

EVERYWHERE ALL THE TIME: TARGETED INDIVIDUALS, PLATFORMS, AND
RHETORIC

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Over the past decade, there have been numerous disclosures about the extent to which people's electronic communications are being surveilled and used for other purposes without their knowledge. Events such as Edward Snowden's disclosures about mass surveillance or the Cambridge Analytica scandal have evoked widespread concern about diminished privacy in contemporary life. One group in particular takes the possibility of surveillance very seriously. "Targeted individual" (TI) is a self-applied descriptor employed by people who believe that they personally are being watched and harassed by the intelligence community. TIs allege that they are followed by what they term "gang stalkers" in public. They describe having their homes broken into and bugged by these shadowy actors. TIs even claim that voices are forcibly projected into their minds through "voice-to skull" technology, which they term "v2k." The TI movement owes a large part of its growth to online communities and media production. In such outlets, TIs often plea for freedom from their harassers. The tension emerging from TIs' calls to be left alone and their appearance in the semi-public space of online platforms calls for a theoretical intervention.

This dissertation, utilizing insights from psychoanalysis, rhetorical theory, and media studies, argues that one generative way of understanding the TI movement is as a kind of psychotic cultural structure. More specifically, through tending to the movement's media production, I examine how the TI narrative becomes elevated to a level of significance such that it becomes an all-encompassing explanation for occurrences in an adherent's life. By focusing on newspaper editorials, the r/gangstalking subreddit, and YouTube videos that showcase the TI

experience, I argue that scholars should tend to conspiracy theory as something practiced. In the case of TI media, part of that practice is the production and circulation of media about their experiences. I conclude with a consideration of the possibility of moderating media connected to the TI movement alongside other contemporary conspiracist movements, such as QAnon and those who believe the 2020 presidential election was stolen. I ultimately argue that content moderation does not change the underlying relationship that adherents have to such beliefs.

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Preface

I would not have completed this dissertation without the help of many other people besides myself. I would like to take an opportunity to acknowledge a few of them.

I owe Brent Malin a substantial thank you for his many hours spent patiently teaching me how to become a better writer and scholar. He has been an excellent advisor and advocate throughout my time as a graduate student at Pitt. Without his guidance, I would have been lost trying to complete this project. I would also like to thank Olga Kuchinskaya, Jinying Li, and Calum Matheson for their service as committee members. A few of my colleagues at Pitt have been especially influential on this journey. I would like to acknowledge Ambrose Curtis for his endless reserve of cheer, mirth, and friendship. No doubt, one day we will look back and laugh. I'd also like to thank Rachel Clancy for always asking the right questions and for her superior hosting skills.

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1.0 Introduction

The contemporary United States has no lack of paranoia, mistrust, and intrigue. American culture has long been populated with conspiracy and fantasies about hidden plots working against the public. Speculation and suspicion about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, for example, have become an anticipated part of discussions of the event, even if one accepts the official narrative. In the 19th century, an entire political party was organized around opposition to Freemasons' supposed influence on the inner workings of the government after "an obscure and derelict stoneman" disappeared one evening.¹ In the present, whether they concern allegations of fraud in the 2020 presidential election or theories about effects of the COVID-19 vaccines, there is no shortage of beliefs that posit what is truly driving our society forward is an obscured truth that cannot be acknowledged in public. One movement in particular exemplifies how both the internet and American culture have shifted towards the normalization of conspiracy theory in everyday life.

"Targeted individual" (TI) is a self-applied descriptor used by people who believe that the government or some other powerful actor is surveilling and harassing them on a personal basis. TIs describe finding their homes in disarray after being out. Another common complaint is that they are being followed by strangers in public, which they describe using the term "gangstalking."²

¹ William Preston Vaughn, *The Anti-Masonic Party in the United States: 1826-1843* (University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 1.

² There is no consistent stylization of gangstalking across academic and vernacular research on the topic. I use the compound word without a hyphen to highlight how it is conceptually distinct from stalking.

Others allege that they are being invisibly attacked by the state via “direct energy weapons.” Some even claim that their harassers are broadcasting voices directly into their heads, forcefully projecting running commentary or even violent suggestions into the individual’s consciousness. I devote considerable attention toward examining the different forms that TIs’ claims of injury take throughout this dissertation. For now, it is sufficient to understand that TIs see themselves as helpless victims of a secret and obscene violence at the hands of the state. What’s more, their pleas for help are often not taken seriously by those outside of the community. This skepticism from outsiders can both affirm their certainty that the state or other nefarious actors are pursuing them, as well as cause them to look for others who have had similar experiences.

This dissertation examines the TI movement’s online media network by way of insights from rhetorical criticism and psychoanalysis to understand the investments that enable it to gain salience as an identity position. More specifically, I argue that TI media is psychotic in the Lacanian sense, insofar as it is a response to the absence of a shared authority. TIs see themselves as being at the mercy of a sadistic and all-powerful state. Part of being able to identify as a TI is the term being recognized by others as a legible identity category. In other words, the position is external to the subject, as something that is possible for many people to experience and could account for someone’s lingering feelings of suspicion and disruption. TIs use criteria for establishing their identity that tend to accord with conventional understandings of how psychosis and technology intersect, like usage of the energy weapons and voice projection technology described in the above paragraph. As Jeffrey Sconce and others argue, the technical delusion has become a widespread figure in mass media with “Wires, microphones, radios, televisions, computers, cable lines, antennas, satellites, microwave towers, cell phones, brain chips, and raw

electromagnetism” all being potential avenues for “physical torment and mental control.”³ People now readily understand the potential for a displaced sense of reality to be connected to mass media and its supporting infrastructure. In the context of this dissertation, I explore how media platforms have enabled some users to become intensely invested in this online movement and examine some of the resulting artifacts.

1.1 The TI universe

Before further discussing the media usage practices that enable the TI community to function as a community, it is important to provide some details about the TI worldview. As I have already mentioned, there is no clear authoritative voice that is accepted in the community. Much of what is believed is an amalgamation of common conspiracy theory tropes and declassified military research. Occasionally, these themes connect to esoteric knowledge and the occult, in the sense that malevolent and supernatural powers like sorcery or demons are invoked as sources of explanation.⁴ The result is a world in which the mechanisms of power that torment TIs are presented as invisible and inescapable. As a result of this omnipresence, many of the typical broadcasts from TIs are banal, everyday scenes. People often film themselves from inside their

³Jeffrey Sconce, *The Technical Delusion: Electronics, Power, Insanity* (Duke University Press, 2019), 12.

⁴ I utilize the term in the sense described. However, there is a more sophisticated historical account of the definition of occult that concerns the slipperiness of the term as it becomes produced and circulated through mass media. See Joshua Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 25–26.

homes with their camera pointed at their face. If not shot from inside the home, many TI videos are filmed in places of commerce, with parking lots and the interiors of stores commonly serving as settings. Since the conspiracy alleges that TIs are under surveillance everywhere all the time, no location is off limits when it comes to filming.

TIs often narrativize their harassment, recounting to the viewer stories from their everyday experiences. As Christine Sarteschi notes, however, TIs or victims of gang stalking “believe... but their belief exists without causality.”⁵ Sheridan and James identify this challenge in the conclusion to their survey of group-stalking victims. They stake out the position that, “either the stalking was delusional or the individuals were victims of elaborate and extremely expensive behavior, organized, for no apparent reason, by those with huge personal wealth or by government agencies.”⁶ In other words, though no one doubts the sincerity behind the fears that TIs hold, it seems extremely unlikely that the events they describe are literally happening to them. Many TIs frequently claim that their harasser’s goal is to isolate them from their friends and family, so as to wear them down and induce a state of psychological torment. Regardless of whether the conspiracy against them is actual, many TIs do seemingly come from a place of social isolation and psychological strain.

In distinguishing between fact and distortion in the content of this group’s beliefs, Sheridan and James suggest “that some cases could have concerned overvalued ideas, rather than delusions,

⁵ Christine M. Sarteschi, “Mass Murder, Targeted Individuals, and Gang-Stalking: Exploring the Connection,” *Violence and Gender* 5, no. 1 (December 1, 2017): 52, <https://doi.org/10.1089/vio.2017.0022>.

⁶ Lorraine P. Sheridan and David V. James, “Complaints of Group-Stalking (‘Gang-Stalking’): An Exploratory Study of Their Nature and Impact on Complainants,” *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology* 26, no. 5 (September 3, 2015): 601–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14789949.2015.1054857>.

influenced by the internet.” They take the former term, an “overvalued idea,” from psychologist P.J. McKenna. It is defined as “an isolated, preoccupying belief, neither delusional nor obsessional in nature, which comes to dominate the sufferer’s life, often indefinitely.”⁷ In other words, rather than stating that TIs espouse outright falsehoods, one way of looking at their situation is the view that they heavily invest in some matter of fact but elevate it to a position of special significance. For example, the disclosures made by Edward Snowden, which established that the United States intelligence community was passively surveilling Americans’ electronic communications, are sometimes cited as proof by TIs that the government is surveilling them. Through playing games of presence and absence with supposed traces of the conspiracy against them, TIs assume and bolster their identity. This blurring of fact and fiction is not as troubling for analysis as one might think. As Joshua Gunn writes, “from a descriptive standpoint, fact-checking seems increasingly irrelevant in the dominant domains of public exchange.”⁸ Thus, it is more important to understand how the TI universe operates as an economy of ideas and affect than it is to understand it as mere misinformation. There is an investment in such ideas that goes well beyond their utility, making psychoanalytic theory a generative resource for making sense of the phenomenon.

Many TIs identify hearing voices, which they attribute to V2K or “voice-to-skull” technologies, as a source of their knowledge that they are targeted.⁹ Other times, TIs might say that they are being subject to “noise attacks” or other forms of auditory harassment that serve as grave sources of distress and discomfort. Myron May, a TI who committed a mass shooting at

⁷ P. J. McKenna, “Disorders with Overvalued Ideas,” *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 145, no. 6 (December 1984): 579 <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.145.6.579>.

⁸ Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric*, 84.

⁹ Sconce, *Technical Delusion*, 262.

Florida State University, claimed that during a trip to Houston, cars would honk their horns in ten-minute intervals as they drove past where he was staying to harass him.¹⁰ Similarly, sometimes TIs will focus on electromagnetic frequencies as the medium through which they are being harassed. A more recent development in this area is the specification of frequencies as being the source or channel through which the aural harassment is achieved. On the website for Targeted Justice, a TI advocacy organization, the group identifies “Lockheed GPS Satellite Tracking,” “Vircator Attacks” and “cell tower attacks” as occurring on frequencies between 2300 and 3750 MHz. Philosopher Robin James refers to this equation of physicality and phenomenon as “the sonic episteme,” a paradigm of knowledge that “creates qualitative versions of the same relationships that the neoliberal episteme craft quantitatively” and that “sound embodies material immediacy.”¹¹ Sconce connects the persistence of fantasies about ray-guns and telepathy in technical delusions to a need to locate the source of ideological influence in some physical medium.¹² The same principle, that some imperceptible physical cause is ultimately the point of origin for one’s knowledge of being targeted, is what is at work in TI fantasies of being harassed at a distance through frequencies or energy. The difference is that the instrument of harassment has been updated to reflect contemporary communication infrastructure and the proliferation of cellular and computational technologies.

TI identity is sustained by a tension between the public expressions of violations of their privacy and a desire for their antagonists to leave them alone. Users regularly post content in which

¹⁰ KRQE, *Video: FSU Shooter Describes Time in NM*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yn_98ImRkY.

¹¹ Robin James, *The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism, and Biopolitics* (Durham, NC: University Press, 2019), 3.

¹² Sconce, *Technical Delusion*, 251-255.

they discuss and describe instances in which they believe that their lives have been disrupted by some outside actor. As I have mentioned, alleging that one is being followed by strangers or “gangstalked” is quite common in TI media. According to one of the few pieces of quantitative research inquiring into gang-stalking, over 94% of respondents described being subject to “physical surveillance/being followed,” and 66% reported “physical interference, intimidation, and harassment.”¹³ Many of these updates center on the disruptions and surveillance from gangstalking that TIs believe is dominating their lives. The core ideas and sentiments associated with targeting build upon existing rhetorics of paranoia and conspiracy. Moreover, those who post TI-related content tend to post it quite frequently. It is not uncommon for them to publish daily (and sometimes more than daily) updates. Prolific publication and a desire to be left alone may seem in tension with one another, but as I argue, they are actually complementary. These two tendencies are driven by the same motivating factor, which is to paper over the hole in the Symbolic, a process through which this discursive community achieves cohesion. In other words, the community achieve unity through their shared response to a state that violates its own promises to protect its citizens and not interfere in their lives.

Another mark of TI media is a strong thematic fixation on intelligence and law enforcement as sites of suspicion, as the source of these alleged harassment campaigns. Over 64% of respondents to the study referenced earlier identified an “establishment cover-up” being part of what they were experiencing.¹⁴ Through such notions, the TI community offers its own variation

¹³ Lorraine Sheridan, David V. James, and Jayden Roth, “The Phenomenology of Group Stalking (‘Gang-Stalking’): A Content Analysis of Subjective Experiences,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 7 (April 2020): 5 <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17072506>.

¹⁴ Sheridan et al., “Phenomenology of Group Stalking,” 6.

of a common conspiratorial narrative in which a powerful, clandestine elite persecutes ordinary people through hidden acts of excessive violence. Sconce notes that this basic antagonism grounds the feeling of a “collective powerlessness” of the TI position within American society.¹⁵ This conflict between helpless citizens and corrupt elites also serves as a way to introduce some notion of class identity, however crude, into the conspiracy. From the vantage point of TIs, those in the upper echelons of society are permitted to commit hidden acts of violence against those who are beneath them.

The TI community exists across the globe, with many analogical groups appearing in Western Europe especially. Targeted Justice has purchased advertising on public transportation and billboards in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Thailand.¹⁶ Similarly, organizations to promote awareness of electronic harassment exist in the Netherlands,¹⁷ Germany,¹⁸ and Poland,¹⁹ among others. Recently, in the UK, an event was staged in London in which a number of TIs congregated with signage in public to draw attention to their plight.²⁰ Though I focus primarily on Anglophone manifestations of the TI phenomenon, it is worth

¹⁵ Sconce, *Technical Delusion*, 272.

¹⁶ “BILLBOARD GALLERY,” FFTI, accessed January 11, 2022, <https://www.freedomfortargetedindividuals.org/billboards>.

¹⁷ “STOPEG.COM - STOP ELECTRONIC WEAPONS AND GANG STALKING (STOPEG Foundation),” accessed October 4, 2020, <https://www.stopeg.com/>.

¹⁸ “Covert Harassment Conference 2015, Berlin 1-2 October 2015,” accessed October 4, 2020, <https://www.covertharassmentconference.com/%3E>.

¹⁹ “STOPZET,” STOPZET, accessed October 4, 2020, <https://stopzet.wordpress.com/>.

