Antichrist by placing them alongside the trend itself, which could be represented either by the shrine image or references to *The Omen*. For instance, Sheriff Bart (@bart_sheriff) posted the shrine image alongside an image of the Trump family, all in black, alongside a dour-looking Pope, labeling both “The Omen.”⁴⁶ This post connected the shrine image (and all of the associations the trend connected with it) with the 2017 visit with the Pope. In doing so, the image with the Pope became another moment drawn into the developing narrative of Donald Trump being the Antichrist. In the Mouth of Mattness (@MattKonopkaKHC) similarly expanded the associated texts by posting a variety of images of the Trump family (the shrine image, the image from St. John’s Episcopal Church holding the Bible, Melania’s highly-mocked Christmas decorations, and the cemetery photo) along with the caption “Don’t think we’ll be covering this sequel to THE OMEN at @KillerfromSpace. Looks terrible.”⁴⁷ Because he used the phrase “The Omen” and the shrine image, the trend’s associations were fundamentally part of the remix, relying on the shrine image’s earlier contamination to make the argument that many moments in the Trump presidency fit into *The Omen* aesthetically and/or affectively.

⁴⁶ Sheriff Bart. Twitter post. June 3, 2020. 1:49 P.M. https://twitter.com/bart_sheriff/status/1268238371245240321.

⁴⁷ In the Mouth of Mattness. Twitter Post. June 3, 2020. 5:21 P.M. <https://twitter.com/MattKonopkaKHC/status/1268291622459936771>.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways in which Twitter users contaminated and remixed an official political image with horror references and aesthetics, establishing connections between Donald Trump and the popular culture Antichrist Damien Thorn. The resonance of the Twitter trend was deeply reliant on context, drawing on the specific church visits Donald Trump made in early June as well as the overall fear and power dynamics that were being discussed and fought over in the political sphere. Twitter users were able to respond to the chaos of June 2020 through mocking the shrine image, first through contaminating it with horrific affects and associations with *The Omen* and then by visually editing the shrine image to make the connections seem inevitable. Once those connections had been established, users were able to remix the trend itself with prior controversies to argue that more of the Trump administration than just this one moment could be connected to the horror franchise. As Twitter users drew more official images into their remixes, they were able to create a wider possibility for resonance in their audiences, and potentially expand the contexts that their audiences were aware of.

With each iteration, and the massive spreading of these discussions and images, the need to explain or prove the connection lessened. Because of that, the connections made by individual posters could go farther. The contamination posts could only meaningfully connect the shrine image and *The Omen*, and the selective remixes could suggest that Donald Trump, *in that moment*, made sense within the world of *The Omen*, but reflexive remixes connected Donald Trump to Damien Thorn, the Antichrist, through numerous of his own images in the real world. This allowed the idea to grow beyond the context of just June 2020 to reflect on the Trump presidency as a whole.

What does this trend say about the use of the Antichrist in digital, political discourse? First, it demonstrates a way that social media users can cope with emotionally difficult political moments, by drawing on resonant pop culture references that connect to the current political problems. This kind

of memetic content is often created because more serious discussions have failed. As Peverini described, activists use remix strategically in order to “try to bypass the indifference of audiences by moving beyond the idea that exhibiting the realistic effects of an emergency is enough to obtain the attention of public opinion.”⁴⁸ By June 2020, activists had spent years listing Donald Trump’s actions and declaring them dangerous, but by using remix strategies, they were able to move away from the cognitive negotiation of morality toward a more affective, memetic concept that implanted an image of Donald Trump as horrific in their audience’s minds.

The Antichrist was particularly apt for this moment, because it was an easily accessible representation of religion merging with violent, powerful people, all of which were ideas that were floating around thanks to the incidences of police brutality, the violent responses to the protests, and Donald Trump’s attempts at demonstrating his religiosity. Historically speaking, the Antichrist existed in the midst of all of these conflicts, and within *The Omen* films themselves, it was explained that, “the Devil’s child will arise from the world of politics.”⁴⁹ Because of these associations, the Antichrist resonated more than other suggested comparisons. Through creating remixes, Twitter users were able to vent their frustrations and make associations with a religious horror figure that made sense to them in that moment.

Another potential impact of *The Omen* Twitter trend was an opening for further, potentially more serious, conversations about Donald Trump’s similarity to the Antichrist. In early June 2020, the frequency of search phrases such as “Antichrist,” “Donald Trump Antichrist,” “Is Trump the Antichrist,” “Is Trump Antichrist” and “Trump Antichrist” were all at their highest search frequency in four years on Google.⁵⁰ While it is impossible to say how seriously people were taking

⁴⁸ Paulo Peverini, “Remix Practices and Activism: A Semiotic Analysis of Creative Dissent,” in *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*, ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough (Routledge, 2014), 323, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315879994>.

⁴⁹ Richard Donner, *The Omen*, Horror (20th Century Fox, 1976).

⁵⁰ “Google Trends,” Google Trends, accessed February 3, 2021, <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=is%20trump%20antichrist&date=today%205-y&geo=US>.

these searches, their existence suggests that the idea of Donald Trump as the Antichrist was resonant enough with some viewers that they engaged with the topic outside of Twitter, willingly seeking out more connections to be made. Where these searches may have led them, and what some of those further connections might have been will be the topic of the next chapter, which explores a website that compiled connections between Donald Trump and the Antichrist sampled from popular culture, religious texts, eerie oddities, and more.

Chapter 3

While I was conducting research on the Antichrist and its use in popular discourse, my computer and social media profiles were conducting research on me, determining that I had an interest in the apocalypse, and that I was interested in *The Omen* Twitter trend discussed in the previous chapter. From that data, an intriguing web page appeared in my Google search results that detailed a series of evidence connecting Donald Trump with the Antichrist. At the bottom of the page, there were 48 links to other pages on the website, most having to do with Donald Trump and his allies. Taking advantage of the relative anonymity of the digital space, the website presented the conspiracy pages as seemingly timeless, authorless collections of information. At the time of writing this, there were 62 distinct pages within the website connected to the Trump Administration, ranging from analyzing prophecy to making light-hearted jokes and popular culture comparisons. Almost none of these pages openly provided information about their creation, including no author or location and only being dated by their responses to current events. By all appearances, it seemed like I had stumbled onto a conspiracy theory website, but upon further examination, I found that it was actually an online poetry journal called The HyperTexts, which got over a million views per year.¹ The website appeared to me because the search engines I was using guided me to it based on my interests, a similar process to how many others would have found it. The compilation of evidence itself was fascinating, but the hidden nature of it added to an affective sense that I (and others like me) had stumbled upon something unusual and important.

Of the 62 distinct pages within the HyperTexts website, I have chosen to focus in on just one for this chapter, a page named: “Donald Trump — 666 Fifth Avenue Mark of the Beast, Born on a Blood Moon! Is Donald Trump the Anti-Christ? What do the Prophets and Bible Codes Say? Trump, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Chairman Mao, Berlusconi and Other Fascists.” For the sake of

¹ Michael Burch, “Current and Back Issues of The HyperTexts,” The HyperTexts, accessed February 10, 2021, http://www.thehypertexts.com/Current_and_Back_Issues.htm.

simplicity, this will be known as the DT666 page going forward. I have chosen to focus in on this page because it seems to be the most interconnected of all of the pages that discuss Donald Trump on the HyperTexts website. Coming from the home page of the website, individuals can find five different Donald Trump related pages listed in the website's Current and Back Issues ranging from January 2018 - January 2019, all of which list the DT666 page as one of the first hyperlinks at the bottom of the page. Likewise, it is in the bottom hyperlinks for the page "The Best Donald Trump Puns, Limericks, Jokes, Tom Swifties, Wellerisms, Spoonerisms and Coinages," which is listed as the 24th most common search term that brings readers to the website, with 11K specific searches.² Finally, DT666 is also listed under "Michael R. Burch Critical Writings and Miscellanea," a link that is included when you look for more information on the editor of the HyperTexts website.³ Because it is so well connected on the website, as well as having the potential to appear in web searches, DT666 has the highest chance of being viewed by interested parties.