²⁰ *Targeted Individual Day BBC - London 29th August (Short Excerpt)*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmjgLCoh460>.

observing that its characteristic ideas have spread across a number of national boundaries and cultural contexts.

At this stage, perhaps one is wondering how many people could be called TIs or identified as members of the community. Though there is not much in the way of quantitative research in this area, the study from Sheridan et al. cited throughout this section states in reference to existing data about the experiences of stalking victims that “the gang-stalking phenomenon would thus appear to be relatively common.”²¹ This statement refers to the self-reported experiences of victims, irrespective of whether they’ve reported as happening to them is actually occurring. A *New York Times* article from 2016 identified 10,000 adherents as a “conservative estimate.”²² It seems probable that there are more people who are consuming TI media than produce it and probably many who do believe it is happening to other but not necessarily them. The messages that the community promotes and the manner in which they influence offline behavior raises deep questions about what kind of community the TI community is and how we may understand what membership or participation to be. I develop an extended account of this issue in Ch. 2.

1.2 “Terrorists using cult tactics:” An example

An example of a narrative that displays many of the common features I have described so far can be found in an editorial published by *The Garden Island*, a local newspaper based out of

²¹ Sheridan et al., “Phenomenology of Group Stalking,” 2.

²² Mike McPhate, “United States of Paranoia: They See Gangs of Stalkers,” *The New York Times*, June 10, 2016, sec. Health, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/11/health/gang-stalking-targeted-individuals.html>.

Kauai, Hawaii. The author, Rose A. Buchanan, describes witnessing “‘human trafficking’ and/or ‘gang stalking’” on the island. She writes:

Everyone always asks, “who are ‘they?’” If I knew exactly who “they” are, I’d be able to get a restraining order. “They” do the harassment and targeting with many people. which is why it’s called “gang stalking.” There has been a brief story on a news station a few years ago about it.²³

Buchanan writes about how she has had her reputation tarnished by these people. Identifying herself as a lesbian woman who loves her wife, Buchanan claims that her personal life “has been stolen by terrorists using cult tactics to try to force me to marry a man, have kids and live a life other than what I had built for myself.” She indicates that she has tried to stop the stalking from happening by reporting it to the FBI and other authorities. Despite law enforcement’s lack of interest in helping her, Buchanan states that she is going to local authorities “to file paperwork.” She concludes with a call to others who may be experiencing this to “turn it in and get these people put in prison where they belong.” Despite not referring to herself as a TI, Buchanan’s story has many of the typical indicators of a TI narrative. She is surveilled by a group with few concrete qualities that is engaged in nefarious and somewhat mysterious activity. They have seemingly limitless access to the levers of power and lack any checks on their ability to interfere in people’s lives.

Beyond serving as a representative instance of TI concerns, another notable feature of Buchanan’s editorial is the comments section. There, as of the time of this writing, one can find 455 comments, many of which attest to the reality of Buchanan’s concerns or offer further speculation as to the nature of the conspiracy. Some offer their social media handles or even write

²³ Rose A. Buchanan, “Be Aware of Human Trafficking, Gang Stalking,” *The Garden Island*, October 15, 2018, <https://www.thegardenisland.com/2018/10/15/opinion/be-aware-of-human-trafficking-gang-stalking/>.

their personal phone number, while others direct users to specific YouTube channels or the r/gangstalking subreddit.²⁴ Independent of the actual content of these posts, I want to emphasize the function that such commenting serves. These are messages that are broadcast in such spaces to facilitate contact between TIs. This contact is commonly achieved through “the bottom half of the internet” in the comments sections of media or sources of information that affirm the reality of the phenomenon for its adherents.²⁵ This manner of seeking recognition through media is not peculiar to online comments but is common throughout other forms of TI media too. As mentioned earlier, producers of TI media seem to be especially prolific, so almost anywhere there is user-generated content online, one can find some variety of TI media.

1.3 Platforms, knowledge, and the decline of symbolic efficiency

The role of the Internet is key in understanding the rise of the TI movement and their sites of rhetorical investment. Specifically, the widespread adoption of the term as a self-descriptor is indicative of a broader shift in how people utilize the Internet to connect with one another. With the shift towards user-produced content effected by the arrival of Web 2.0, the internet became much more personalized.²⁶ It also generated financial models dependent upon isolating user

²⁴ “R/Gangstalking,” reddit, accessed January 21, 2020, <https://www.reddit.com/r/Gangstalking/>.

²⁵ Rob Manuel, “Rob Manuel: ‘The Top Half of the Web Looks down on the Rest,’” *Wired UK*, May 28, 2013, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/the-top-half-of-the-web-looks-down-on-the-rest>.

²⁶ Greg Singh, *The Death of Web 2.0: Ethics, Connectivity and Recognition in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 12, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pitt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5614777>.

interests' and using that information to market commodities to them that are connected to those interests.²⁷ This broader shift toward relying on user-produced content is one of the conditions that has enabled TI media to flourish.

The shift described above has been a catalyst for the growth of the TI media network and is also indicative of several broader shifts in how technology is used on a massive scale. Facebook, YouTube, & Twitter, among others, are all platforms. This term consolidates several distinct functions. Tarleton Gillespie describes the “tensions inherent” to platforms as stemming from their model’s dependence on “being between user-generated and commercially-produced content, between cultivating community and serving up advertising, between intervening in the delivery of content and remaining neutral.”²⁸ The platform has emerged as a dominant model for organizing and operating the broader and older category of social networking sites. Social networking sites, according to danah boyd and Nicole Ellison’s influential definition are, “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other user users with whom they share a connection and view their list of connections and those made by others.”²⁹ But as Anne Helmond has argued, there has been a shift towards “platformization,” in which social networking sites have gradually transformed into platforms intended for a wider range of uses. This shift marks a change in how these sites position

²⁷ Singh, *Death of Web 2.0*, 13.

²⁸ Tarleton Gillespie, “The Politics of ‘Platforms,’” *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (May 1, 2010): 348, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342738>.

²⁹ Danah M Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison, “Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13, no. 1 (October 1, 2007): 211, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x>.

themselves and their users' data, so that platforms are able to expand into the wider internet. This enables them to build upon the rest of the existing web while simultaneously enabling easier exposure of the platform's contents to that wider web.³⁰ As a result, users are required to expose themselves to data collection as a condition of participation online. This broader push toward capturing and surveilling user activity has contributed towards the conditions that enable the TI phenomenon to occur, since the result is an increased reliance upon user-produced content to furnish these digital spaces.

Since platforms perform a number of functions, scholars have adopted a variety of approaches towards theorization. Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost's work, often cited as one of the first to propose humanistic inquiry into platforms, noted that "little work has been done on how the hardware and software of platforms influences, facilitates, or constrains particular forms of computational expression."³¹ In general though, research into platforms has ignored the lacuna identified by Montfort and Bogost, and instead focused on user-experience as shaped by platforms, tending to the ways in which they foster forms of social engagement. In an article about the *danmaku* interface, Jinying Li argues that an underlying feature of platforms is that they put users into contact with one another.³² The ubiquity of their design has led some, like Benjamin Bratton, to explore the implications of the widespread adoption of platforms into the area of political

³⁰ Anne Helmond, "The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (July 1, 2015): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603080>.

³¹ Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009): 3, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pitt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3338983>.

³² Jinying Li, "The Interface Affect of a Contact Zone: Danmaku on Video-Streaming Platforms," *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 4, no. 3 (September 8, 2017): 139, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22142312-12340079>.

theory.³³ Both indicate that platforms have enabled new forms of sociality that resist easy historical comparison and call upon theory to help make sense of things.

Platforms have contributed toward a general shift in the decentralization of knowledge production. This decentralization is not unique to conspiracy theory but instead applies to all information in today's networked world. Historically, the internet has been heralded as a revolutionary technology with regard to information access, with some even supposing that the internet could enhance democratic processes. Mark Andrejevic has noted that "at the very moment when we have the technology available to inform ourselves as never before, we are simultaneously and compellingly confronted with the impossibility of ever being *fully* informed."³⁴ Andrejevic argues that the interactivity afforded by contemporary network technologies is not just "political" but also "potentially subversive and empowering."³⁵

It is well documented, however, that proprietary algorithms play a prominent role in curating the array of information that people receive.³⁶ Even so, research investigating concerns about the impact of so-called "filter bubbles" or "echo chambers" has mostly demonstrated that while they do exist, their measurable impact on people's political views is limited.³⁷ In response

³³ Benjamin H. Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

³⁴ Mark Andrejevic, *Infoglut: How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know* (New York: Routledge, 2013):12-13.

³⁵ Andrejevic, *Infoglut*,14.

³⁶ Jonas Andersson Schwarz, "Platform Logic: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Platform-Based Economy," *Policy & Internet* 9, no. 4 (2017): 388, <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.159>.

³⁷ Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel, and Justin M Rao, "Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80, no. S1 (2016): 298–320, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfw006>; Axel Bruns, *Are Filter*

to this problem, scholars have advocated for the need to understand how the proliferation of both knowledge and uncertainty facilitated by digital infrastructure is reconfiguring people's experiences of the world.³⁸ Platforms are often the typical vehicles for circulating TI content. The communities that emerge on such platforms are therefore reliant upon this user-created content to sustain the media ecosystem. As a result, the generation of ideas associated with being targeted are largely generated in these forums that are driven by users' interest and speculation.

Related to the decentralization of knowledge is agnotology, which refers to the “conscious, unconscious and structural production of ignorance.”³⁹ The problem in the case of TIs is not so much the production of ignorance about the institutions that plays a role in their narratives. Instead, a consistent theme of TI messaging is to isolate themselves from friends, family and especially medical authorities for the sake of self-preservation.⁴⁰ Concerning the utility of “counterknowledge” as a heuristic to understand exactly what kind of cultural object conspiracy theories are, Mark Fenster writes that such a designation is “too abstract to explain the specificities

Bubbles Real? (John Wiley & Sons, 2019); Frederik Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., “Should We Worry About Filter Bubbles?,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, April 2, 2016), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2758126>.

³⁸ Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis, “The Affective Politics of the ‘Post-Truth’ Era: Feeling Rules and Networked Subjectivity,” *Emotion, Space and Society* 27, no. 2018 (2018): 75–85.

³⁹ Robert N. Proctor, “Agnotology: A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and Its Study),” in *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, ed. Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 3.

⁴⁰ Alyse Burnside, “Targeted,” April 3, 2020, <https://entropymag.org/targeted/>; Sconce, *The Technical Delusion*, 280.

of ‘resistance.’”⁴¹ In other words, it is a mistake to regard conspiracy theory merely as a set of knowledge claims that contradict existing political doxa. Instead, Fenster’s critique is ultimately that such framing fails to account for the populist style of conspiracy theory and its situatedness within broader cultural and political structures. Aided by the ease of transmission and the absence of content moderation, the circulation of conspiracy theories online facilitates their migration to the mainstream and may even further blur the line between “fringe” and “mainstream.”⁴² This prediction has been borne out by the rise of conspiracies like QAnon or theories about what the broader aims of pandemic safety measures may be.

While all of this may sound extreme, TIs have more in common with ordinary people than one may think. They serve as an extreme case that indexes more general trends with regard to knowledge and the mediated self and as a result, can provide better insight into both. First, as Andrejevic and Gunn both note in slightly different terms, there has been a general decline in symbolic efficiency precipitated by the rise of network communication technology.⁴³ The excess of information that Andrejevic describes as a “glut” leads people to seek means to filter through extraneous information in order to arrive at some kind of certainty.⁴⁴ Among others, Andrejevic points to Big Data and the reemergence of conspiracy theory in mainstream media as examples of attempts to “cut” through the glut. In the case of TIs, their attempt to bypass this complexity takes

⁴¹ Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 225.

⁴² Michael Barkun, “Conspiracy Theories and the Occult,” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (New York: Routledge, 2015), 707–8.

⁴³ Andrejevic, *Infoglut*, 13–18.

⁴⁴ Andrejevic, *Infoglut*, 12.

the form of a conspiracy narrative about United States intelligence agencies interference in the lives of ordinary people who have done nothing wrong. They reference this conspiracy to account for a whole slew of contingent and otherwise unconnected events in the world and their personal lives. The intelligence actors animating these narratives are seemingly omniscient and leave no detail to chance in TIs' reports of their actions. Since they attribute so much agency to the bad actors harassing them, TIs can serve as an extreme example of what an attempt to bypass the information glut looks like when scaled up to the level of an online community.

Scholars have shifted towards understanding the role that conspiracy theory plays as a lived out set of practices. This position sits in contrast to a common view that the acceptance of conspiracy theory is being primarily rooted in some epistemic deficit or mistake.⁴⁵ David Lafferty, for example, has executed a "literary-biographical" study of British anti-Semite Douglas Reed's oeuvre on the basis that "conspiracy theory is not only a social phenomenon but a creative endeavour in which fact and fiction are blurred."⁴⁶ In their history of conspiracy theory research, Butter and Knight have observed that even if we cannot confidently assert that conspiracy theories

⁴⁵ On this point, M. R. X. Dentith offers a helpful typology of scholarly views toward conspiracy theory. They are characterized by the following assertions: "conspiracy theories are prima facie false," "conspiracy theories are not prima facie false, but there is something about such theories which makes them suspicious," and "conspiracy theories are neither prima facie false nor typically suspicious." See "M R. X. Dentith, "Conspiracy Theories and Philosophy: Bringing the Epistemology of a Freighted Term into the Social Sciences," in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uciniski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 94, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190844073.003.0006>.

⁴⁶ David Lafferty, "A Literary-Biographical Approach to the Study of Conspiracy Theory: The Development of the 'Grand Design' in the Works of Douglas Reed," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (December 21, 2014): 805.

are more common in the present than it was in previous eras, the twin forces of “academic research and popular journalism have turned them into an object of inquiry.”⁴⁷ Matthew Hayes shows the disproportionate influence that a single text, handwritten notes about a UFO coverup, has had over the Canadian ufologist community.⁴⁸ Hayes cautions that the absence of any kind of limiting agent in digital spaces makes the potential for the details of these narratives to shift and change over time. As a result of these multiplying sites of reproduction, scholars should focus on the mechanisms that keep conspiracy theory alive and salient for those who take them seriously.

The aesthetic coherence of the TI network enables it to function in a manner akin to Kenneth Burke’s description of literature as “equipment for living.”⁴⁹ Jenny Rice notes how the proliferation of evidence in conspiracy theories “transfigures into something else- something aesthetic.”⁵⁰ Rice’s observation lets us understand that the perception of TI narrative coherence might play some other role in addition to enabling the affirmation of their identity or establishing affiliation. Sconce has suggested this possibility in his work, noting in particular that some consumer products meant to defend TIs against their invisible harassment could, “provide a

⁴⁷ Michael Butter and Peter Knight, “The History of Conspiracy Theory Research,” in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uciniski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 42.

⁴⁸ Matthew Hayes, ““Then the Saucers Do Exist?”: UFOs, the Practice of Conspiracy, and the Case of Wilbert Smith,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 51, no. 3 (February 1, 2018): 688, <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcs.2017-0028.r1>.

⁴⁹ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (University of California Press, 1973): 300. I am thinking in particular of Burke’s premise that “each work of art is the addition of a word to an informal dictionary (or *in the case of purely derivative artists, the addition of a subsidiary meaning to a word already given by some originating artist*)” (emphasis mine). In tandem with Rice’s thesis, we can regard TI media as furnishing a vocabulary for something that otherwise unnamable, its meaning changing in inflection with each addition.

⁵⁰ Jenny Rice, *Awful Archives* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020) 92.

palliative or even therapeutic function during a time of delusional transition.”⁵¹ In other words, the signifiers that capture intense investment from TIs are those that enable them to impose an aesthetic coherence onto the world and their environment. For those who ascribe to it, TI media could play a role similar to that of online fandoms of film, television, and other cultural objects. In this way, the TI conspiracy is a collectively authored and evolving cultural object. However, the narratives are not delivered with an ironic detachment and instead focus on real-world actors like politicians or government officials. TIs understand the stories they tell as literal, faithful descriptions of the world. This exemplifies what Lacan meant when he said that while Daniel Paul Schreber, a German judge whose published memoirs on his mental illness were written about by Freud extensively, “is a writer, he is no poet,” a point I explore in detail later on in Ch. 2.⁵² Such investment, however, comes at the expense of a deeply truncated understanding of the possible meanings that one can glean from the world. I follow this thread in the later chapters of this dissertation, regarding the objects of analysis in each case as the result of this kind of participatory media form.

There are other instances of discourse that could be called psychotic that scholars have examined and are comparable to TI discourse. 9/11 truthers contest the official narrative of what happened during the attacks on that date in 2001.⁵³ Another, the sovereign citizens movement,

⁵¹ Jeffrey Sconce, *Technical Delusion*, 282.

⁵² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III: The Psychoses 1955-1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 78.

⁵³ Jodi Dean, “The Psychotic Discourse of 9/11 Truth,” in *Rhetoric in Neoliberalism*, ed. Kim Hong Nguyen, Rhetoric, Politics and Society (Champagne, IL: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 11, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-39850-1_8.

believe they are not subject to the legal authority of the federal government.⁵⁴ Similarly, in recent years there has been increased visibility of adherents to the idea that the Earth is flat and that those maintaining a spherical paradigm are doing so on behalf of nefarious interests.⁵⁵ All of these movements concern knowledge about some repressed or obscured reality and as a result, are similar to each other, as well as aspects of the TI movement. Notably, all of these ideas have benefitted greatly from the existence of platforms to expose people to them and facilitate discussion about them. In addition to their popularity online, they all serve as examples of belief in “the Other of the Other,” Lacan’s term for the notion that there exists some guarantor behind the different configurations of a lacking Symbolic.⁵⁶ Essentially, they are all paranoid fantasies that locate a structure that has privileged access to order in the face of contingency. I develop this point in depth in Chapter One.

Another way in which the TI community can inform us about ourselves is the manner in which they serve as a clear case of what mediated psychosis can look like in practice. As I elaborate later on, psychosis is a structure of subjectivity for Lacan rather than a diagnostic category. The psychotic subject “presents the unconscious without translating it into another language,” and thus does not abide by widely held conventions of speech.⁵⁷ This designation is not meant as a

⁵⁴ Calum Lister Matheson, “Psychotic Discourse: The Rhetoric of the Sovereign Citizen Movement,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (March 15, 2018): 187–206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2017.1306876>.

⁵⁵ Rachel Runnels, “Conspiracy Theories and the Quest for Truth” (Abilene, TX, Abilene Christian University, 2019).

⁵⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VI: Desire and Its Interpretation*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (Medford, MA: Polity, 2019), 298.

⁵⁷ Todd McGowan, “The Psychosis of Freedom: Law in Modernity,” in *Lacan on Psychosis: From Theory to Praxis*, ed. Jon Mills and David L. Downing (New York: Routledge, 2018), 52.

diagnosis, as a trained analyst might make in a clinical setting. Instead, it is a way of identifying how \ subjects relate to language, as well as the field of social conventions governing the use of language. In particular, “psychosis” provides a critical idiom for identifying how linguistic practices can be shaped by foreclosure and through intense investment in metonymic linkages. This foreclosed signifier is not a negated or repressed signifier. Instead, it is a signifier that lacks a place within that symbolic universe and is consequently incapable of being expressed within it. A hole remains in its place and subjects invest in signifiers that serve to “suture” over it. The “name of the father” is the Lacanian term for this structural position for the signifier that prohibits the subject from unmediated access to the symbolic order.⁵⁸ In this way, psychosis concerns “the perception of an absence of authority.”⁵⁹

With regard to TIs, I posit that what is absent from the symbolic order is a sense of safety or security from the United States federal government. More specifically, TIs do not have a place in their symbolic universe for the idea that the law is an impersonal actor. This explains their occasional self-description as human rights campaigners, as well as the role of the national security state as the object of their ire. Both concern a legal order intended to protect gone awry and turned against its own citizens. Jodi notes that “the psychotic confronts us with the lacks in language” and “psychotic discourse...tries to prevent us from repressing what we already know, undermining thereby the conditions of possibility for credibility.”⁶⁰ Citing “a discourse on freedom that must certainly be called delusional,” Lacan himself suggests that it may be appropriate to situate

⁵⁸ McGowan, “Psychosis of Freedom,” 51.

⁵⁹ Gunn, “Social Networking,” 72.

⁶⁰ Dean, “Psychotic Discourse,” 180.

Western rationalist subjectivity in the field of “social psychosis” on a similar basis.⁶¹ Gunn similarly wagers that one consequence of the prevalence of social media that “as a culture, North America is moving from a once dominant, characteristically neurotic mode of public discourse toward a psychotic one.”⁶² If Gunn’s thesis proves true, studying TIs provides us with a clear example of what this mediated psychosis can look like in practice.

The last general trend that TIs can provide insight about is how online culture is shifting in response to what has been called by Žižek a “decline in conditions of symbolic efficiency.”⁶³ This term denotes conditions of symbolic exchange in which a signifier’s capacity to refer to something else is diminished, such that the signifier is taken at face value rather than as part of a larger network of meaning. In Žižek’s example, he describes a scenario in which a person in court refuses to recognize the judge as a representative of the legal system, but instead understand him only as a man. In effect, the person in Žižek’s example fails to understand the judge as part of a larger symbolic network. Specifically, the pragmatic consequences of symbol use are ignored in favor of its immediately apparent qualities. The dilemma as recounted by Žižek is, “What do you believe, your eyes or my words?” TIs choose to believe their eyes, which tell them that the person before them is undoubtedly part of the conspiracy. This results in them seeing the causes of their persecution as unrelenting and proximate to them, since anything can take its place. This is a more

⁶¹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 450.

⁶² Joshua Gunn, *Political Perversion: Rhetorical Aberration in the Time of Trumpeteering* (The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 69.

⁶³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, Wo Es War (London ; Verso, 1999), 323.

general trend that Andrejevic identifies as one broader reason that various “cuts” through the excess of information have elicited great interest among the general population.

What distinguishes the TI phenomenon is that many of the things identified as proof of the conspiracy are reliant upon expressions of self-knowledge. Moreover, as the name would suggest, it inserts the believer into the center of the narrative. Adherence to the beliefs constituting the TI universe would mean that one is the quarry of the CIA and other intelligence agencies. While TI media is not constructed solely from acts of self-disclosure, it is reliant upon personal experience as a source of authority to a greater extent than most other conspiracy theories. This has consequences for how it bears upon the practice of conspiracy, a point I elaborate on in chapter one.

1.4 How community takes shape

The TI community is constituted in large part by self-published accounts of violations of their privacy at the hands of actors they believe to be working on behalf of various intelligence agencies; the FBI, the CIA, & the NSA are all potential antagonists when one peruses TI media. Members of the community allege that they have identified a clandestine, global campaign to systematically harass, surveil, and disrupt the lives of regular people. They have created a body of media that promotes some of the core ideas propagated by the community. These documentaries run the gamut from crude to sophisticated with regard to their production quality. They promote some of the more niche areas of the group’s interests, such as why TIs are selected or what the origin of the conspiracy is. Others may reference commonplace topics of the TI community but not exactly fit within it.

The group exists in some capacity across a whole range of digital platforms, ranging from YouTube, Reddit, and even Soundcloud,⁶⁴ among others. One can find a wealth of materials on archive.org, tumblr, Quora, and Medium. There is a body of self-published literature on Amazon, some of which I examine throughout this dissertation. Sconce has analyzed a WikiHow page that provides instructions for TIs who are seeking relief.⁶⁵ There are even businesses like Advanced Electronic Security Co. that offer to sweep listening devices from clients' homes and educate potential clients on electronic harassment.⁶⁶ I focus primarily on user-created content as the main object of study because that is largely what sustains the movement, but these other sites are indicative of wide enough interest to sustain their own site. Seemingly anywhere in which there is a space for user-created content, TI media appears.

Offline, there are multiple actors who utilize public attention to promote the TI narrative. For example, there is a 501 ©(3) organization called Freedom For Targeted Individuals that coordinates public demonstrations advocating for the interest of TIs. They also purchase ad space on billboards and on public transit, publicizing the plight of TIs using terms like “electronic assault” to describe the nature of what they are experiencing (Fig. 1). These ads have appeared in multiple countries and are a good example of how TI media resists centralization and instead circulates in numerous spheres, taking on a life of its own with each new iteration. In other words, the community's reliance on user-produced media results in a diffuse and decentralized network. While there may be certain hubs that are more important than others in propagating TI media, this

⁶⁴ “Targeted Individual,” SoundCloud, accessed January 12, 2022, <https://soundcloud.com/user-780479381>.

⁶⁵ Sconce, *The Technical Delusion*, 280.

⁶⁶ “Advanced Electronic Security BugSweeps.Com Detective Security Agency TSCM Technical Surveillance Counter Measures,” accessed January 11, 2022, <http://www.bugsweeps.com/index.html>.

widespread distribution is part of what warrants examination of the group. Along similar lines to the tensions evinced by their need for publicity, I seek to account for why TIs seemingly post whenever and wherever possible.



Figure 1: Freedom For Targeted Individuals billboard in the Los Angeles area

1.5 Psychosis in a non-ordinary sense

It should also be obvious that the thematic interests and concerns of the community could attract both people who have a legitimate concern about privacy violations, as well as those who are likely experiencing paranoia as a result of mental health issues. Again, this underscores the uncertainty around how social networking sites and platforms enable the formation of collective identity and how users come to be interpellated by those discourses. From my position as a scholar of communication, I am more interested in exploring the processes by which the TI moniker enables disparate groups to gather as one than I am in the particular circumstances that drive

anyone person to seek such groups out. There is a scholarly controversy over what the function of social knowledge in group affiliation is, with the core of the dispute concerning whether or not sociability is a primary factor motivating group membership.⁶⁷ I am exploring how this process unfolds in public through mediated contact.

Another advantage of this method of approaching the topic is that it avoids staking a definitive position concerning where a boundary line lies between what constitutes a delusion on the one hand and what is a legitimate concern on the other. This is because, as I detail in Chapter 1, psychosis is a mode of relating to a signifier in Lacanian theory.⁶⁸ Consequently, what is important is to tend to how this mode of relation is revealed within the speech and public acts of TIs, rather than assessing the veracity of what is asserted. That the psychotic subject regards their words as full of meaning rather than meaningful in a semantic sense is one reason to study TI culture.⁶⁹ This tendency is particularly visible in how they relate to language and the conventions governing it. While I provide additional detail about relevant historical or contemporary references to develop a thick account of the social and cultural milieu that created the conditions of possibility for TI media to become widespread, I am primarily interested in accounting for how those details are leveraged in TI narratives.

⁶⁷ Miika Vähämaa, “Groups as Epistemic Communities: Social Forces and Affect as Antecedents to Knowledge,” *Social Epistemology* 27, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2012.760660>; Don Fallis and Kay Mathiesen, “Veritistic Epistemology and the Epistemic Goals of Groups: A Reply to Vähämaa,” *Social Epistemology* 27, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2012.760666>.

⁶⁸ Matheson, “Psychotic Discourse”, 189.

⁶⁹ Annie G. Rogers, *Incandescent Alphabets: Psychosis and the Enigma of Language* (New York,: Routledge, 2019), 36.

Contemporary scholarship has started to pursue the shared social link that papers over the hole in the symbolic in the way I discuss above. Matheson has written about how exchange anxiety structures how people present themselves in mediated spaces.⁷⁰ Similarly, Joshua Gunn has argued that on balance, North American culture may be in the process of becoming more psychotic because of the particular form of mediation afforded by social networking sites.⁷¹ Gunn posits that a shared sense of what constitutes the rule of law has faded from public discourse as a consequence of the immediacy of communication technologies and acceleration in the political and social spheres.⁷² In her essay figuring the 9/11 truth movement as psychotic discourse, Jodi Dean argues that the 9/11 truth movement is a response to “the loss of authority” that occurred with the attacks and the subsequent hole it produced.⁷³ In keeping with Dean’s emphasis on the collective aspect of these movements as what is distinctive about them, this dissertation examines the multiple spaces and platforms that enable the propagation of this discourse, in part to capture how it can serve as a felt milieu for users.

TIs sometimes draw upon occult or religious themes in their descriptions of their delusions or explanations of what is happening with them. After all, they often confer extraordinary powers to technology as a resource for making sense of their experiences. Moreover, the figures they describe are seemingly omniscient, allegedly following TIs everywhere they move whether it be

⁷⁰ Calum Lister Matheson, “Filthy Lucre: Gold, Language, and Exchange Anxiety,” *Review of Communication* 18, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 249–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2018.1508738>.

⁷¹ Joshua Gunn, “On Social Networking and Psychosis,” *Communication Theory* 28, no. 1 (February 1, 2018): 69–88, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtx002>.

⁷² Gunn, *Political Perversion*, 70.

⁷³ Dean, “The Psychotic Discourse of 9/11 Truth,” 163.

their homes or public space. This creates the possibility of an identifiable cause for TIs persecution. Explaining the causes of surveillance is a tricky matter, however, since TIs concern themselves with both immediate material causes and more expansive, structural explanations. Moreover, the two varieties of explanation are invoked to support one another's validity.