The digital realm makes this page, as well as other forms of conspiracy discourse, more effective because it is a location where all sources of information can be equally valued, blurring the lines between what is true and false. Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner discuss this as a critical component in the Far Right's ability to pollute the media landscape, explaining, "Digital networks ensure that any clear-cut separation between the mainstream and the Far Right is no longer possible. ... Informationally, the two islands now find themselves linked."⁴ Taking this idea a step further, when extreme or absurd sources on any side of the political spectrum become as easily accessible and known as those that prioritize the truth, digital users can easily become confused about which is more accurate than the other. This confusion makes conspiracy discourse more popular, because

² Michael R. Burch, "Our Most Popular Poets and Pages for 2010-2018," HyperTexts, accessed February 10, 2021, <http://www.thehypertexts.com/Most%20Popular%20Poets%20and%20Pages.htm>.

³ "Michael R. Burch Critical Writings: Literary Criticism, Bible Criticism, Etc.," The HyperTexts, accessed February 10, 2021, <http://www.thehypertexts.com/Michael%20R.%20Burch%20Critical%20Writings.htm>.

⁴ Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2021), 23.

conspiracy theories often provide explanations for events that standard information sources can or will not speculate on.

One form of conspiracy discourse that is important in this epistemological crisis is the conspiracy archive. Unlike a conspiracy theory, which distinctly maps out who has done what, a conspiracy archive can simply be a collection of information that has to do with the topic at hand. This allows a conspiracy archive to be more flexible than a conspiracy theory, which must remain fairly rigid about its key points. For instance, evidence that claims that the Twin Towers were never hit may be in a 9/11 Truther conspiracy archive, but it does not necessarily suggest *who* faked the disaster or why. Because of that, conspiracy archives are more adaptable to different circumstances or to the arrival of new evidence. Where a conspiracy theory has a clear persuasive goal in leading audiences to believe the details of *that specific* theory, conspiracy archives are capable of being used for a variety of different purposes, persuasive and creative, and therefore can be useful to vastly different audiences.

The HyperTexts website is so interesting because it functions as a digital conspiracy archive, bringing together a wide variety of evidence that Donald Trump is the Antichrist and presenting it online to whatever users may find it. Rather than focusing on any particular version of the “Donald Trump is the Antichrist” theory, the HyperTexts website presents a variety of evidence for readers to do with as they please; the conspiracy archive opens itself up to multiplicity, which makes it useful for any number of potential audiences. By using the structure of the conspiracy archive, the HyperTexts conspiracy pages (and DT666 in particular) can put together a variety of differently valued pieces of evidence, allowing readers to focus in on what resonates with them and use it for their theories and arguments moving forward. They also may, if the evidence they see is not persuasive to them, simply use it as entertainment. Because there are so many ways that a conspiracy archive may be perceived and used, I am explicitly not making any claims about the audience in this

thesis beyond what the text provides, nor am I voicing my opinions about their interpretations of the materials presented within the archive. The digital conspiracy archive creates possibilities, establishing a repository of evidence that may be drawn on for any number of future generative works.

In this chapter, I use the idea of the digital conspiracy archive to understand how the HyperTexts page works, and why it is important. First, I provide a theoretical discussion of what the digital conspiracy archive is and what critical characteristics it displays. This creates a framework for how the rest of the chapter will be structured, and a system to evaluate the DT666 page by. Next, I briefly discuss how the perceived neutrality of the page is an important context, both through examining the absence of visible authorial and temporal information and through the invisibility of the algorithms that play a role in a user finding the HyperTexts website. From there, I dive into the three characteristics of the digital conspiracy archive—accumulation, hypertextual navigation, and a revelatory impulse—to explore how the DT666 page works and how this structure supports the idea of Donald Trump as the Antichrist. Finally, I turn to the topic itself to demonstrate how the concept of the Antichrist amplifies the content and structure of the digital conspiracy archive beyond what is listed on the page.

The Digital Conspiracy Archive

In order to properly understand what the digital conspiracy archive entails, it is important to briefly discuss the meanings and significance of the archive and archival practices more broadly. Because this project deals with vernacular communication practices online, I begin with Richard Pearce-Moses's definition of the archive within the vernacular context: "any collection of documents that are old or of historical interest, regardless of how they are organized."⁵ This definition focuses on the content of the archive, limiting this content to documents, and only those understood to be

⁵ Richard Pearce-Moses, *Glossary of Archival And Records Terminology* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005).

historically valuable. Caitlin Patterson, however, conducted a survey to see how people popularly understand the term now that it is in use in the digital field, and found that the most popular definition was “Documents or materials preserved for future use because of their public or historical value.”⁶ This definition, while similar to Pearce-Moses’s, broadens the content to include potentially any ‘materials’ that may have ‘public’ value, not just historical. Between the two, vernacular understandings of the archive seem to be any collection perceived to be of value.

The value of the archive is determined by its likelihood to help a user find a new sense of truth or knowledge. As Sun-ha Hong explains, “the archive fabricates a sense of knowability... by serving as a container of the desire for knowledge and control.”⁷ For the compiler, an archive is a way of accumulating knowledge; for the user, it is a repository of possibility, promising some new knowledge which will close the gaps left by other parts of life. However, this possibility for knowledge is not a neutral thing. According to Charles E. Morris, archives should “rightly be understood not as a passive receptacle for historical documents and their ‘truths,’ or a benign research space, but rather as a dynamic site of rhetorical power.”⁸ The decision to make an archive, and every decision after that point regarding what to collect, what to preserve, how to organize, etc. is a process of privileging some information over others, granting them power and value for those who later encounter them.

Jenny Rice expands the archive from being a primarily textual, tangible collection to a more experiential, practice-focused concept as she turns from archives broadly to conspiracy archives in particular. Rice defines archives as “ordinary and extraordinary experiences in public life that leave

⁶ Caitlin Patterson, “Perceptions and Understandings of Archives in the Digital Age,” *The American Archivist* 79, no. 2 (2016): 351.

⁷ Sun-ha Hong, “The Indefinite Archive,” in *Technologies of Speculation: The Limits of Knowledge in a Data-Driven Society* (NYU Press, 2020), 36.

⁸ Charles E. Morris, “The Archival Turn in Rhetorical Studies; Or, The Archive’s Rhetorical (Re)Turn,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (2006): 115.

lasting, palpable residues, which then become our sources—our resources—for public discourse.”⁹ This definition emphasizes the archive as a source of future conversation and argument, not just a site for acquiring knowledge, which is a key component to my understanding as well. The archive is flexible, allowing a variety of different arguments to emerge from its contents. More specifically focusing on conspiracy archives, Rice explains that they “are generative and are continually re-created through inventive action.”¹⁰ Conspiracy archives are distinct practices of compiling evidence that supports a conspiracy belief, but the process of collecting evidence, and the emotional attachment of the compiler to their belief and evidence, are constantly supplementing the evidence on the page. A conspiracy archive is never complete, because the experiences and information that the compiler acquires are constantly being measured against, and added into, the archive.

In some cases, this archive may be simply within the mind of the conspiracy theorist, the intangible yet significant body of evidence that they draw on in later discussions. For this chapter, however, I focus on the *digital conspiracy archive*, which is a digital text that explicates the personal archive of the poster for a given conspiracy belief and opens it up for public consumption. My concept of the digital conspiracy archive comes from a combination of Jenny Rice’s work on conspiracy archives and a variety of scholarship on digital archives more broadly, which have led me to define the structure by three key features: accumulation, hypertextual navigation, and the potential to provoke revelatory impulses in their audiences. These three features heavily play into one another, with hyperlinks being a way of navigating an overabundance of evidence, and the revelatory impulse developing from the way the evidence and its arrangement seem to surpass their individual parts.

The first defining trait of the digital conspiracy archives, accumulation, is an intuitive component of any archive, but functions within the conspiracy context particularly well due to the

⁹ Jenny Rice, *Awful Archives: Conspiracy Theory, Rhetoric, and Acts of Evidence* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020), 16-17.

¹⁰ Jenny Rice, “The Rhetorical Aesthetics of More: On Archival Magnitude,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 50, no. 1 (2017): 27. <https://doi.org/10.5325/philrhet.50.1.0026>.

accumulation's power as evidence itself. As Rice explains, "Proliferation is not only a *kind* of evidence but can also be a *form* of evidence."¹¹ Rice finds that "hyperevidentia," a state of compulsively producing and archiving evidence, is a common component within conspiracy archives.¹² As the evidence accumulates, the sheer amount of evidence becomes a form of evidence itself, suggesting that there is no way that something with *this much evidence* could possibly not be true. When hyperevidentia is present, the resulting archive is not intended to be an organized argument, as much as it is a compilation of potentially endless data. Adding in the digital component, digital conspiracy archives are comparable to systems like Wikipedia, where the information may be edited for accuracy or to add new content, but as "knowledge by accumulation," it "never needs to be edited for reasons of space."¹³ As new information comes about, it is added to the archive, despite any potential conflicts or overlap with earlier evidence.

The second defining trait of the digital conspiracy archive is the hypertextual navigation system which allows users to productively work through the overabundance of information contained within the archive and its external references. This may be as simple as referencing the external text, allowing readers to find it, or may involve the distinctly digital navigational method of hyperlinking. Hyperlinks are digital functions that allow users to jump from one website or page to another without needing to complete an individual search. Kees Tszelsky explains, "The essential element of the web is the link. All the web material in these different layers are bound together by links and hyperlinks."¹⁴ Hyperlinking puts every webpage into conversation and connection with

¹¹ Jenny Rice, *Awful Archives: Conspiracy Theory, Rhetoric, and Acts of Evidence* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020), 93.

¹² Jenny Rice, *Awful Archives: Conspiracy Theory, Rhetoric, and Acts of Evidence* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020), 66.

¹³ William Westerman, "Epistemology, the Sociology of Knowledge, and the Wikipedia Userbox Controversy," in *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*, ed. Trevor Blank, 2009, 129, https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/usupress_pubs/35.

¹⁴ Kees Tszelszky, "The Historical Context of Web Archiving and the Web Archive," in *The Historical Web and Digital Humanities: The Case of National WEb Domains*, ed. Niels Brügger and Ditte Laursen (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 15.

others. While this is practically useful in connecting websites for easier use, it is not a neutral function. As Rice points out, hyperlinks are remarkably similar to the sensation of “going down the rabbit hole,” a process whereby “One thing simply leads you to another, which leads to another, which leads to countless others until you run out of time or something snaps you back to attention.”¹⁵ Due to the similarity of this technical process to the analog experience of going deeper down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole, the introduction of hyperlinking to conspiracy archives makes them potentially more effective, because the decision to go deeper is so automatic in the digital era. This phenomenon has been consistently documented in regard to YouTube, where individuals may be radicalized through algorithms that hook viewers by repeatedly presenting them with suggestions for future videos that dive deeper down the rabbit hole.¹⁶

Finally, the combination of accumulation and navigation results in a sense of something more, which I refer to as the revelatory impulse. Rice explains that documents, particularly within conspiracy archives, provoke a sense that “*something more, something palpable*, emerges beyond the geological and historical factoids: evidence of government secrecy, occult wisdom, eternal life, a sense of purpose.”¹⁷ This “something more” has been described by scholars and participants alike as having an affective hold on them, far beyond what they would get from the same information coming from an official source. As Caleb Cain, a self-proclaimed recovering YouTube radical explained, the information he found felt more true, and made him see himself as important: “When I found this stuff, I felt like I was chasing uncomfortable truths. ... I felt like it was giving me power and respect and authority.”¹⁸ According to Mick West, the conscious decision to dig deeper after the initial find allows participants to feel that they have found and chosen to explore “an incredible

¹⁵ Rice, *Anful Archives: Conspiracy Theory, Rhetoric, and Acts of Evidence*, 47.

¹⁶ Kevin Roose, “The Making of a YouTube Radical,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2019, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/08/technology/youtube-radical.html>.

¹⁷ Rice, *Anful Archives: Conspiracy Theory, Rhetoric, and Acts of Evidence*, 11.

¹⁸ Roose, “The Making of a YouTube Radical.”

wonderland of truth.”¹⁹ This, in turn, returns us to the affective power of the archive, which Hong describes as “a mystical embodiment of the truth out there—and of the hope that all these secrets, all these complexities, could be ordered, bounded, and accounted for.”²⁰ For those seeking truth in a supposedly post-truth world, the digital conspiracy archive serves as a particularly powerful site for users to feel they have made sense of the world and found knowledge unknown by the vast majority of others.

Context

While the previous chapter focused on a piece of digital media that was necessarily hyper-contextual, the HyperTexts pages are composed in such a way that contextual information is difficult to ascertain. William Westerman found that, for sources of information that can be provided by anyone, like Wikipedia, levels of bias are often judged by the proximity of bias indicators to the presented information.²¹ Looking at the DT666 page itself, there is no clear author or date listed on the page, and there is no guarantee that viewers will do the necessary digging to find out more. Because of this, the information presented may come across as relatively unbiased. However, if users were to actively look for more contextual information, it is easy to determine that Michael Burch, the editor for The HyperTexts, is the author, listing the page as a critical writing in his biography and posting many poems and jokes about Donald Trump under the name “Michael R. Burch aka ‘The Loyal Opposition.’”²²

Trying to date the website is a little more difficult, because it is a living document. According to data on The Wayback Machine, the earliest snapshot of DT666 is from February 2016, with

¹⁹ Mick West, “How to Pull a Friend out of the Conspiracy Theory Rabbit Hole,” Salon, September 16, 2018, <https://www.salon.com/2018/09/16/how-to-pull-a-friend-out-of-the-conspiracy-theory-rabbit-hole/>.

²⁰ Hong, “The Indefinite Archive,” 36.

²¹ Westerman, “Epistemology, the Sociology of Knowledge, and the Wikipedia Userbox Controversy,” 135.

²² “Donald Trump Poetry: The Best Poems of Donald J. Trump and Joe Biden,” The HyperTexts, accessed February 17, 2021, <http://www.thehypertexts.com/Donald%20Trump%20Poetry%20the%20Best%20Poems%20of%20Donald%20Trump.htm>.

frequently updates including one major change as recently as February 2021, when the Conservative Political Action Conference featured a golden statue of Donald Trump, which the website describes as disturbingly close to the Biblical golden calf.²³ The perpetual updates make the website feel current no matter when an individual finds it, but it also actively decontextualizes the document from being a product of any one moment. Each new incident is a piece of evidence, not a kairotic moment for the website itself.