There is a sense in which these all-powerful actors take on a divine quality. As mentioned earlier, Rogers observes that psychotic subjects sometimes are positioned as having borne "witness to a ghastly Other in social isolation."⁷⁴ Additionally, there is the figure of "shadow people" in contemporary American folklore as another point of reference.⁷⁵ These entities are said to be lurking everywhere, hiding when one goes to identify them. As the moniker may suggest, shadow people lack any real qualities beyond being "enigmatic, silent, and even threatening." Moreover, they have been a frequent topic of discussion by the paranormal radio program Coast to Coast AM. Nonetheless, those who attest to their existence claim that they are followed by these beings and experience a sense of danger. Though they are not literally invisible, the so-called "gangstalkers" are a similarly elusive and ever-present figure in TI media. As one can observe, many the animating ideas of TI discourse have an element of ambiguity woven into its very nature. Gang-stalkers are meant to be infinitely fungible. They are ever present yet never so close that one can really identify who they might be. They are all lumped together as part of a concerted effort against the subject. Such grouping is a result of the metonymic linkages produced by the subject. Lacan notes that Schreber coins the term "*fabricated or improvised men*" as a sort of shorthand for all people that

⁷⁴ Rogers, *Incandescent Alphabets*, 4.

⁷⁵ Libby Tucker, "Shadow People," *Voices* 43, no. 3/4 (2017): 16.

he met.⁷⁶ There is a parallel between Schreber's improvised men and gangstalkers, insofar as they are taken as sure signs of a broader harassment campaign against the TI.

1.6 Preview of chapters

In the first chapter, I argue that understanding the TI movement as a psychotic cultural structure enables onlookers to make sense of otherwise puzzling activity. To do so, I rehearse a history of the movement and its contemporary iterations, as well as develop a brief recapitulation of how psychosis and technics have intersected in both psychiatry and critical theory. I emphasize how the arrival of the internet gave rise to niche websites and forums focusing on mind control that are the forebears of TI media. Throughout this exposition, I develop my account of Lacan's theory of psychosis that I refer to continually throughout this dissertation.

The second chapter focuses on the r/gangstalking "subreddit" message board in order to argue the thesis that such platforms enable a specific economy of trope to form that provides users with an identity-forming function. Specifically, I argue that the discourse on the subreddit is sustained by metonymic linkages and an unwillingness to be "duped" by language. In making this argument, I offer a critique of some Lacanian theorists who argue that psychosis is chiefly characterized by a profound disconnect from the social linking function of language.

Chapter Three focuses on YouTube videos that TIs post of themselves recounting their experiences on YouTube. I argue that these videos are a mean for TIs to externalize themselves

⁷⁶ Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 53.

and become part of a wider video archive. More specifically, I claim that we might understand these videos as “yieldable objects,” or media objects that seemingly make the subject’s presence available on demand. Though Lacan emphasizes the role of audio recording technology in his own time, I argue that we should update the concept for today’s technological milieu. To achieve this, I examine Myron May’s final video before his tragic acts of violence and a video from prominent TI Doreen Dotan in which she offers advice for the targeted.

The final chapter focuses on videos posted to YouTube that purport to document gangstalking in the act. Consulting Lacan’s theory of anxiety, I emphasize how the production and circulation of these videos enable TIs to play games of presence and absence with their tormentors. I argue that this is a practice that bolters their own sense of identity and embodies the logic of what Dean calls “communicative capitalism.” In making this argument, I assess videos produced by TIs themselves, as well as clips that have garnered great attention from the community on YouTube.

This dissertation is about how communication on platforms and a decline in shared authority have enabled an online conspiracy culture to emerge. Far from being just a set of ideas, the TI community is a group that thrives upon the contributions of its members of digital platforms. Whether these contributions take the form of comments on a message board, or a full-fledged video meant to document an incident of stalking as it is happening, they all contribute to the collaborative narrative behind the TI media universe. In executing this study, I hope to demonstrate the need for scholars to refine their understanding of how conspiracy theory is sustained in such settings. While making this case, I also hope to provide some insights into more general patterns of online platform use.

2.0 Language Without Dialectic, Paranoia Without Doubt: TI Media, Psychosis, & Rhetoric

2.1 Overview

The post-9/11 era is one that has been marked by increasingly ubiquitous digital contact. One consequence of this has been revelations about how individual users' privacy may be compromised. For example, the disclosures provided by Edward Snowden about the state's ability to indiscriminately capture and analyze phone data lead to wide discussion about how far surveillance had gone in the name of national security.⁷⁷ In another instance, whistleblower Christopher Wylie came forward about Cambridge Analytica's illicit use of personal data acquired from Facebook users to more strategically advertise political candidates, playing into popular anxieties about the power social media has to influence people.⁷⁸ Finally, in the present, some view

⁷⁷ Matthew Mosk, James Gordon Meek, and Lee Ferran, "Edward Snowden, NSA Contractor, Claims to Be Source of Surveillance Program Leaks," ABC News, June 9, 2013, <https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/edward-snowden-source-stunning-nsa-leaks-reveals/story?id=19359212>; Barton Gellman and Jerry Markon, "Edward Snowden Says Motive behind Leaks Was to Expose 'Surveillance State,'" *Washington Post*, June 10, 2013, sec. Politics, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/edward-snowden-says-motive-behind-leaks-was-to-expose-surveillance-state/2013/06/09/aa3f0804-d13b-11e2-a73e-826d299ff459_story.html; Steven Erlanger, "Edward Snowden Says Disclosures Bolstered Individual Privacy," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2016, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/17/world/europe/edward-snowden-defending-his-patriotism-says-disclosures-helped-privacy.html>.

⁷⁸ Nicholas Confessore, "Cambridge Analytica and Facebook: The Scandal and the Fallout So Far," *The New York Times*, April 4, 2018, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-scandal->

the use of location data gleaned from smartphones in order to engage in contact tracing as a potentially dangerous step towards further compromise of a right to privacy.⁷⁹ Despite these and other events, there is little in the way of an organized social movement against mass surveillance. One exception to this is the targeted individual community (TI). As detailed in the introduction, the TI community organize around a cluster of shared beliefs, most of which concern being surveilled or harassed by some clandestine organization.

This chapter is meant to provide an overview of the TI community, detailing their history, and analyzing distinctive features of their media. I focus on some of the definitive concerns of the community as made evident in their media. To achieve this end, I adopt a critical stance aided by insights from Lacanian psychoanalysis and its reception within American rhetorical studies. After dwelling on the TI community's signature notions and providing a brief history of the rise of these discourses, I provide an account of the TI community as a specific economy of trope. I ultimately conclude that we can view TI discourse as a psychotic cultural form in the narrow, Lacanian sense of psychosis. The first instance of the term TI appears to emerge sometime in the early 2000s. Even so, they possess some continuity with popular representations of technologically induced paranoia in North America and Europe. Though no single historical iteration of this position is equivalent to the contemporary TI movement, each instance represents an incremental step along

fallout.html; Terry Gross, "Whistleblower Explains How Cambridge Analytica Helped Fuel U.S. 'Insurgency,'" NPR.org, October 8, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/08/768216311/whistleblower-explains-how-cambridge-analytica-helped-fuel-u-s-insurgency>.

⁷⁹ Evan Halper, "Lawmakers Warn Coronavirus Contact-Tracing Is Ripe for Abusive Surveillance," *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-04-26/privacy-americans-trade-off-trace-coronavirus-contacts>.

the way toward the legibility of TIs as a cultural position in the present. In aggregate, these historical examples serve as important contexts for understanding the broader cultural history of psychosis and media that precedes the circulation of ideas about TIs and gangstalking.

Though this historical trajectory intersects with several key moments in the intellectual formation of psychoanalysis, psychoanalysis does more than simply provide historical context against which to understand the emergence of the figure of the TI. Psychoanalytic theory also offers a set of insights that can render clear aspects of TI public communication that might otherwise be regarded by onlookers as puzzling. In particular, psychoanalytic theory can bring the rhetorical aspects of TI media into focus and offer an account of how such media serve as sites of affective investment and public affiliation. Understanding language as fundamentally tropological in nature, Lacanian concepts can explain why some invest heavily in their identification and how the meaning underlying it is sustained. This is achieved through tending to how the labor of trope sustains this specific rhetorical economy. As I signaled earlier, I also introduce psychosis as a critical term that describes how TIs relate to signifiers, arguing that it provides a clarifying stance for making sense of otherwise unusual TI behavior. As noted in the introduction, I am not engaging in any kind of medical diagnosis of the producers or consumers of TI media when utilizing this psychoanalytic idiom. Indeed, as Joshua Gunn notes, focusing on the individual “is somewhat besides the point, since “psychical structures reside in culture.”⁸⁰ Instead, I am tending to the tropological structures that underwrite typical modes of address within that media. This

⁸⁰ Gunn, *Political Perversion*, 63.

means examining how processes of affective investment, signification, and repetition enable the figure of the TI becomes a legible identification in public.⁸¹

TI media not only addresses an explicitly identified audience, but simultaneously predicates certain qualities of the subject that produced it. In other words, we can examine TI media as public speech not only to understand how bonds of affiliation are formed between TIs in public, but also provide onlookers insight into how TIs understand themselves. Though much of this speech takes place on platforms, I am more concerned with identifying how trope organizes individual and collective identity on platforms than I am with the platforms themselves. This means that I focus primarily on how these media objects function as a means of bringing TIs together, rather than on the technical aspects of the platforms themselves.

In what follows, I offer an initial sketch of some of the characteristic concerns of TI media. I then situate them within a broader historical context and scholarly perspectives on conspiracy theory and surveillance. Following this exposition, I develop an account of Lacanian psychoanalysis heavily influenced by its reception within American rhetorical studies and media studies. Particular emphasis is placed on psychosis and its relationship to metaphor and metonymy. I conclude the chapter with a second look at the TI community as a specific economy of trope, asserting that it is shaped by practices of metonymic interpretation and anxious positioning of TIs in relation to their pursuers.

⁸¹ Christian Lundberg, *Lacan in Public: Psychoanalysis and the Science of Rhetoric* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), 143.

2.2 Brief history of movement

Identifying precisely when and where the construction “targeted” came into circulation is unclear. There are, however, many signs that indicate it is contemporaneous with an increased usage of computers and a growing reliance upon user-generated content. Google Trends shows that searches of the term have steadily risen over the last decade and a half.⁸² In 2006, a paper addressed patients who reported experience consistent with delusion during the course of their internet use. It concluded that “it is noteworthy that a potentially disabled and disenfranchised group has co-opted available technology to create a complex, dynamic and information-rich community that serves to support and inform similarly affected people...driven by potentially psychotic symptoms.”⁸³ The study found that there was likely some level of social organization among users producing and consuming this content at that time, given the consistency of certain themes.

In 2009, *The New York Times* published an article detailing this rise in experiences of “mind control” online. The article quotes psychiatrist Dr. Ralph Hoffman as saying that repeated exposure to materials supporting delusional beliefs is what strengthen their hold on the person possessed by them. In the following paragraphs, however, they speak to Derrick Robinson, who is described as the president of the group Freedom from Covert Harassment and Surveillance. Robinson posits

⁸² “Google Trends,” Google Trends, accessed December 20, 2020, <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=targeted%20individual>.

⁸³ Vaughan Bell et al., “‘Mind Control’ Experiences on the Internet: Implications for the Psychiatric Diagnosis of Delusions,” *Psychopathology; Basel* 39, no. 2 (February 2006): 90. Note that the definition of psychosis referenced here is taken the DSM-IV, which is distinct from the Lacanian sense operative elsewhere in this chapter.

the notion that this kind of contact with others online who felt they were being surveilled was therapeutic for him. He states that, “I felt that maybe there were others, but I wasn’t real sure until I did find this community.” Though the terms “targeted individual” or “gangstalking” do not appear in the article, it appears to depict an early version of the community.

In the following years, several TIs commit acts of mass violence that elicit the movement a great deal of new attention. The first high profile incident occurred in 2013. Aaron Alexis was a government contractor who claimed he was being controlled by “low-frequency radio waves” and killed 12 people at the Washington Navy Yard before being fatally shot by police. Next year, Myron May, a former prosecutor, shot three people in a Florida State University. May was immersed in TI media, actively posting in Facebook groups intended for TIs and sending out packages documenting his belief that he was a TI to news organizations prior to the shooting. The last high profile incident of mass violence occurred in 2016, when Gavin Long executed an ambush that killed three police officers and injured three others present at the scene. These incidents lead to wider public awareness of the TI community.

Later in 2016, the *Times* published a very similar report to the one that they had printed 7 years prior. The key difference is that, here, the term TI appears very early on and much of the reporting focuses specifically on the numerous forms that TI discourse assumes. YouTube videos, radio programs, & self-published texts are identified as the primary channels through which the core ideas associated with the TI community are disseminated. The ease of production and circulation of such media likely plays a role in enabling “TI” and “gang stalking” to become the preferred signifiers that people who believe they are suffering from harassment invest in. The last three chapters of this dissertation examine such media in detail as objects which create the conditions for the formation of a public. The difference in capacity to connect through media sits

in contrast with the preceding article, which only briefly mentioned a website operated by Robinson. While the actual beliefs plaguing some are more or less the same, the channels to consume it proliferated and often included space to comment and interact with one another. Around the same time, Vice Media published two documentaries about the TI community and gangstalking respectively. The former offers a look at how the community has taken shape in the United Kingdom, featuring interviews with prominent TIs and footage of a TI conference⁸⁴. The documentary about gangstalking focuses on Los Angeles and emphasizes how the rise of digital communication technologies and disclosures about mass surveillance have created conditions ripe for the proliferation of such beliefs.⁸⁵ Both offer a glimpse at how adherence to the idea promoted in TI media can be deeply agonizing for those who believe in them.

There are a few organizations whose purpose is to amplify TI concerns and promote their interests. One is called Targeted Justice and they purport to have the most traffic of any TI or gang stalking site online.⁸⁶ They describe themselves as a “501 © (3) non-profit organization committed to exposing and ending the CIA’s illegal torture program of U.S. civilians- through public awareness, education, and legal actions.” Targeted Justice have made it their mission to inform the public about the nature and extent of the programs working against them. Their site provides visitors with information about the specific technologies used against TIs as well as their evidence

⁸⁴ Vice, *Meet the Targeted Individual Community*, accessed February 4, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62s3FinAoC0>.

⁸⁵ Vice, *The Nightmare World of Gang Stalking*, accessed February 4, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LPS7E-0tuA>.

⁸⁶ “TARGETED JUSTICE - Targeted Justice for Targeted Individuals,” accessed April 8, 2020, <https://www.targetedjustice.com/>.

for justifying these claims. There are also guides that provide information specific to particular cities, states, or areas outside of the United States. These guides offer speculative diagrams of how a particular gang stalking program is constituted in each area (fig. 1). Another group is called Freedom for Targeted Individuals (FFTI).⁸⁷ They list three primary aims:

to raise awareness about organized stalking and electronic harassment....to demand that law enforcement starts treating victims with dignity and begins taking official reports of victims' claims about organized stalking and electronic harassmentto ask city councilors, legislative assemblypersons, and national elected representatives to pass modern legislation criminalizing organized stalking and electronic harassment in language aligned with the victims' reports

One way that FFTI accomplish these goals is through advertisements on billboards and public transportation. On their site, they provide a gallery of these advertisements as they have implemented them in Vancouver, Los Angeles, and Bangkok, among other locations. They have even created a GoFundMe for such advertisements.⁸⁸ Targeted Justice similarly seeks donations, though they utilize a subscription model on the Patreon platform.⁸⁹ A description on Patreon states that funds gathered through the platform are to be used to hire legal representation for a class-action lawsuit against the CIA. Targeted Justice and FFTI are just two prominent examples of the many organizations that seek to draw attention to the plight of TIs. They warrant special focus due to the attention they draw, both in digital and physical space.

⁸⁷ "FFTI: Freedom For Targeted Individuals," FFTI, accessed January 21, 2020, <https://www.freedomfortargetedindividuals.org>.

⁸⁸ "Ads for Freedom, Organized by Matthew Aaron," [gofundme.com](https://www.gofundme.com/f/xg4mg-ads-for-freedom), accessed December 13, 2020, <https://www.gofundme.com/f/xg4mg-ads-for-freedom>.

⁸⁹ "Targeted Justice Is Creating a Fan Page," Patreon, accessed December 13, 2020, <https://www.patreon.com/TargetedJustice>.

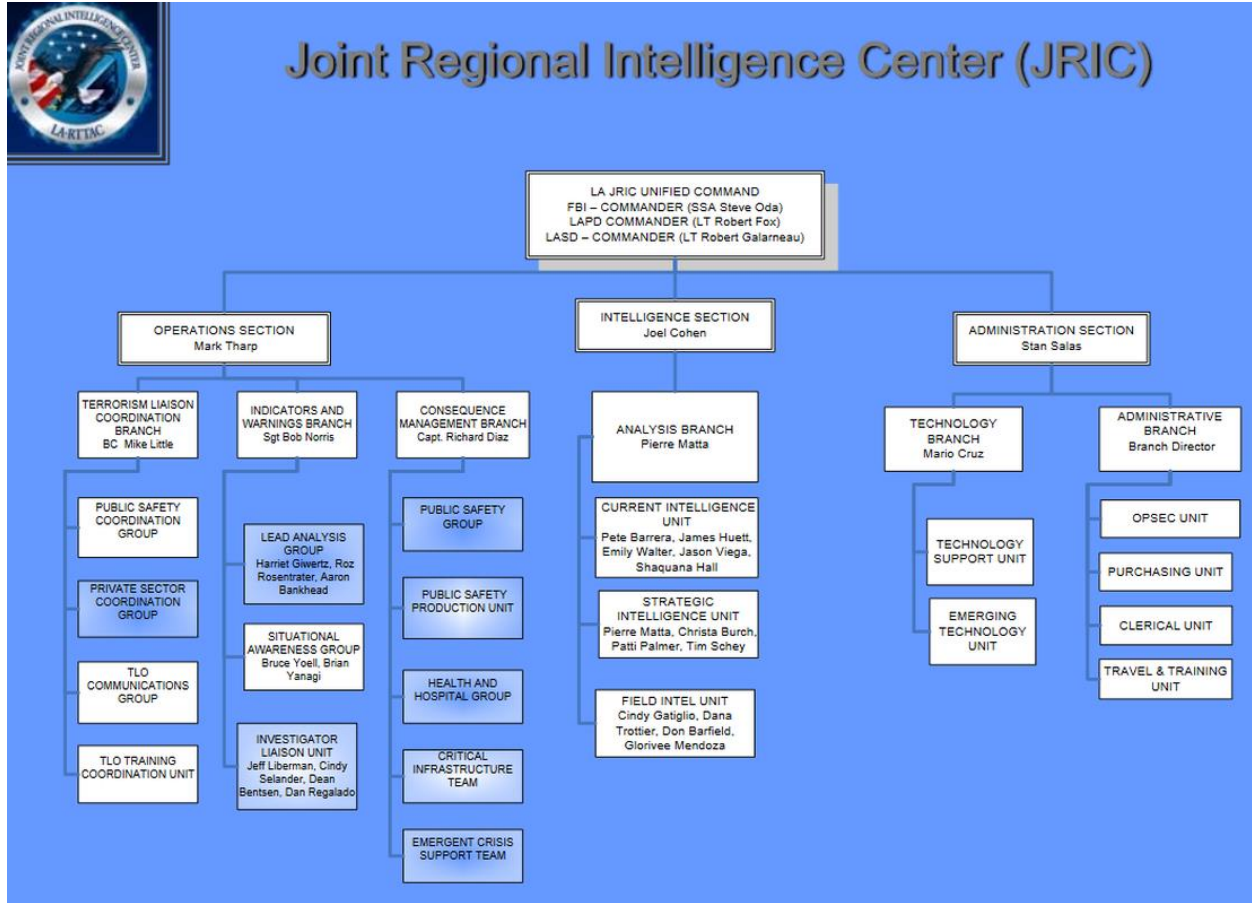


Figure 2: Targeted Justice diagram of gangstalking program

TI discourse relies upon an imaginative incapacity to represent the operation of sophisticated electronics that enables them to function as a black box in accounting for the source of aural hallucination or even one’s conscious intentions. In the context of this delusion, however, these devices are merely instruments of a more sinister force that is attempting to control a TI’s life. TIs purport that there is almost always some larger group or structure behind the harassment that they are experiencing. Though the specific details often vary, the identities of these antagonists are almost always an intelligence agency with the CIA as the most common culprit. For instance, Targeted Justice’s website houses a “Defund the CIA” section. TIs also have an interest in declassified military research and historical incidences of intelligence operations being conducted

domestically, which I address later on. Everything leads back to a larger organization that has coordinated harassment against the TI at a personal level.

Just as pervasive as the concerns about who is doing the targeting is a fixation on why some people are targeted rather than others. Explanations abound in this area. For instance, some will posit that they have a heightened profile due to their “political activity.”⁹⁰ Others reach for biological explanations, arguing that holders of MC1R or the so-called “redhead gene” are targeted due to the relative scarcity of the gene in question.⁹¹ Notably, Black TIs have occasionally described the experience they endure as stemming from the historical legacy of racism in the United States. Prior to the incident in Baton Rouge, Aaron Alexis had been uploading videos to YouTube that drew a link between his own TI-inflected thinking and the Black radical tradition in the United States more generally.⁹² While there is limited sociological data available about TIs in general, it appears that they come from a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, with no obvious overrepresentation of one group relative to the wider demographic tendencies of the United States. More research in this area would be a valuable contribution toward understanding how race shapes these discourses. Still, others insist that rather than there being a political or biological reason for their targeting, there is instead some kind of religious or occult explanation.

⁹⁰ QueenBee Nightly, *FOR TARGETED INDIVIDUALS, A Guide for Survival*, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zlm9X41ahl8>.

⁹¹ Gotham Nation, *Why Are Targeted Individuals Targeted?*, accessed January 31, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lwjh8JeXf5A>.

⁹² Cosmo Setepenra, *Convos With Cosmo on Protesting, Oppression, and How to Deal with Bullies*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4oTAoOpW48>. Cosmo Setepenra was a pseudonym used by Gavin Long for his publications.

For instance, prominent TI Doreen Dotan identifies TIs as “big souls.”⁹³ Dotan insists that “big souls” know without question that they are TIs and that they possess some deeper connection to God. More recently journalist Joseph Flatley interviewed a TI who described her awareness of being targeted as stemming from what she termed “a spiritual awakening,” though she found it difficult to identify exactly what that meant to her when Flatley asked for clarification.⁹⁴

For TIs, there is a feeling of immediate proximity to this larger campaign and an absolute certainty that it is in fact occurring. As a result, there is a significant amount of messaging addressed to TIs that encourages them to ignore friends, family, or medical authorities that contest the premise. Another common and related theme of TI media is the loneliness that being targeted produces in the individual. Jack Z. Bratich uses the term “conspiracy panics” to describe how collective fear and the urge to cast out conspiracy theory functions as a means of distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge. Bratich focuses on how enacting arbitrary lines distinguishing acceptable knowledge claims from conspiracy theory concerns unease over a “form of thought,” rather than any specific content.⁹⁵ In this context, there is clearly a knowledge internal to the TI community that their claims about stalking and harassment will be diminished as untrue and possibly even indicate that they are mentally unwell. TIs assert that such social isolation is the ultimate aim of the campaign being waged against them. Sadly, regardless of whether one believes

⁹³ QueenBee Nightly, *FOR TARGETED INDIVIDUALS, A Guide for Survival*.

⁹⁴ Joseph Flatley, “Conversation with a Targeted Individual,” .mp3, Failed State Update, December 10, 2020, accessed December 23, 2020.

⁹⁵ Jack Z. Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture* (SUNY Press, 2008), 11.

such claims are true, the result is often the same.⁹⁶ There are many instances online of people who, having invested heavily in the targeting narrative, report that they find themselves feeling paranoid and alone.

2.3 Unclear origins

It is not clear whether the term “targeted individual” was invented or appropriated from another context, but the construction does have an arid legal flavor. The term does seem to have some usage in law and military literature, functioning as a means of identifying a person subject to force or some other form of action. For example, in the U.S Army Field Manual, an “empowered individual” or “targeted individual” is a threat to be managed during a military operation. Such texts are intended to educate soldiers on how to dominate and control local populations.⁹⁷ Interestingly, “empowered individual” is a term some TI content producers have adopted to identify themselves as victims of the conspiracy who have made peace with the notion that they have been harassed.⁹⁸ Some early user may have engaged in a generative misreading of

⁹⁶ There is an analogy here with Žižek’s discussion of the impact that rumors of a grand plot to overtake the CIA had on the agency during the 1980s. Specifically, both are circumstances in which the lack of corroboration for such beliefs cause a search to find proof for them. Despite never finding the thing, the search for it still produces the same effects as if it were actual. See Slavoj Žižek, *How To Read Lacan* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 19–20.

⁹⁷ United States Army, *Field Manual FM 3-98 Reconnaissance and Security Operations July 2015* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

⁹⁸ For examples, see “(1) Empowered Individuals: Life Update - YouTube,” accessed January 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJiJCiRduW8>; Chasedreamsin Targetedindividuals • 2 Years Ago, “Artificial

the term “targeted individual,” which served as a seed that eventually enabled the broader TI economy to develop. In this case, the reader would imagine themselves as the subject of these texts and their misunderstanding would instead become the basis of a larger conspiracy mythos. I return to this point later in my rereading of the TI phenomenon via Lacanian theory.

One hypothesis of this project is to wager that the static construction “TI” is not inconsequential, but in fact symptomatic of a larger shift in how people connect online. The term “TI” allows for the consolidation of the varied accounts of covert harassment and surveillance that users consume and upload under a single searchable phrase. This enables terms like “v2k,” “MK-ULTRA,” or “gangstalking” that might otherwise be unlinked to one another to now have increasing levels of coincidence. This connection is brought about incrementally through the contribution of user-produced content focusing on these ideas. Though it may sound like a minor point, the result is that otherwise unconnected delusions or concepts that individuals experiencing a paranoid disturbance might heavily value congeal together under a single searchable term. The result is that these ideas are now linked through repetition and become easier to access. As I elaborate later, this is also how language operates abstractly.

TIs’ manner of positioning themselves relative to their antagonists, as a binary conflict between elites and ordinary people, allows them to assume a rhetorical style evocative of contemporary human rights campaigns. Occasionally, the TI community describe their plight as

Intelligence Is Now Targeting Empowered Individuals,” Steemit, August 10, 2017, <https://steemit.com/targetedindividuals/@chasedreams/artificial-intelligence-is-now-targeting-empowered-individuals-2017810t115544520z>; Miles’s Bases Project, *Bases 54 Tara Allgood Empowered TI Part 1*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1iZkdvl-6c>; NuBreed Till The World Over, *Targeted Individuals Must Become Empowered!*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYIVw1BUJuY>.

the greatest human rights violation cover-up in human history.⁹⁹ Couching the matter in terms of human rights harbors an implicit notion of full personhood as being able to live autonomously and speak freely without interference of any sort. The notion that the rights of TIs' are being violated speaks to their investment in the existing legal order and its failure to live up to its ideals in practice. Thus, the image of the state is one that has chosen to wage war against its citizens, no longer distinguishing between internal and external threats. This explains in why TIs fixate on common representations of the national security state turned against its own people.

TIs should thus be understood as emerging from and being deeply invested in the fantastic, obscene underbelly of neoliberal democracy. The fantasy is one in which unspeakable and sometimes literally invisible acts of harm are committed out of the sight of an otherwise omniscient technocratic regime. This perception of transgressive violence against people who have not committed any offense or violated any law serves as the imaginary support to the feeling of powerlessness identified by Sconce. Outright harm or even the mere suggestion of it through actions like stalking serve to bolster the notion that TIs live under a security regime that treats the population it is meant to protect as if they themselves were comparable to an external threat. This results in a deep distrust of the intelligence and security apparatus.

⁹⁹ "Grievances," TARGETED JUSTICE, accessed February 23, 2021, <https://www.targetedjustice.com/grievances.html>.

2.4 Historical precursors

Though it may seem novel, the TI movement does have some historical precedent. Accounting for aspects of psychosis through reference to technology is not unique to TIs within the wider history of psychology. Exploring how such analogies have functioned in the past is illustrative. Andrew Gaedtke observes in his study of technological paranoia in early modernist literature that “psychoanalytic notions of unconscious “mechanism” along with early neurological accounts of the mental processes converged toward a view that thought was not fully under conscious control or available to introspection but was governed by automatic systems.”¹⁰⁰ In other words, the increasingly complex technologies of the 20th century offered a powerful analogy for representations of psychic life that diminished the role of the subject’s own conscious volition. In this section, I focus on their historical antecedents. Specifically, I focus on how technology has served as a resource for understanding psychosis and madness. I argue that TIs are a contemporary iteration of this broader historical tendency, updating the technologies and their effects to reflect modern technology but still assuming the same stance with regard to how technology, the self, and the external world interact. I offer a sketch of this history in order to provide context for understanding the emergence and uptake of the TI phenomenon.

In early psychological theorist Emil Kraepelin’s study of dementia praecox, he deploys several communication technologies to describe how patients report hearing voices.¹⁰¹ He says

¹⁰⁰ Andrew Gaedtke, *Modernism and the Machinery of Madness: Psychosis, Technology, and Narrative Worlds* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 2.