While historical context is not as important, or even possible, to trace as it was in Chapter Two, the algorithmic context of the website and its presence in the digital realm is significant for how audiences find and engage with the page. Despite the common understanding that the Internet is neutral, each individual's navigation of the digital realm is controlled by invisible algorithms that are programmed to increase clicks and engagement. As Andrew Peck explains, "The data used by the algorithm is often provided unknowingly by users and structures everything a user sees, from the content in their social media newsfeed, to the top results on Google, to suggested videos, trending hashtags, and the latest viral challenges."²⁴ Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner explain the political power of this context, stating, "Google is a political agent in part because it helps us determine what is worth knowing."²⁵ For those who discover the HyperTexts conspiracy pages, and others like them, a seemingly neutral, apolitical search engine has provided them with information worth knowing. The presence and power of these algorithms then creates what Eli Parisher labeled the "filter bubble," a space that appears unbiased, but instead reinforces the individual's beliefs by

²³ "Donald Trump 666 Mark of the Beast," The HyperTexts on the Wayback Machine, February 12, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160212050703/http://www.thehypertexts.com/Donald%20Trump%20666%20Mark%20of%20the%20Beast.htm>.

²⁴ Andrew Peck, "A Problem of Amplification: Folklore and Fake News in the Age of Social Media," *Journal of American Folklore* 133, no. 529 (2020): 332.

²⁵ Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner, *Make America Meme Again: The Rhetoric of the Alt-Right* (New York: Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2019), 146.

providing them with more of what they already enjoy seeing.²⁶ This system of algorithms and recommendations is critical to how an individual may find a website like the HyperTexts, and suggests that those who find it are likely to be those who are pre-disposed to the ideas within it.

The lack of obvious contextual indications on DT666 and the other HyperTexts conspiracy pages facilitates the idea that the archives are neutral information, unlike the perceived biases of traditional information sources. Those who are guided to the DT666 page are likely to be those who have already demonstrated an interest in similar ideas, which may make them more willing to engage with the content inside of it. With that openness, the distinctive features of the digital conspiracy archive may be more effective, beginning with the overwhelming amount of content, which I turn to now.

Accumulation

The massive amounts of accumulation within the HyperTexts DT666 page can be demonstrated through examining the length, repetition, and variety of the evidence compiled. Through its length, the page is able to support the idea that something within this vast quantity of evidence must be worthwhile. The use of repetitious sections extends the sense that there is too much evidence to deny and reinforces key takeaways. Finally, the variety of evidence then allows readers to selectively focus in on the forms of evidence that they value, and which are the most interesting to them. Altogether, these characteristics facilitate the collection of information that might be useful to audiences while simultaneously relying on the structural power of accumulation to suggest that there is something worth knowing within the archive.

The sheer length of the DT666 page provides visitors with a wealth of information that is strengthened through its abundance. According to Petty and Cacioppo, those who are not invested

²⁶ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think*, Reprint edition (Penguin Books, 2012).

in critically engaging with a message are more likely to accept that “the more argument the better.”²⁷

The DT666 page certainly provides the user with ‘more.’ If a user were to print out the DT666 webpage on March 9, 2021, for instance, they would have a document 32 pages long, with 22,911 words and 22 images that support the idea of Donald Trump being the Antichrist.²⁸ Comparatively, the version of the web page from February 2016 was barely six pages long with only two images.²⁹ The increased length of the document, going by Petty and Cacioppo’s theory, makes it more persuasive, even if the information is repetitive or even contradictory.

Because of the digital context, the compiler did not have to prioritize which information deserved a spot on the website due to space; any and all information that connected to the general framing was included, adding onto what was already present. The accretive process can be seen in the fact that certain subsections, like “The Voice of Trump” and “Comparison of Jesus Christ to Donald Trump,” are identical between the current DT666 page and the version of the page from February 2016, despite the co-existence of similar but more updated sections like “What Would Jesus Do?”³⁰ This is not an uncommon phenomenon on the webpage. In the approximately 32 subsections of the DT666 page, there are four different sections dedicated to connections between Trump and the number 666 and seven that in some way suggest that Trump is not Christian or Christ-like. While the information is largely the same throughout these sections, placing them alongside each other extends the length of the document beyond what it might be if it were more carefully edited, and demonstrates the compulsive nature of hyperevidentia in comparison to more traditionally organized archives.

²⁷ Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, “The Effects of Involvement on Responses to Argument Quantity and Quality: Central and Peripheral Routes to Persuasion,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 46, no. 1 (1984): 70.

²⁸ “Donald Trump 666 Mark of the Beast Antichrist Little Horn Trump of Doom Blood Moon,” The HyperTexts, accessed March 9, 2021, <http://www.thehypertexts.com/Donald%20Trump%20666%20Mark%20of%20the%20Beast.htm>.

²⁹ “Donald Trump 666 Mark of the Beast.”

³⁰ “Donald Trump 666 Mark of the Beast”; “Donald Trump 666 Mark of the Beast Antichrist Little Horn Trump of Doom Blood Moon.”

In addition to the expanded length of the document through the repetition of similar sections, the repetition has persuasive power in itself, both through the repetition of content and the repetition of experience. According to Nadia Brashier and Elizabeth Marsh, people begin to think of information they see multiple times as true, even if they believed it to be false on first sight.³¹ While this does not necessarily tell the audience what to do with the repeated information, it does suggest that the information featured most often is likely to be considered true and therefore useful. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, DT666 repeats several sections, but it also repeats the same content within different sections. Despite only having four dedicated sections for associations with 666, the same ten to fifteen associations show up in seven different sections, often alongside discussions of Trump's name meaning and/or the astrological events that have happened over the course of his life and presidency.³² This information could become vital to an audience member's theorizations, or it could be used as fun facts, depending on the individual's predispositions, but either way, when the information is coded as being true, it develops a sense of usefulness and staying power in the future. These associations are also generally some of the shortest in the document, making them more easily remembered. If this information is memorable and believable, there is a higher chance that it will be shared, particularly given that those who are algorithmically led to this kind of website are already more likely to want to engage with it.

In addition to the repetition of information, there is a repetition of experience over the various conspiracy pages on the HyperTexts that a user might encounter, which help train users in how to read the web page and process its content. As Joshua Landy has explained through his concept of the "formative circle," reading certain texts trains us to think in the way that the text

³¹ Nadia M. Brashier and Elizabeth J. Marsh, "Judging Truth," *Annual Review of Psychology* 71, no. 1 (January 4, 2020): 499–515, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010419-050807>.

³² "Donald Trump 666 Mark of the Beast Antichrist Little Horn Trump of Doom Blood Moon," The HyperTexts, accessed March 9, 2021, <http://www.thehypertexts.com/Donald%20Trump%20666%20Mark%20of%20the%20Beast.htm>.

encourages; as we become more talented at this mode of thought, we are more likely to fall into it or seek it out.³³ Thus, the repetition of experience within the HyperTexts more broadly has the potential to make users stay longer and seek out similar materials. Each web page is similarly formatted, with a series of information correlated under headed subsections, with hyperlinks to more specific information sprinkled throughout and at the bottom of each page. Through the repetition of the experience, individual users may become more familiar with navigating the website, a process that will be discussed in the next section, as well as more familiar with navigating similar information.

The final component of accumulation is the variety of information, which provides many different ways for a user to successfully read the DT666 page. As Lynne S. Mcneill explains, “Digital natives are born into a world that bombards them with information from every angle—their coping mechanisms are built into their worldview.”³⁴ One of these coping mechanisms is the ability to select individual pieces of information out of an overwhelming amount of it, ignoring what is not relevant or does not ring true to the individual in order to only focus on what they find important. As Raab et al explain, “Extreme theories, in books as well as on the web, would serve as a mixed bag, that (speaking with P.T. Barnum) offer “something for everyone”; so everybody is free to adopt some story fragments only.”³⁵ For those more inclined to be swayed by prophecy, the webpage provides prophecies from the Bible and from Nostradamus that are eerily similar to events that have happened throughout the Trump candidacy and presidency. Michael Barkun identifies prophecies as a form of stigmatized knowledge common to religious conspiracy theories, which provide more serious, apocalyptic angles to the Donald Trump-Antichrist associations for those who find them

³³ Joshua Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10.

³⁴ Lynne S. Mcneill, “The End of the Internet: A Folk Response to the Provision of Infinite Choice,” in *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*, ed. Trevor Blank, 2009, 94, https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/usupress_pubs/35.

³⁵ Raab et al., “The Sarrazin Effect,” 2.

most significant.³⁶ Another critical form of evidence on this page is explanations of major events through the lens of an Antichrist Trump. According to Jonathan Gottschall, the human brain is drawn to fiction and to conspiracies for the same reason: “The storytelling mind is allergic to uncertainty, randomness, and coincidence. It is addicted to meaning.”³⁷ By explaining major events and controversies like COVID-19, the accusations of collusion with Russia, Trump’s immigration policies, and more through the lens of the apocalypse, users may find a new kind of sense from what otherwise is simply chaotic. Comparisons between Trump and Jesus demonstrate Trump’s false religiosity. Comparisons to famous dictators send a message about the danger that Trump may pose. Oddities, concerning the frequency of the number 666 in relation to Donald Trump, the concerning meanings of his name, and the astrological significance of his birth may not be overly persuasive for a conspiracy argument, but they have the potential to unsettle readers and provide them with interesting, bizarre facts to share with others. By mixing divergent pieces of evidence, readers can engage in a navigational game of sorts, where they can take out of it whatever they want to, either building future arguments or just acquiring new information.

This section examined the accumulation of evidence in the DT666 archive through the length, repetition, and variety within it. The length, 32 pages long, functions persuasively to convince audiences that there must be some truth in all of the information present. This is aided by repeated sections, which increase the length of the document while also reinforcing and validating the information and structures within them. Finally, the variety of evidence types responds to the digital-native tendency to pull relevant or interesting information out of a data set, ignoring irrelevant or boring information. In all of these ways, the DT666 page draws on the accumulation characteristic

³⁶ Michael Barkun, “Millennialism, Conspiracy, and Stigmatized Knowledge,” in *Culture of Conspiracy*, 2nd ed., Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America (University of California Press, 2013), 26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt3fh35v.6>.

³⁷ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, 1st Edition (Boston: Mariner Books, 2013), 103.

of the digital conspiracy archive, leading visitors to consider the ideas inside more seriously and, preferably, look for more information, both within and beyond the HyperTexts website.

Hypertextual Navigation

As the name of the website suggests, individual pages of the HyperTexts contain a variety of references and hyperlinks to other texts, which provide legitimacy to the claims made within each page. That happens both through internal references, which direct readers to other parts of one page or to other pages within the HyperTexts domain, and external references, which direct readers away from the HyperTexts website and toward news platforms and search engines. Internal references provide users with opportunities to seek out more information on the topic while continuing to engage with the original website, while external references add to the perceived reliability of the pages, allowing readers the opportunity to fact check the information if they so choose. Between internal and external references, the DT666 page provides a structure of hypertextual navigation that makes it easier for users to consume the information that is most interesting to them. Thus, external references support the internal claims, and the claims of each page lead visitors further down the rabbit hole of the HyperTexts' perspective on Donald Trump.

Beginning with the use of internal references, the HyperTexts website uses hyperlinks to guide readers to new pages on their website that dive into a specific topic in more detail. Perhaps the best executed of these is as follows: "Trump's 'good life' includes cheating on his wives, bragging about his wealth and power, gold-plating toilets, bilking students of 'Trump University,' insulting women, and generally acting like a boor. If this concerns you, there is more information at [Donald Trump's War on Women](#)."³⁸ By presenting information, asking the reader to think about their reaction to it, and then guiding them to more information, the text guides readers to go deeper. However, the hyperlinks within the website only direct readers to other pages within the HyperTexts

³⁸ "Donald Trump 666 Mark of the Beast Antichrist Little Horn Trump of Doom Blood Moon."

website itself. This makes sure that those going down this particular rabbit hole are steered in one very clear direction, rather than encouraging them to seek out a variety of information. In addition to the in-text hyperlinks, the bottom of the DT666 page includes 48 hyperlinks that present readers with related content that may not have been explicitly referenced within this page, again offering the reader any information they would like to know within the website. For example, if a reader is interested in going deeper into the conspiratorial angle, they might click on links like “Donald Trump Antichrist” or “Is Donald Trump the Anti-Christ?” If they are more interested in the playful side of mocking Donald Trump, they might click on links like “The Best Donald Trump Puns,” “The Best Donald Trump Limericks,” or “The Best Donald Trump Jokes.”³⁹ Either way, the website controls the message and gets increased engagement from funneling readers further within the one website.

In addition to the internal references, the external references included on the DT666 page reassure readers that the information provided is verifiable, but by doing it textually, not hypertextually, it does not encourage readers to leave the website. The textual references provide a place for readers to start Googling, but require more effort than if the information was all connected to its sources through hyperlinks, as other aspects of the webpage are. As an example, a quotation from Trump that implies a potentially incestuous relationship with his daughter states: “*BuzzFeed* reported that *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen quoted Trump asking of his 13-year-old daughter Ivanka: ‘Is it wrong to be more sexually attracted to your own daughter than your wife?’”⁴⁰ The references to *Buzzfeed* and the *Washington Post* provide a sense of legitimacy, as well as a place to look if someone wanted to determine if the quotation was real or not. In addition, the impulse to question the veracity of this information is actively condoned by the text itself three times over the

³⁹ “Donald Trump 666 Mark of the Beast Antichrist Little Horn Trump of Doom Blood Moon.”

⁴⁰ “Donald Trump 666 Mark of the Beast Antichrist Little Horn Trump of Doom Blood Moon,” *The HyperTexts*, accessed March 9, 2021, <http://www.thehypertexts.com/Donald%20Trump%20666%20Mark%20of%20the%20Beast.htm>.

course of the web page: “You can easily confirm these details with Google searches;” “You can find the interview on YouTube and via Google;” “Details will follow, or you can confirm this with simple Google searches.”⁴¹ The text prompts readers to turn to Google for confirmation, but requires that they do the work for themselves. For those who are not highly motivated, this is more likely to provide a greater sense of trust in the source, because the fact that the information is verifiable means that they do not feel the need to verify it themselves.

The two forms of hypertextual navigation discussed in this section help to make the DT666 page more effective, drawing readers to spend more time on the HyperTexts website while simultaneously assuring them that they could find this information elsewhere. In doing so, the anonymous compiler presents their work as simply an easy-to-use repository of information, rather than a carefully crafted argument. That impression strengthens the idea of the archive as a site of truth for the user while minimizing the active choices that were made in constructing it. In addition, the archive and its creator use the natural curiosity of the user and the hyperconnectivity of the Internet to direct users to stay on the HyperTexts, rather than letting them follow their curiosity more freely. This curiosity is what fuels the revelatory impulse that I discuss next.