¹⁰¹ Emil Kraepelin, *Dementia Praecox and Paraphrenia*, ed. George M. (George Matthew) Robertson, trans. R. Mary Barclay (Edinburgh : Livingstone, 1919), 8, <http://archive.org/details/dementiapræcox00krae>.

that these patients describe them as being like “a telephone, a receiver, a phonograph in the head.” This results in the source of the perception being located externally to the patient, as something foreign. Later, Eugen Bleuler, the psychiatrist who renamed Kraepelin’s dementia praecox “schizophrenia,” asserting that “the mutual influence of different psychic functions works like an electric device where functions are switched on and off.”¹⁰²

One of the most prominent examples of this conjunction of technology and madness can be found in Daniel Paul Schreber’s memoirs.¹⁰³ A jurist who suffered multiple nervous breakdowns throughout his life, Schreber’s memoirs describe the complex theological system that was at the center of his delusions. Schreber claimed that he was able to talk to God and others through a process he describes as “nerve-contact” (*Nervenanhang*).¹⁰⁴ In his account, God and the souls of the living are ultimately reducible to these nerves. Schreber describes the communication he experiences via nerves as being comparable to telephony¹⁰⁵ as well as “electric light and railways.”¹⁰⁶ Schreber’s memoir is an object of analysis for both Freud and Lacan. The former is struck by the degree to which Schreber’s delusions bear resemblance to his own theory of libidinal investment, whereas Lacan comments on Schreber’s memoirs throughout his third seminar.

¹⁰² Bleuler in Gaedtker, 14.

¹⁰³ Daniel Paul Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2000).

¹⁰⁴ Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, 23.

¹⁰⁵ Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, 277.

¹⁰⁶ Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, 193.

There's an even clearer affinity between TI narratives and accounts reported by patients to psychoanalyst Viktor Tausk more than a century earlier in Berlin.¹⁰⁷ Formerly a lawyer, Tausk left the profession in order to become a psychanalyst.¹⁰⁸ Tausk studied under Freud and much contemporary scholarship has read Tausk as mostly in agreement with Freud about a number of basic theoretical points, with a few caveats. In 1917, Tausk published a paper on the "influencing machine" in schizophrenia, a bizarre and complicated device described by patients in sessions with Tausk. These machines were attributed responsibility for manipulating the patients' thoughts and bodies, thus locating the source of these agitations outside of the subject and in the world. Summarizing his patients' accounts of these machines, Tausk writes that "it consists of boxes, cranks, levers, wheels, buttons, wires, batteries and the like."¹⁰⁹ It is implied that the complexity of these machines in patients' verbal descriptions is because some aspect of its function that escapes understanding. This deluge of speech from Tausk's patients was aided by the fact that these devices were objects of delusion, existing only in the patients' minds and thus need not add up to a cohesive image of the machine.

Tausk recounts how he has repeatedly encountered some version of this machine as the source of schizophrenic patients' symptoms when he worked with them in analysis.¹¹⁰ Specifically, he attributes five prominent and recurrent effects of the influencing machine as reported to him by

¹⁰⁷ Victor Tausk, "On the Origin of the 'Influencing Machine' in Schizophrenia," trans. Dorian Feigenbaum, *The Journal of Psychotherapy Practice and Research* 1, no. 2 (1992): 184–206.

¹⁰⁸ Paul Roazen, "Victor Tausk's Contribution to Psychoanalysis," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (July 1, 1969): 349, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21674086.1969.11926495>.

¹⁰⁹ Roazen, "Victor Tausk's Contribution to Psychoanalysis," 186.

¹¹⁰ Tausk, "On the Origin of the Influencing Machine," 186.

patients. First, “it makes the patients see pictures” in a manner similar to “a magic lantern or cinematograph.” Tausk notes these pictures are “unlike typical visual hallucinations” because they are not three-dimensional but instead appear “on a single plane” like a projected image or film appears upon a screen. Second, the influencing machine “produces as well as removes, thoughts and feelings by means of waves or rays or mysterious forces.” Third, the device “produces motor phenomena in the body, erections and seminal emissions that intended to deprive the patient of his male potency” and such is accomplished via “electrical, magnetic, or...air-currents.” The fourth symptom attributed to the influencing machine is the generation of indescribable sensations via the same invisible mechanisms that deprive the patient of their sexual energy. Last, the influencing machine causes “cutaneous eruptions” like abscesses.

One striking feature of these symptoms is that there is a great deal of overlap between the reported effects of the influencing machine on Tausk’s patients and what TIs attribute to their harassers in the present. The parallels do not end merely with these symptoms, but also extend to the attribution of an identity to those responsible for causing these disturbances through the technical apparatus. One of Tausk’s patients, a philosophy student identified as Natalija A., described the device as a kind of electric sarcophagus crafted in her image.¹¹¹ From this, Tausk concludes that the machine must be the patient projecting themselves outwards, as a foreign object. Joan Copjec observes that this projection is not the explanation for paranoia but rather a defense against a world perceived as hostile to the subject.¹¹² Natalija A. alleged that a shadowy group of

¹¹¹ Tausk, “On the Origin of the Influencing Machine,” 191.

¹¹² Joan Copjec, “The Anxiety of the Influencing Machine,” *October* 23, no. Winter (1982): 56–57, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778584>.

men somewhere in the city were torturing her at a distance through the machine and that it was slowly coming to resemble her more and more as they continued this activity. Copjec notes that Tausk seemingly “dodges the issue” of the sexual identity of these men and posits their presence indicates a “hypochondriacal theory of the apparatus- which projects the image of a phallic machine reproducing only male spectators.” Copjec argues that the fact that the antagonists are “always men” suggests that the cinematic apparatus may impose a masculine posture with respect to how the viewer enjoys cinema. In contrast, Sconce cites Carolyn Marvin’s historical work on the gendered nature of technical expertise of argue that the masculine identity of the antagonists is not indicative of some “timeless object of libidinal projection.”¹¹³ Instead, the men’s presence reflects the broader sociological trends shaping the labor force at the time.

The parallels between Tausk’s account and TI narratives of the present indicate that while history matters and the particulars of this strain of delusion may change over time, there is nonetheless an overlapping thematic concern that should prompt closer scrutiny. TIs feel compromised by a hostile outer world. This world is one maintained by those who represent a corrupt legal order and are dedicated to ruining the lives of innocent people. This process of externalizing their identity enables TIs to locate their identity as separate from themselves and guaranteed as part of a broader symbolic economy. There is a certainty about their identity because it is located outside of them.

Another salient line of scholarship explores how cultural narratives invest technology with occult powers and inversely, how new media technology might serves as tools for researching the supernatural, unusual, or strange. Often, these two aims are entangled from the start. Roger

¹¹³ Sconce, “Origin of the Origin of the Influencing Machine,” 83.

Luckhurst persuasively argues that electronic communication like the telegram was a primary factor in generating public interest in the prospect of telepathy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.¹¹⁴ Moreover, the question of whether or not such capacities were even possible was not necessarily considered a dubious line of inquiry, but rather one that helped shaped the bounds of subsequent psychological research. Even Freud held out for the possibility of there being some sort of telepathic contact between humans. A similar narrative is plotted out by Stefan Andriopoulos in the context of German cultural and intellectual history, examining “the intersection of the ghostly with various media and discursive fields between 1750 and 1930.”¹¹⁵ Jeff Sconce identifies the power that “the structuring metaphor of the ‘etheric ocean’ held over the imaginations of early radio listeners.”¹¹⁶ This figure, with its implication of invisible omnipresence, functioned as a resource for early radio enthusiasts to explore the reality of telepathy or contact with the dead.¹¹⁷ Similarly, John Durham Peters writes that there is a “clearly some kind of elective affinity between schizophrenia and broadcasting.”¹¹⁸ One reason for that affinity could be the differing abilities of the listener and the broadcaster to interact with one another, in a way that facilitates a parasocial attachment on the part of the other. As mentioned already, I am not interested in engaging in any sort of diagnosis or psychological assessment of

¹¹⁴ Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870-1901* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹¹⁵ Stefan Andriopoulos, *Ghostly Apparitions: German Idealism, the Gothic Novel, and Optical Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013): 10.

¹¹⁶ Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 63.

¹¹⁷ Sconce, *Haunted*, 76

¹¹⁸ John Durham Peters, “Broadcasting and Schizophrenia,” *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 1 (2010): 132.

any of the producers of the TI media grounding my study. Rather, I am interested in examining TI media as public speech, as broadcast delusions that serve as the basis for a kind of collective identity or community. The basic question that I am addressing is how certain forms of collective habit are enabled through features of TI media itself and the media infrastructure enabling its circulation.

2.5 Targeted individuals in 2020

The TI community continues to persist in the present. Like nearly everything else in 2020, the community has responded to the outbreak of a global pandemic. What was most significant about this development for the TI community was not the integration of COVID-19 into their existing mythos but instead the positing of between the implementation of 5G mobile networks and the novel coronavirus. While the rollout of this technology seemed to roughly coincide with the propagation of the virus, there is no such connection. Nonetheless, the possibility proved too tempting for many conspiracy theorists to resist. Specifically, this conspiracy theory shares a paranoia about communication infrastructures with TI media and similarly seeks to invoke them as explanations for how otherwise invisible activity occurs. Moreover, both TI media and conspiracy theory linking 5G and Covid-19 primarily circulate through online platforms.¹¹⁹ Both

¹¹⁹ James Meese, Jordan Frith, and Rowan Wilken, “COVID-19, 5G Conspiracies and Infrastructural Futures,” *Media International Australia* (8/1/07-Current) 177, no. 1 (November 2020): 30–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X20952165>; James Temperton, “How the 5G Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory Tore through the Internet,” *Wired UK*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory>.

phenomena serve as examples of how contemporary communication technologies function as resources for explaining invisible processes in which the body functions as a medium within a larger circuit.

Targeted Justice have largely repeated a common right-wing trope of the COVID-19 pandemic being a planned event intending to create conditions for the consolidation of power. However, their site offers little explanation beyond hosting memes that depict extreme skepticism about the virus's potential harm, as well as its origin in nature.¹²⁰ The eruption of the pandemic is thus taken as further indication that shadowy elites are in control of a number of events that otherwise might be regarded as contingent. Targeted Justice also link to a controversial documentary called *Plandemic*, which has been taken down from YouTube and other platforms for being deemed misinformation.¹²¹

¹²⁰ "CoronaScam," TARGETED JUSTICE, accessed December 27, 2020, <https://www.targetedjustice.com/coronascam.html>.

¹²¹ Sheera Frenkel, Ben Decker, and Davey Alba, "How the 'Plandemic' Movie and Its Falsehoods Spread Widely Online," *The New York Times*, May 20, 2020, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/technology/plandemic-movie-youtube-facebook-coronavirus.html>; Jack Brewster, "Facebook Bans Users From Sharing Debunked 'Plandemic' Movie," *Forbes*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackbrewster/2020/08/18/facebook-bans-users-from-sharing-debunked-plandemic-movie/>; "The 'Plandemic' Video Has Exploded Online — And It Is Filled With Falsehoods," BuzzFeed News, accessed December 21, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/janelytvynenko/coronavirus-plandemic-viral-harmful-fauci-mikovits>.

2.6 TI Discourse as conspiracy theory

As discussed in my introduction, the proliferation and uptake of TI media is indicative of a broader pattern of the decentralization of knowledge. This has resulted in a fragmentation of authority and an enhanced capacity for users to circulate their own knowledge online. This is not unique to TI media and has resulted in novel challenges for platforms to navigate concerning the circulation of inaccurate or misleading information online. As a result, while TI media may be described as conspiratorial and certainly has affinity with conspiracy theories, it lacks the coherence or power to explain broader structures that is typically part and parcel of conspiracy narratives. Put a little differently, TI media asserts that ordinary people are surrounded by swathes of conspiracy but tends to devolve into the same characteristic assertions, that American intelligence agencies are engaged in active surveillance of the population and that this could very well be happening to you and others. Conspiracy theory is thus a relevant framework for the case at hand. Invocation of conspiracy theory raises questions about the community's evidentiary practices and what it means for a conspiracy theory to be "real."

There has been a longstanding interest in conspiracy theory in communication studies. Thomas Goodnight and John Poulakos understand conspiracy theory as a sort of corrupted form of inquiry that is put in service of defining social reality.¹²² Theodore Joseph Remington similarly

¹²² G. Thomas Goodnight and John Poulakos, "Conspiracy Rhetoric: From Pragmatism to Fantasy in Public Discourse," *Western Journal of Speech Communication: WJSC* 45, no. 4 (Fall 1981): 299–316, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570318109374052>.

approaches conspiracy theory as a form of sublimated political speech.¹²³ Still others have followed in the footsteps of Richard Hofstadter's essay on the "paranoid style" in American politics by treating conspiracy as a genre or style. The hallmark of such a style in Hofstadter's estimation is that its proponents "regard a 'vast' or 'gigantic' conspiracy as *the motive* force in historical events."¹²⁴ Jenny Rice takes up such a focus in the aesthetic in her *Awful Archives*, focusing on the rhetorical effects produced by conspiracy theory archives. Recovering the concept of *megethos* or magnitude, Rice posits that the archives constructed by conspiracy theorists produce an aesthetic coherence that lends them an additional appeal.¹²⁵ Ian Reyes and Jason K. Smith agree, arguing that conspiracy theories are a genre unto their own and that "the mark and measure" of such rhetoric is not their truth but "their ability to set and keep in motion a labyrinthine argument."¹²⁶ Using psychoanalysis for the purpose of rhetorical criticism, Matheson tracks how a complex battery of conspiratorial beliefs and a rejection of legal authority animate and sustain the sovereign citizens movement.¹²⁷ The prevailing opinion among scholars is that critical approaches to conspiracy theory must look beyond whether they are true or false and instead

¹²³ Theodore Joseph Remington, "Conspiracy Narratives as Political Rhetoric" (Ph.D., United States -- Iowa, The University of Iowa, 2002), <http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/287874190/abstract/1879ECCFE18459APQ/1>.

¹²⁴ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays*. (New York, Knopf, 1965), 29.

¹²⁵ Rice, *Awful Archives*, 69.

¹²⁶ Ian Reyes and Jason K. Smith, "What They Don't Want You to Know About Planet X: *Surviving 2012* and the Aesthetics of Conspiracy Rhetoric," *Communication Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (September 2014): 413, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2014.922483>.

¹²⁷ Calum Lister Matheson, "Psychotic Discourse: The Rhetoric of the Sovereign Citizen Movement," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (March 15, 2018): 187–206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2017.1306876>.

explore how they become elevated to a place of special significance for adherents. In concurrence with many of these scholars, I believe that viewing conspiracy theories primarily as a matter of some epistemic failure is not a generative framing. Instead, what I think is noteworthy about the TI phenomenon considered as a kind of conspiracy theory is how it functions as a space for the articulation of social anxieties, akin to Jodi Dean's treatment of the UFO phenomenon in her book on the topic.¹²⁸ TIs see themselves as victimized by a security state prone to excessive violence. As I detailed earlier, this conviction has sometimes led to TIs taking up arms against police officers or even innocent people in an effort to fight back against those perceived as complicit in the conspiracy. I explain how TIs come to be so certain that these offenses really are occurring later on in this chapter.