Revelatory Impulses

The final component of the digital conspiracy archive is the provocation to revelatory impulses, a drive to know more and seek out hidden truths. Jenny Rice explained one of the uncertain, affective elements of conspiracy archives through the concept of worlding, what happens when the archives and the evidence within them are added up to become something more than all the individual pieces. As she says, “Worldings unfold alongside aura, allowing us to get a sense of the ways things are within that unfolding. Thus, in worlding, in the adding up of archives, bodies are

⁴¹ “[Donald Trump 666 Mark of the Beast Antichrist Little Horn Trump of Doom Blood Moon](http://www.thehypertexts.com/Donald%20Trump%20666%20Mark%20of%20the%20Beast.htm),” *The HyperTexts*, accessed March 9, 2021, <http://www.thehypertexts.com/Donald%20Trump%20666%20Mark%20of%20the%20Beast.htm>.

oriented in particular ways through the aura simultaneously generated.”⁴² The DT666 page establishes a framing for the ‘way things are’ through avoiding direct claims, asking leading questions, and expanding the readers’ sense of plausibility on the topic. By not directly making the claim that Donald Trump is the Antichrist, the DT666 page has the potential to stir curiosity and a desire to understand why this claim could possibly be considered valid. Visitors are asked to add up the evidence, and see what revelation comes from it.

The lack of any clear accusations, and the failure to deliver details on who Donald Trump has conspired with and what the conspiring has done or will do, is what makes this a conspiracy archive, not a conspiracy theory. Mattia Samory and Tanushree Mitra explain that conspiracy theories are composed of three core elements: “the group of conspiratorial agents, their secret and malevolent actions, and the targets of the conspiratorial plot.”⁴³ None of these elements are explicitly stated on the DT666 page, because the digital conspiracy archive is all about providing readers with information that they can use to come to their own conclusions. There are claims that Donald Trump is certainly *like* the Antichrist, but none go further than that. For example, the most direct statement on DT666 claims, “Trump is doing exactly what we would expect the Antichrist to do.”⁴⁴ This is clearly leading readers in a particular direction, but it is distinctly not saying, “Donald Trump is the Antichrist.” Only the reader can make that claim, and only if they add up all of the evidence in such a way that that conclusion is the only one that makes sense as ‘the way things are.’ Figuring out the details beyond that is another task. What has Donald Trump, as the Antichrist, done? Who has he conspired with? These are critical questions for someone seeking further revelation, and the

⁴² Rice, *Awful Archives: Conspiracy Theory, Rhetoric, and Acts of Evidence*, 41.

⁴³ Mattia Samory and Tanushree Mitra, “‘The Government Spies Using Our Webcams’: The Language of Conspiracy Theories in Online Discussions,” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 2, no. CSCW (November 1, 2018): 152:3, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3274421>.

⁴⁴ “Donald Trump 666 Mark of the Beast Antichrist Little Horn Trump of Doom Blood Moon.”

natural next steps for those who come to the implied conclusion of the digital conspiracy archive, but they are not answered by the archive itself.

In order to lead readers in the intended direction without making any direct statements, the DT666 page uses leading questions as guidance. The full title of the page begins with the oddities associated with Donald Trump, followed by these key questions: “Is Donald Trump the Anti-Christ? What do the Prophets and Bible Codes Say?”⁴⁵ In statement form, this title would be, “Donald Trump is the Anti-Christ; The Prophets and Bible Codes Prove It.” But the question format is less daunting, provoking curiosity instead of defensive reading. The text of DT666 is littered with similar questions that link the current evidence to the idea of Donald Trump as the Antichrist. As a few examples, the page asks: “Is Donald J. Trump the Beast of Revelation? Why does the number 666 keep turning up — over and over again — where Trump and his family are concerned, as documented extensively on this page?”; “Who but the Antichrist would claim to be a Christian while ridiculing the core beliefs of Christianity?”⁴⁶ It is not subtle; the organizing principle that Donald Trump is remarkably similar to the Antichrist is never hidden, but it is structured to force the reader to add up the evidence to come to that conclusion themselves.

Even if a reader completely rejects every part of the archive, their curiosity and sense of plausibility may be expanded when they engage in later political thought or discourse. Raab et al. have theorized that the inclusion of extreme theories, even when rejected, expands what an individual considers to be radical, and thus what they consider to be reasonable and/or plausible.⁴⁷ For those who are not persuaded by the compilation of evidence that seems to argue that Donald Trump is the Antichrist, that becomes a new limit to plausibility, making less extreme ideas seem more reasonable. By drawing readers in, and leading them to weigh the merits of an unstated but

⁴⁵ “Donald Trump 666 Mark of the Beast Antichrist Little Horn Trump of Doom Blood Moon.”

⁴⁶ “Donald Trump 666 Mark of the Beast Antichrist Little Horn Trump of Doom Blood Moon.”

⁴⁷ Raab et al., “The Sarrazin Effect.”

ever-present conspiracy claim, the web page has the potential to deeply change the way that impacted individuals respond to political discourse moving forward.

By not directly making the claim that Donald Trump is the Antichrist, the DT666 page forces users to make the statement—or reject it—themselves. The page’s leading questions strongly indicate how the reader *should* respond to the presented information, but they do not force the reader into anything. Finally, even if nothing within the archive actively persuades the user, it may broaden what they see as possible, making them more open to similar information in the future. This drive for more information, or at least newfound openness to it, leads to the final section of this chapter, which explores the invisible forces and resources that are at play within the Antichrist-specific digital conspiracy archive.

Invisible Evidence

In addition to the ways that the DT666 page and HyperTexts pages more broadly benefitted from the structure of the digital conspiracy archive and the content and functionalities that that structure allows, they also benefitted from a vast history that was implicated in each archive, regardless of whether or not they were explicitly stated. In his exploration of authorship, Roland Barthes explained, “The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.”⁴⁸ Drawing on this concept, Phillips and Milner explain storytelling as a collective process, where “the storytelling *we* functions as its own kind of phantom: an amorphous connection to an unseen past, which exerts its influence even on those who don’t believe.”⁴⁹ This phantom is what I refer to as invisible evidence here, the topic-dependent information and experience that is supplied by the world and/or the viewer, rather than the creator. This information exists in the world and potentially in the mind of the reader, impacting their perception of the archive’s information without ever being stated outright. As Phillips and Milner go on to explain, “Tellers and audiences of any

⁴⁸ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146.

⁴⁹ Phillips and Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet*, 2017, 149.

given story may not know how and when—or even *that*—they have encountered existing narratives. They don't need to; the inclusions of these elements speaks, regardless, to all the stories that have come before, swept up again and again into countless tales based on countless tales.”⁵⁰ For the purposes of this study, those existing narratives and elements come from history, theology, and popular culture, and they follow all of the same rules as the digital conspiracy archive, although they do so with evidence that is not explicitly present.

In terms of invisible accumulation, for instance, the term “antichrist” has approximately 2,000 years of history, as well as thousands of artistic and theological texts that have been created over that time period. This invisible evidence, while not necessarily being present on the page itself, holds weight. As Stephen D. Moore explores, the idea of Trump-as-Antichrist involves not just Trump as the long-awaited arrival of the Beast, nor Trump as a representation of a pre-scripted Beast, but rather a state of interaction between the idea of Trump and the idea of the Antichrist, “coextensive with and co-implicated in them (Trump and the Beast commingling, each passing into and flowing through the other) in a continuous plane of interconnection.”⁵¹ Any interpretation is reliant on what has come before and what is happening now, as well as what elements of that an individual knows. The Antichrist is not a new concept, and it certainly brings its baggage with it, more so than a concept that is more recently created or specifically located. The sacred, eschatological significance of the idea adds to the importance of the archive. The fact that the figure, in its modern representations, is nearly always within the context of a horror film—secular or religious—adds to its importance. While any given user approaches the archive with a different base of knowledge derived from that possible field of information, few will come to the topic without some pre-determined sense of what it means.