In this sense, the narrative that the TI community tells itself is broadly populist in character, in as much as it features a binary conflict between empowered elites and everyone else "in relation to liberal representative democracy."¹²⁹ While the exact definition of populism is subject to extensive scholarly debate, one dominant approach to the subject is to argue it is a rhetorical style that is characterized by an emphasis on a confrontation between corrupt elites and ordinary people.¹³⁰ This is the core conflict that preoccupies the attention of the TI community, though with

¹²⁸ Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 18.

¹²⁹ Axel Muller, "The meaning of 'populism,'" *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 45, (no.9-10): 1026.

¹³⁰ Some key thinkers on this topic beyond Muller are Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>; Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005); Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford University Press, 2016).

specific emphasis with regard to how it impacts them personally. Fenster has criticized the use of “populism” in broadly characterizing conspiracy theory, due to the need for greater specificity when it comes to precisely what is being opposed.¹³¹ In this case, however, viewing the community as populist in character underscores how this antagonism and the community’s participatory culture work in tandem to create an expansive cast of potential enemies that could be plaguing a TI. As I explain in the next section, this is perhaps productively understood as a form of self-surveillance.

2.7 Surveillance studies

As a consequence of the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, the nation swiftly enacted legislation like the USAPATRIOT Act that granted increased power to the federal government to engage in mass scale surveillance of its population. At the time of writing, governments around the world are using information gleaned from smartphones to track the spread of COVID-19.¹³² The Office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement uses Big Data technology to locate, detain, and deport undocumented persons.¹³³ The connection between the capacity to

¹³¹ Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 287

¹³² Natasha Singer and Choe Sang-Hun, “As Coronavirus Surveillance Escalates, Personal Privacy Plummets,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 2020, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/technology/coronavirus-surveillance-tracking-privacy.html>.

¹³³ McKenzie Funk, “How ICE Picks Its Targets in the Surveillance Age,” *The New York Times*, October 2, 2019, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/02/magazine/ice-surveillance-deportation.html>; Rosalie Chan, “Here’s What You Need to Know about Palantir, the Secretive \$20 Billion Data-Analysis Company Whose Work with ICE Is

surveil and digital media is one that is unescapable in the present technological milieu. The TI community partly forms around this connection. Consequently, the emergence of the TI phenomenon must be read as being formed from the detritus of a culture of ubiquitous surveillance.

Scholars have proposed a range of concepts to explain how surveillance works. One core idea is that a “surveillance society” is one in which some actor “uses information gathered through surveillance in order to maintain power over others.”¹³⁴ This notion probably reflects conventional understandings of how surveillance operates, with one party gathering information from others in order to gain an advantage over them. Thus, it includes the kind of mass state surveillance conducted against the general population that excites the TI imagination. This imbalance in the capacity to surveil one another creates relationships of subordination between a centralized power and its subjects. In contrast, a *sousveillance* society is one in which those which the mechanisms of information capture and publication to monitor those who would be doing the monitoring. Computer scientist Steve Mann coined the term to describe individuals using “panoptic technologies to help them observe those in authority.”¹³⁵ In other words, *sousveillance* refers to the capacity of individual actors to surveil each other or those above them in a hierarchy through the usage of different technologies used to record and circulate information. This is perhaps a less

Dragging Amazon into Controversy,” *Business Insider*, July 19, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/palantir-ice-explainer-data-startup-2019-7>.

¹³⁴ Jean-Gabriel Ganascia, “The Generalized *Sousveillance* Society,” *Social Science Information* 49, no. 3 (September 1, 2010): 491 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018410371027>.

¹³⁵ Steve Mann, Jason Nolan, and Barry Wellman, “*Sousveillance*: Inventing and Using Wearable Computing Devices for Data Collection in Surveillance Environments,” *Surveillance & Society* 1, no. 3 (2003): 332, <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v1i3.3344>.

common understanding of how surveillance works but is still important for understanding TI media. Rather than being spied on by the state, TIs are instead in sense engaging in willful surveillance of themselves through disclosing information via social media. Daniel Trottier explains how these dynamics collide on social media, arguing that a full account of social media surveillance includes a combination of individual, institutional, market, and policing forces.¹³⁶ TIs stage how these tendencies inflect one another, offering an example of how concerns about privacy and the inherent publicity of social media interact. As noted by Alyse Burnside, whether they realize or not, TIs live in a nightmarish world in which there is no escape from panoptic mechanisms.¹³⁷ Rather than being purely a response to an imagined surveillance, there is also an investment in a symbolic economy and a desire to broadcast one's participation.

Shoshanna Zuboff has developed the term “surveillance capitalism” to describe a system that “unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data” to develop “*prediction products* that anticipate what you will do, now soon, and later.” Such commodities are “traded in a new kind of marketplace that I call *behavioral futures markets*.”¹³⁸ Some have argued that such conditions require us to demarcate the contemporary moment from preceding economic history with the term “platform capitalism.”¹³⁹ In contrast to industrial capitalism which relies upon producing physical commodities, platform capitalism is dependent

¹³⁶ Daniel Trottier, *Social Media as Surveillance : Rethinking Visibility in a Converging World* (London, [England] ; Routledge, 2016), 158.

¹³⁷ Burnside, “Targeted.”

¹³⁸ Shoshanna Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019): 14.

¹³⁹ Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2017).

upon the manufacture and sale of data about users' activities online. This is part of the economic background that shapes how TIs come together. As a model dependent upon user-produced content, I also think it plays a modest role in determining some of that content. As remarked earlier, TIs tend to be rather prolific in their posting, something also generally true of psychotic subjects. Platform capitalism works by encouraging all users to generate more data and TIs are an extreme instance of this general tendency. The primary distinction between the two terms is the scope and Zuboff's emphasis on the capacity to use data to train consumers' offline behavior. There is also an emphasis on the multivalent factors that have accelerated the development of surveillance capitalism.¹⁴⁰

Introducing surveillance capitalism into the analysis positions us to ask why it is that this form of surveillance receives so little attention from TIs relative to surveillance conducted by state actors. In contrast to the NSA, CIA, or FBI, entities like Google or Facebook are rarely, if ever invoked in TI narratives. While there are probably many factors influencing this, one compelling explanation is that the metonymic linkages forged between violence and the state are an important aspect of what sustains TI fantasy. As a result, an incursion by a platform into an individual's private world to harvest their data lacks both the imaginary and symbolic support necessary for it to register as a transgressive act. Examining how the mechanisms of surveillance capitalism interact with state power is an important line of academic research that should be advanced further. For now, note only that the TI community affords state actors a particular place of privilege. As I argue later, the disproportionate emphasis placed on state actors is a consequence of TIs having foreclosed the possibility of certain modes of understanding how surveillance works. Having

¹⁴⁰Srinicek, *Platform Capitalism*, 341-344.

outlined some of the other scholarly approaches for understanding where the TI community has emerged from, I now move to my account of Lacanian psychoanalysis and its uptake within rhetorical theory.

2.8 Lacanian Psychoanalysis in Theory

Some may be skeptical of the potential for psychoanalysis to be useful in understanding digital culture. I contend that the value of Lacanian theory in relation to the TI community is that the latter offers a clarifying perspective with regard to how subjects become invested in and motivated by signification. As you will see in the conclusion of this chapter as well as those later on, psychoanalytic theory is particularly adept at explaining how the TI community coheres through the failures and foreclosure of meaning. Here I argue that Lacan's notion of psychosis better enables onlookers to better understand the absence of doubt from TI discourse and their tendency to coalesce around some central structure vindicating their belief. Before delving into the specifics of his conception of psychosis, I will outline a few of the core ideas structuring Lacan's approach to psychoanalysis.

2.8.1 The unconscious and the subject

Famously calling for a "return to Freud," Lacan's development of the unconscious differs significantly from popular understandings of the term as referring to some thought or memory that evades the awareness of the subject. For Lacan, the notion of an "unconscious thought" is "a

contradiction in terms.”¹⁴¹ Instead, he pushes us to understand the unconscious as “that part of concrete discourse qua transindividual which is not at the subject’s disposal in reestablishing the continuity of his conscious discourse.”¹⁴² In other words, the unconscious is something external to the subject. The unconscious plays a role in the constitution of subjectivity at a level that resists reduction to either individual or group psychology. Perhaps Lacan’s most famous formulation on the topic is the aphorism that “the unconscious is structured like a language.”¹⁴³ This observation is meant as an analogical comparison between unconscious and natural language, insofar as both are systems of reference that operate on differentiation between symbols to function. The key difference is that language is governed by rigid rules of signification for its operation, whereas the unconscious is not.¹⁴⁴ Elsewhere, Lacan identifies this structuring as stemming from “the combinatory powers that orders its [language’s] equivocations” and compares this to similar work on “completely unconscious systems” conducted by ethnographers and philosophers.¹⁴⁵ In other words, an order and consistency eventually emerges from otherwise contingent significations through repetition. The unconscious is a kind of repository of all potential meanings that could be attributed to “a sign to have intelligible meaning” but “does not require a subject nor a conception of interiority.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 215.

¹⁴² Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 214.

¹⁴³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 48.

¹⁴⁴ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 53.

¹⁴⁵ Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 223.

¹⁴⁶ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 52.

This account of the unconscious requires further elaboration about the nature of the subject in psychoanalytic thought. Lacan posits a fragmented subject, meaning that they are defined by a failure to achieve equivocation between their experience and representations of themselves. Perhaps the most famous elaboration of this premise can be found in his discussion the mirror stage. In it, a child looks at its specular image in the mirror and “anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage.”¹⁴⁷ The child, however, fails to attain total mastery over this specular image, observing some unassimilable remainder that endures beyond the child’s efforts. This is taken as an exemplary instance of how subjects relate to the signifier taken to be coextensive with themselves in ordinary talk.¹⁴⁸ This is the inaugural moment of the child’s entry into the realm of symbols and the meanings they accrete.

The child rejects absolute identification with the image in the mirror and is its first experience with desire. From a Lacanian perspective, it is also the subject’s first experience of something cannot be captured in signification. Desire is mediated through the field of language.¹⁴⁹ Specifically, the subject must represent its desire through signification. Such signification and the desideratum in question are not coextensive, resulting in some unattainable remainder. We can view Lacan’s mirror stage as an allegory dramatizing how subjects enter the world of language and its relation to the visual field.¹⁵⁰ Lacan says, “the subject’s relationship to the world is a mirror

¹⁴⁷ Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 76.

¹⁴⁸ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 32.

¹⁴⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), 14.

¹⁵⁰ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 53.

relation.”¹⁵¹ This is Lacan’s sense of castration, insofar as entry into language and the social world of other language-users always denies the child the experience of the wholeness it had already inhabited. The signifier acts upon the subject and becomes a limit condition for its own satisfaction. Signification necessarily both includes and excludes some elements in its operation and this encounter with impotence is castration. Following this encounter, they experience what Christian Lundberg calls “feigned unicity,” which “means that discourse is a contingently situated act of labor connecting signifiers and representations with their referents and providing the illusion of communion between subjects and their others.”¹⁵² This is also how a subject “imagines a unified social field,” in which there is coherence and order instead of fragmentation. In other words, whether it is suturing together moments of consciousness or the wider social terrain, the subject is constantly constructing a wholeness that is not actually present in their experience.

2.8.2 Rhetorical theory’s reception of Lacan

Lacan discusses rhetoric throughout his career and frequently draws upon figures like Quintilian and Augustine from the canon of rhetorical theory in order to elaborate his own position. At various moments in his work, he also identifies a whole slew of rhetorical tropes that could inform a psychoanalytic intervention.¹⁵³ Lundberg has developed a reading of Lacan as rhetorical theorist, one who offered a way of understanding how trope structures the symbolic economy through which subjects come to exchange signs with one another. Derived from *tropos* or “turning”

¹⁵¹ Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 87.

¹⁵² Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 3.

¹⁵³ Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 222.

in Attic Greek, Lundberg identifies the role of trope in Lacan's work as not just describing the formal structure by which subjects relate to language but also as a condition of possibility for social life.¹⁵⁴ He writes, "all language is 'troped' because it relies on the functions of metonymy to establish differentiation and connection and on the work of metaphor to establish condensation and reference." Direct reference is an impossibility, due to language operating as a system of combinatory differentiations. Each attempt at reference falls short of the thing it is supposed to capture our attention. Using this insight, he develops an account of Lacanian theory that pushes back against the reception of Lacan's work in comparative literature and cultural studies by focusing on the role of trope in Lacan's broader theoretical approach.

Calling this approach tropological, Lundberg makes a distinction between a general and specific economy of trope.¹⁵⁵ The subject is initially lacking in being and so attempts to coordinate itself with the representations of itself it receives in the external world. These efforts to coordinate oneself in relation to these symbols is what triggers a long series of catachrestic substitutions that make up the life of the subject. This is an account of the general economy since it describes the process by which subjects encounter the gap between themselves and the signs that constitute their social world. Specific economies "are discrete configurations of tropes that individuals and groups take up in assuming public identitarian commitments."¹⁵⁶ In other words, a specific economy consists of those concrete relations in public that occur through investment in particular narratives about their position in the world and how they ought to relate to one another.

¹⁵⁴ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 73.

¹⁵⁵ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 74.

¹⁵⁶ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 74.

TI discourse is a specific economy that I believe can provide more general insight into how subjects relate (or fail to relate) to one another in an increasingly mediated world. TIs perform some of these failures in an especially clear way that makes them serve as instructive cases for how platforms, social networks, and the decentralization of information online work in tandem. While TIs may seem like an extreme case, they actually engage in many behaviors that are regarded as commonplace for interaction online.

2.8.3 Lacan's orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real

This point makes an excellent segue into a discussion of how Lacan accounts for the experience of the subject by reference to the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. These are three categories or registers that together comprise the experience of the subject. Though Lacan may place different degrees of emphasis on each order during different stages of his career, all three play a constant role in the development of his system. There have been debates in rhetorical theory about which order is best suited for rhetorical inquiry, but in general rhetoricians have focused on the Symbolic as a source for generative insights.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ An early colloquy in the field on whether emphasis ought to be placed on the Imaginary or Symbolic can be found in Joshua Gunn, "Refitting Fantasy: Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity, and Talking to the Dead," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 1 (February 1, 2004): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0033563042000206808>; Christian Lundberg, "The Royal Road Not Taken: Joshua Gunn's 'Refitting Fantasy: Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity and Talking to the Dead' and Lacan's Symbolic Order," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 4 (November 1, 2004): 495–500, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0033563042000304025>; Joshua Gunn, "On Dead Subjects: A Rejoinder to Lundberg on (a) Psychoanalytic Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 4 (November 1, 2004): 501–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0033563042000304034>.