⁵⁰ Phillips and Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet*, 149.

⁵¹ Stephen D. Moore, “Beastly Boasts and Apocalyptic Affects: Reading Revelation in a Time of Trump and a Time of Plague,” *Religions; Basel* 11, no. 7 (2020): 346: 3, <http://dx.doi.org.libezproxy2.syr.edu/10.3390/rel11070346>.

These sources of information also remain as future resources, invisible references that can be followed. As Polletta and Callahan explain, “Stories’ persuasive power lies in their ability to call up other compelling stories,” which means that “the most powerful stories may not even need to be told. They can simply be referred to, often by way of their protagonist.”⁵² Sarah Iles Johnston also works with this idea, arguing that “it is a name, first and foremost, that holds together the different—perhaps the very many, very different—instantiations of a character.”⁵³ The word “Antichrist” holds all of these stories and directs people to them through invisible hypertextuality. As one clear example of this, the number 666 is used 95 times over the course of the DT666 page, but Revelation 13:18, the Bible verse in which this number is associated with the Beast, is never mentioned.⁵⁴ The text is clearly being referenced, but the individual user must either come into the DT666 page with that knowledge or seek it out for themselves. The selected Bible verses and prophecies from Nostradamus that are included in the DT666 page implicitly reference other Biblical texts, theological works, and apocrypha. The references to popular culture, namely *The Omen*, may prompt users to think of (and use as a resource) any number of other popular culture Antichrist works, ranging from *Left Behind* to *American Horror Story*. These linkages are all present, but the page does not actively highlight them.

Finally, the revelatory impulse should feel obvious by the name alone. As I have explained, the Antichrist contains an invisible network of resources to draw from, as well as detailing a massive amount of possible representations of the Antichrist. From the Christian dispensationalist perspective, explained by Glenn W. Shuck, “believers must await ‘signs of the times’ to alert them

⁵² Francesca Polletta and Jessica Callahan, “Deep Stories, Nostalgia Narratives, and Fake News: Storytelling in the Trump Era,” *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*; London 5, no. 3 (October 2017): 394–395, <http://dx.doi.org.libezproxy2.syr.edu/10.1057/s41290-017-0037-7>.

⁵³ Sarah Iles Johnston, *The Story of Myth* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 170.

⁵⁴ “Donald Trump 666 Mark of the Beast Antichrist Little Horn Trump of Doom Blood Moon.”

that time is short.”⁵⁵ From the popular cultural angle, Neil Gerlach explains that “strange coincidences occur in a series that, when taken together, begin to form a pattern that no longer can be explained as coincidence.”⁵⁶ Either way, predicting and/or stopping the apocalypse relies on digging deep and interpreting a series of evidence in the correct order. It is the responsibility of the individual to sort through these, taking from them what feels *true* and determining how they relate to a secret figure scheming for the downfall of the country, or perhaps the world.

This section addressed invisible manifestations of each of the digital conspiracy archive’s characteristics, which have an influence on the user despite not being explicitly present within the text. The Antichrist as a figure or topic has accumulated a larger amount of content than any one archive could contain, which provides more of an impact than the material might have without it. This content is frequently referenced without ever being stated outright, resulting in an invisible structure of hypertextuality. Finally, naming an Antichrist, and apocalyptic speculations more generally, are processes of reading hidden signs to discover a sacred truth, which innately strengthens the drive for truth within conspiracy discourse. Altogether, the invisible evidence concerning the Antichrist amplifies each of the characteristics of the digital conspiracy archive, engaging with ideas and materials that are significant to individual users without needing to mention them all.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the ways in which The HyperText’s DT666 page utilized the structure of the digital conspiracy archive to provide information for curious readers and those who may use the information for their own creative arguments and arrangements. The web page is characterized by a vast accumulation of evidence, a structure of hypertextuality that guides readers

⁵⁵ Glenn W. Shuck, “Christian Dispensationalism,” *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, October 17, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195301052.003.0026>.

⁵⁶ Gerlach, “Narrating Armageddon.”

further down the rabbit hole, and an indirect structure of claims that have the opportunity to provoke revelatory impulses in receptive audiences. Due to its technical contexts, those who find the page are most likely to be those who will have an interest in the subject or engage with similar materials on a frequent basis. This allows the familiar structure to easily guide new audiences through the abundance of information compiled.

While conspiracy discourse flourished long before the Internet, the conspiracy archive benefits especially well from the way that the digital landscape creates possibilities. DT666 never has to firmly take a stance on Donald Trump being the Antichrist, or precisely what that phrase even means, which allows individual pieces of information to be useful on their own without being caught up in the “false until proven true” dilemma that conspiracy theories often fall into. Instead, the digital conspiracy archive offers up information that can be used to create formalized conspiracy theories or that can be used in Twitter trends like the one discussed in Chapter Two, or in any number of other circumstances. The information is placed into a realm of possibility, rather than trapped into any one formation. Its flexibility is a great strength and allows for more multivocal participation in political discourse at large.

This case study provides an interesting answer to the question of how the Antichrist may be used in digital, political discourse. Where *The Omen* Twitter trend discussed in Chapter Two was useful for coping with a specific, chaotic moment, and opening large numbers of people to the idea of Donald Trump being like the Antichrist, the HyperTexts DT666 page functions as a resource for the *various* ways that Donald Trump can be connected with the Antichrist. As a digital conspiracy archive, this website is able to provide the necessary information for virtually any discussion connecting Donald Trump to the Antichrist, no matter how serious or joking the conversation may be. The use of the Antichrist is a descriptive term for being evil, or for being opposed to the values of Christ. It is an apocalyptic role. It is a joke. It is every possible connection at once, ready for use

in whatever situation may come up. In other words, Antichrist discourse, as exemplified by the HyperTexts DT666 page, is a thorough set of metaphors and evidence; ready to be used in a variety of political arguments whenever an appropriate situation arises.

Conclusion

The increased frequency of Antichrist discourse, particularly online, in the last few years demonstrates that this is not a matter of one Twitter trend and an isolated website, but instead is a larger shifting of discourse, with the metaphor of the apocalypse and the Antichrist becoming more prominent, seriously or not, during the Trump Presidency. As one example, popular YouTuber Jon Cozart (screen name Paint) released a satirical *a capella* video the day before the 2020 election, in which he acted as Donald Trump and invoked Antichrist discourse: “I’m giving Jesuchristo a hand with that Rapture. I love the Bible; Heard I’m featured in the last chapter.”¹ This was his fourth YouTube video depicting Donald Trump, but the first using apocalyptic language. A comment that included explanations of the lyrics was pinned by Cozart, including the explication that “Trump implies here that he is helping Jesus in ending the world. The ‘last chapter’ of the Bible features the appearance of the Antichrist, and as such, Trump is essentially calling himself the Antichrist.” There were several comment wars about what that line meant, with some people simply explaining the reference and many others battling over whether Trump is the Antichrist, the last trumpet, or the savior, reflecting the larger apocalyptic discourse and the various sides in play.

In addition to this popular example, which has received over 2 million views to date, the question of whether Donald Trump is the Antichrist has been taken up in a variety of different formats. Since 2016, there have been several self-published books listed on Amazon that take on the subject, analyzing prophecies and comparing them to events in the Trump campaign and presidency, as well as examining Trump’s characteristics and comments prior to his political career.² Religious leaders took to YouTube in 2020, answering viewer questions about what the Bible says about the

¹ *POLITICLASH: Donald Trump vs Joe Biden*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtMr4Ca6lac>.

² Dane, *Rise of the Little Horn*; Lawrence Moelhauser, *The Fourth Beast: Is Donald Trump the Antichrist?* (Lawrence R. Moelhauser, 2016); D. Xander Varos, *Is Trump the Antichrist?*, 2017.

Antichrist, and whether or not it could be Donald Trump.³ The longer you dig, the more you find, with similar posts popping up on every social media site and even in opinion pieces in newspapers. I selected the examples that I did because they represented two different ends of the participatory spectrum: the most collective, public expression of this mentality, and an extremely de-contextualized, hidden expression of the same idea.

The number and variety of ways in which the idea of Donald Trump as the Antichrist have spread suggests that it has cultural value in this moment. While few of the manifestations of this idea reach the degree of spread that might be called “viral” in their own right, the idea itself has successfully spread, coming into popular discourse. As Milner explains, “Any individual memetic text may not necessarily garner the attention necessary to be called viral, but taken together, these memetic texts demonstrate persistent interest and sharing.”⁴ The degree to which this idea spread suggests that it was needed, that it provided an explanation that so many people struggled to find on their own. Seriously or not, the idea of Donald Trump as the Antichrist was useful.

With the idea spreading as much as it did, this thesis looked at how the structure of the digital sphere aided it in its growth and distribution. There have been excellent examinations of apocalyptic discourse and important studies in digital culture, but the blending of the two is still a relatively new idea. To use Brian Ott and Greg Dickinson’s phrasing, Trump’s was the first “Twitter Presidency,” which impacted his rhetorical style as well as bringing the political sphere online in a way that it had not been before.⁵ With this blending of the political and digital realms, it was only natural that naming political Antichrists would follow the same vein, with speculations, jokes, and

³ *Is Donald Trump the Anti-Christ*, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-evathv_UE; *The Worship Effect, Question Time - Is Donald Trump the Anti-Christ?*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUdbCi3qYU>.

⁴ Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, The Information Society Series (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016), 38.

⁵ Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson, *The Twitter Presidency: Donald J. Trump and the Politics of White Rage*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2019).

arguments moving online to a realm where they could be extremely effective if they took advantage of the digital affordances which allowed for rapid and widespread sharing of ideas.

This thesis asked how speculations about a presidential Antichrist functioned and spread online, understanding remix and archiving as critical practices at work in the phenomenon. In Chapter Two, I turned to *The Omen* Twitter trend as the most public example of this idea that I could find. Thousands of Twitter users were sharing the same idea at the same time, on a website where even more users, including Donald and Melania Trump themselves, had the opportunity to see it. It was a creative exercise, where users were encouraged to make their own versions of the idea, to be paid for their efforts with creative capital in the form of likes, shares, and follows. Chapter Three, on the other hand, could not be more different. The DT666 conspiracy page is hidden inside a digital poetry journal, accessible but not for those who were not already looking for something like it. There was no social element, no way for users to talk back to the text. Instead, it was a living document, seemingly without context, that provided users with information to sate their curiosity and to be used in future endeavors. Where the Twitter trend showed off the hyper-contextual, generative side of the digital apocalyptic discourse, the Hypertexts pages demonstrate a de-contextualized, derivative compilation of information that can be drawn on for future use.

Limitations and Future Work

The first, and most important, limitation to this study is that scholars are not immune to the feedback loops and targeted algorithms that they study. Just as the creators I have studied found their way to Antichrist content based on their prior search history, the fact that I had been studying the Antichrist in contemporary culture for over six months at the time that this project began certainly impacted the trends and search results that were shown to me. With this being the case, there is always the possibility that I have been trained by my algorithms that the trends I am discovering are more significant than they would be if I could study the Internet without these

guiding algorithms. As Markham put it, “As I experience social reality that has been remixed by my interactions with my social media networks, I gain a particular understanding of the world, remix it again, and distribute this to others.”⁶ What is a thesis but a remixing of the ideas that I have seen and read, a composition made out of the assumptions my algorithms have led me to believe and the scholars I have been influenced by? I have done my best to engage with this material honestly, to question the assumptions that I have made, but it is important to note that I will not have done a perfect job. I hope that, as future scholars work in this area, they can help to balance out my algorithmic assumptions with their own, creating a more accurate picture of what is happening.

As stated in the introduction, there is much that this thesis does not do. I examine the texts as an ordinary person might find them, to get a sense of how they function for the average user. This largely leaves out the algorithmic perspective, which might provide a better understanding of how popular these texts really are, and which invisible forces are at play in bringing users to those conclusions. This approach is also limited by not explicitly looking at the people involved, the producers and consumers of the texts themselves. Other than asking permission to use screenshots of two of the Tweets from the Twitter trend, I had no communication with the people involved. This ethnographic angle would provide interesting insights into how serious these ideas were, and why individuals decided to create and spread them.

I believe that, as we put more of our lives online, we will see that digital apocalyptic speculations are not going anywhere. Donald Trump was perfectly situated, as a president deeply entrenched in digital culture, whose presidency was filled with events that felt apocalyptic, to see the widespread conceptualization of him as the Antichrist online. But, unless the end truly is coming, he will not be the last. With that being said, there is a lot of work still to be done. A closer examination of the algorithmic angle or the ethnographic angle with Donald Trump would be useful. And, as

⁶ Markham, “Remix Cultures, Remix Methods,” 64–65.

stated at the beginning of this chapter, there are many more texts that can be examined, providing new perspectives on this phenomenon. These, and any new texts that will be produced after the time of this writing, could provide important insights into how the digital sphere changes the ways in which we name political Antichrists.

Implications and Reflections

It is my hope that my work has been able to contribute to the conversation about what apocalyptic speculations look like and how they function within the digital sphere. I have benefitted from decades of research into how apocalyptic rhetoric works more broadly, how ideas spread online, and how those have been impacted in the Trump presidency. With any luck, my thesis will help weave those different areas of research together. The way that participatory culture, remix, memetic media, and conspiracy discourse function and spread online has a significant impact on the ways that apocalyptic speculation can grow and spread, seriously or not. The historical weight of apocalyptic rhetoric adds a degree of seriousness to the digital sphere, providing a sense of something more true than the usual superficialities of digital culture. Donald Trump was the perfect storm to bring the two together, and I hope that my research has shown the synergy that they have together.

This project has been, just like the texts it explores, such a product of its time. As I worked on this thesis, I saw televangelist Pat Robertson predict that Trump would win the 2020 election, and then that the world would end.⁷ I stayed up late watching the election results and then waited through the ensuing days as the projected winner swung back and forth as more votes were counted. I sat on my couch, staring at the television for hours as Trump supporters stormed the US Capitol, urged on by the rhetoric they had been given and the QAnon theories that they had either accepted

⁷ Josh Peter, "Televangelist Pat Robertson Predicts Trump Win, the End of the World," *USA Today*, October 20, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2020/10/20/televangelist-pat-robertson-predicts-trump-win-end-world/5996435002/>.

wholesale or had absorbed in bits and pieces through conservative news sources. There were days when working on this project seemed to be the most important, relevant thing in the world, and other days when it was so relevant that it was difficult to continue working on. It is my hope that others will find it equally relevant, and useful, as we move forward into a new period, one which will surely include a new set of unprecedented and apocalyptic times.

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