The Imaginary refers to a specular realm of wholeness, in which subjects “impute content to language’s formal charges.”¹⁵⁸ In other words, the subject prescribes some definite and total meaning to a signifier, providing it with a signified to render it meaningful. The completeness of this process is illusory. The force driving these habits of signification that enable this illusory process to occur via the repetitive labor of trope is what Lacan identifies as *jouissance*.¹⁵⁹ *Jouissance* is a French word conventionally left untranslated in English as it lacks an equivalent term, though “enjoyment” is sometimes used as a substitute. *Jouissance* is “that which serves no purpose,” but enables a stasis to obtain in the subject.¹⁶⁰ *Jouissance* serves no purpose in a narrow sense, insofar as it is indifferent to the specific site chosen for its exercise.¹⁶¹ Even so, its operation is a condition of possibility for the “affective labor that organizes the subject and comports it to the world through practices of repetition.” Russell Grigg writes, “that symptoms have meaning and are a source of satisfaction was Freud’s discovery, which Lacan formulates by stating that a symptom is a source of *jouissance* whose meaning is closed off to the subject.”¹⁶² In other words, subjects unconsciously organize themselves around processes of signification. Lundberg describes *jouissance* as an active agent, working when subjects “slide” a signifier towards some concrete signified.¹⁶³ The capacity for *jouissance* to act on the subject is a result of the entry into

¹⁵⁸ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 29.

¹⁵⁹ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 107-108.

¹⁶⁰ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, 3.

¹⁶¹ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 108.

¹⁶² Russell Grigg, “The Engima of *Jouissance*,” in *The Literary Lacan: From Literature to Lituraterre and Beyond*, ed. Santana Biswas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 296.

¹⁶³ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 115.

language.¹⁶⁴ Thus, while there is no purely denotative language that enables direct reference to a thing independent of a broader symbolic context, subjects may often act or speak *as if* such has been achieved, with *jouissance* acting on the subject as a limit to be transgressed, as a “negative instance.”¹⁶⁵ Reaching back to the Imaginary, habitual operation under the pretense of completeness is what facilitates the formation of the subject’s relationship to their ego-ideal or self-representation.¹⁶⁶ The formation of the subject’s ego results from a confrontation with the Other. Not knowing what the Other desires of them, the subjects cathects to the route of least resistance and crafts an ego-ideal that correlates to the mixed, sometimes contradictory messages they receive from the Other.¹⁶⁷

One can observe this “sliding” of a signifier into a signified as a regular feature of TI media. For example, Dr. Tomo Shibata alleges that microwave technology is deployed actively against innocent people by police officers in order to manipulate their thought.¹⁶⁸ Specifically, Shibata refers to “electronic control weapons.” Police do use “electronic control weapons” but the specific construction deployed by Shibata is one which refers to items like tasers or other devices which

¹⁶⁴ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, 24.

¹⁶⁵ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, 3.

¹⁶⁶ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 53.

¹⁶⁷ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 256.

¹⁶⁸ Ramola D, “Groundbreaking Bill Proposal Prohibiting Organized Covert Torture Effected With Electronic Weapons....,” Medium, November 27, 2018, <https://medium.com/@EccEveryday/groundbreaking-bill-proposal-prohibiting-organized-covert-torture-effected-with-electronic-weapons-7fb1a0c0380c>.

rely upon electricity in order to subdue a target.¹⁶⁹ Shibata, however, takes the term to refer to a method of mind control. The construction itself is an abstraction with a range of possible referents. Rather than understand the term to be connotative, Shibata takes it as denotative. That is, she understands it as correlating to her own private conception of what such things could be. In Lacanian terms, Shibata derives *jouissance* from the belief that the term is metonymically connected to the Real, when in fact it is derived from the illusory completeness provided by the Imaginary. Such “sliding” is not unique to TIs but cases like the one identified here are numerous and make for clear examples. This makes for a good moment to transition to the next register, the Symbolic.

The Symbolic is the order of signification and the protocols governing the usage of such. Thus, language usage as well as the conventions governing it fall within this realm.¹⁷⁰ In contrast to the Imaginary, which resists any predefined rules or conventions, the Symbolic is governed by protocols shaping how it operates.¹⁷¹ Lacan connects the Symbolic to his notion of “the Other” insofar as the Other is the “locus of speech.”¹⁷² This is meant in part to emphasize the radically exterior character of language and its role in mediating the subject’s imaginary relation to itself and world. The Symbolic “sets the basic parameters that organize human discourse, and authorizes referential pretension,” the latter term referring to the notion that a signifier and an object are in

¹⁶⁹ Executive Office of Public Safety and Security, “Electronic Control Weapons,” accessed February 23, 2021, <https://www.mass.gov/electronic-control-weapons>.

¹⁷⁰ Yannis Grammatopoulos, *Above the Ground and Beneath the Clouds: Schizophrenia in Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 51.

¹⁷¹ Grammatopoulos, 51.

¹⁷² Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 358-9.

fact coextensive.”¹⁷³ The subject’s desire “is the desire of the Other,” meaning that all of the subject’s desires are subject to articulation within this social field.¹⁷⁴ This orientation towards language is what enables this strain of psychoanalytic theory’s resistance to reducing psychic processes to either individual or collective level. As Žižek writes:

the Social, the field of social practices and socially held beliefs, is not simply on a different level from individual experience, but something to which *the individual him- or herself has to relate, something which the individual him-or herself has to experience as an order which is minimally “reified”, externalized.*¹⁷⁵

I argue in chapter four, that the habit of documenting gangstalking as proof of conspiracy is an attempt to verify before the Other that a TI has encountered conditions that satisfy the fantasy of the TI. It is in this sense that the Other functions as what Derek Hook calls “a verifying authority,” as a sort of impersonal witness providing recognition to what has occurred.¹⁷⁶ The sense of an impersonal witness registering one’s conduct is why Lacan calls the Other “the very foundation of intersubjectivity.”¹⁷⁷ As mentioned earlier, the subject is unsure of what the Other desires, so it devises an ego-ideal that amalgamates these competing messages. This leads to repeated efforts to adjust itself in relation to the Other, though this is the very process that sustains desire.

¹⁷³ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 29.

¹⁷⁴ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 235.

¹⁷⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2002): lxxii.

¹⁷⁶ Derek Hook, *Six Moments in Lacan: Communication and Identification in Psychology and Psychoanalysis*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 15, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315452616>.

¹⁷⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 13.

The last order is the Real, which refers to that which resists incorporation into language. The category of the Real is what prevents Lacan's theory from being characterized as structuralist, insofar as it is the realm of contingency and failure of communication.¹⁷⁸ The Real is a missed encounter, a failure for to assimilate something into to the signifying chain. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan introduces the categories of *tuche* and *automaton* to explain these dynamics. Taking the terms from Aristotle's *Physics*, *automaton* refers to the repetition of words in a signifying chain and is what enables the operation of the chain. *Tuche*, in contrast, indicates the rupture the Real.¹⁷⁹ Lacan connects the Real to trauma, insofar as the object of trauma is some unrepresentable core that the subject continually tries but fails to convey.¹⁸⁰ *Automaton* papers over the irruption created by the encounter with the Real and is what enables the assimilation of new occurrences into language. Psychoanalysis ultimately seeks to understand how desiring subjects respond to such encounters with the Real.¹⁸¹ Subjects cathect to those objects which seemingly have a closer connection to the Real. I argue in the next section that for TIs, this means those objects associated with the Other of the Other that smooth over the foreclosed signifier through investment in other metonymic linkages. For this to be made clear, however, an account of psychosis is needed.

¹⁷⁸ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 90-91.

¹⁷⁹ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 53.

¹⁸⁰ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 60.

¹⁸¹ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 62.

2.8.4 Psychosis

Psychosis” and “psychotic” are two words in English that carry imprecise and extreme connotations that require clarification. For Lacan, psychosis is a mode of relating to a signifier. Each subject has an underlying psychic structure with regard to how they tend to relate to the Other. In Lacanian terms, the signifier that assumes this position prohibiting the subject from unmediated access to the Symbolic is called the name-of-the-father.¹⁸² This relation is described as *Verwerfung* and often translated as “foreclosure.” The psychotic subject forecloses a signifier that creates a separation between themselves and the symbolic order. To foreclose a signifier means that there simply is no possibility of it finding a place within language. Importantly, this is not limited to purely words, but also meaning. To be more specific, “the foreclosure of the signifier does not preclude an economy of meaning but instead removes the operation of metaphor while leaving metonymy in its place.”¹⁸³ A foreclosed signifier sits beyond the limits of what can be expressed for the subject. Subsequently, the psychotic subject is still able to locate meaning in the Symbolic but such meaning is bound by metonymic practices of interpretation. Foreclosure should be contrasted with *Verneinung* or “repression,” in which a subject fails to grasp some potential meaning that could also be attributed to it.¹⁸⁴ In all speech, something is included and excluded

¹⁸² Russell Grigg, *Lacan, Language, and Philosophy*, SUNY Series, Insinuations (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 9.

¹⁸³ Matheson, “Psychotic Discourse,” 194.

¹⁸⁴ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 52.

and the entirety of one's imaginary or intended meaning cannot be spoken.¹⁸⁵ Repression is the inability to see some of the potential meanings inherent to the signifier.

Psychotic subjects respond to the hole that is created by foreclosure with a distinctive certainty. Bruce Fink writes, "While the psychotic may agree that what he or she heard or saw was not audible or visible to others...this may make it all the more special to him or her: he or she has been *chosen* among all others to hear or see it, or it concerns only him or her."¹⁸⁶ While the name-of-the-father need not always be foreclosed, psychotic subjects attempt to communicate something beyond the limits of language or any conventional social link.¹⁸⁷ Annie Rogers describes the psychotic subject as one that "takes the position of witness to a ghastly Other in social isolation."¹⁸⁸ As a result, psychotic subjects are "unable to signify, in relation to questions of existence." Relaying a conversation with a patient's sibling on this question, Rogers writes "something will appear as enigmatic, as strange and disturbing, imposed at the place where there is nothing *about her private, subjective experience*. Even her own thoughts can be utterly foreign."

At their core, TIs are plagued by questions concerning who is tormenting them and why they in particular have been selected for such mistreatment. The entire position is organized around such unanswerable questions. For onlookers, the matter is further complicated by an uncertainty as to the extent to which the occurrences that TI report as happening to them are in fact occurring. TIs can only make meaning of phenomena like gang stalking as coded threats to their personhood.

¹⁸⁵ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, 20.

¹⁸⁶ Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 84.

¹⁸⁷ Rogers, *Incandescent Alphabets: Psychosis and the Enigma of Language*, 200.

¹⁸⁸ Rogers, *Incandescent Alphabets*, 4.

According to one influential study of complaints characteristic of the TI community, the overwhelming majority of TI complaints about stalking are either improbable, impossible, or both.¹⁸⁹ Yet incorporated into their discourse is an obsession with real military experiments with mind control, kidnappings committed domestically by the CIA and other events that are invoked to bolster their convictions. We can understand the production and consumption of TI media as a response to this hole or void in the symbolic order. They elevate the importance of these objects because they appear to be closer to the Real.

A gambit of this dissertation is that a shared foreclosure of a signifier can also function as a social link and serve as the basis of community. Dean writes:

Today, in part because of the internet and in part because of market-driven publishing a text that might have once remained solitary, like Schreber's, can become part of a group, a scene, a genre a movement....Networked information and communication technologies end this isolation, allowing for the emergence of a discourse of the psychotic, a discourse that reacts to a hole with certainty, fear, distrust, and a permeating sense of meaning.¹⁹⁰

TIs are united in their consensus that surveillance dominates our everyday lives, that the state is capable of knowing everything that there is to know about us, and that representatives of the state regularly intrude in their everyday lives. This purported lack of safety and assumed position is the shared link enabling the mediated connection between TIs. TI discourse forecloses the possibility of safety against a militaristic surveillance state and enables a certainty that these assaults are indeed occurring. It may be helpful to think of foreclosure here as a radical exclusion

¹⁸⁹ Sheridan and James, "Complaints of Group-Stalking ('Gang-Stalking')," 205–6.

¹⁹⁰ Jodi Dean, "The Psychotic Discourse of 9/11 Truth," in *Rhetoric in Neoliberalism*, ed. Kim Hong Nguyen, Rhetoric, Politics and Society (Chicago, IL: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 180, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-39850-1_8.

of alternative explanations. Instead of maintaining even the possibility that some aspects of the phenomena in TI media might not be occurring as described, TI media instead insist that these programs are pervasive and occurring in plain sight without notice.

Moreover, this fantastic structure invites deep questions concerning personal identity and the capacity for self-knowledge. Generalizing about the psychotic subject via Schreber's memoirs, Lacan writes "there is literally a fragmentation of their identity, and the subject is undoubtedly shocked by this attack upon their personal identity, but this is how it is, *I can only bear witness*, he [Schreber] says, *to things that have been revealed to me.*"¹⁹¹ The usage of the passive voice by Schreber distances a personal responsibility for what the details of what he is describing. As Rogers notes, psychosis can be understood as an attempt to create a second ego, an identity entirely separate from how a person comports themselves when undisturbed.¹⁹² Matheson also observes that, "all subjects craft an ego as a surrogate token to circulate in the Symbolic, an object not wholly self nor Other. The psychotic subject is distinct in the refusal to fully identify with this token."¹⁹³

This refusal to identify with their ego as surrogate also helps account for the persistent presence of mind-control as a regular part of TI narratives. Mason observes that "mind control narratives assume an autonomous independent subject existing before mind control experiments" and "they also unconsciously represent uncertainties about the autonomy of the subject because of

¹⁹¹ Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 97. Italics in original.

¹⁹² Rogers, *Incandescent Alphabets*, 39.

¹⁹³ Calum Lister Matheson, "Psychotic Discourse," 199.

mind control's claimed ability to alter personality structures and identity.”¹⁹⁴ The fantasy enabled by TI media is one in which the targeted person is of particular significance to the Other and even responsible for organizing the minute details of their life, denying them any personal responsibility for their occurrence. The investment in this alternative fantasy is enabled by the foreclosure of the name-of-the-father. Lacan describes the subject of psychosis as experiencing “language devoid of dialectic,” meaning there is no negation or pushback on the fantasies advanced.¹⁹⁵

As Dean writes in her work on alien abduction narratives at the end of the 20th-century “conspiracy theory is everyday politics.”¹⁹⁶ A similar observation has been made by Susan Lepselter about alien abductions, noting that they can be understood as reflecting everyday experiences in sublimated form.¹⁹⁷ Dean's work functions as a useful model for understanding how “technological, globalized, corporatized” media facilitate the popular uptake of conspiracy theory narratives.¹⁹⁸ Dean argues that abductees “use their experiences to produce meanings, meanings that within some networks...are accepted, transmitted, and respected as credible testimonies, as knowledge.”¹⁹⁹ Though Dean took some criticism at the time of writing for her seeming equivocation between the credibility of different sources within media, it anticipates a

¹⁹⁴Fran Mason, “A Poor Person's Cognitive Mapping,” in *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America* (New York, NY, US: New York University Press, 2002), 53.

¹⁹⁵ Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 231.

¹⁹⁶ Dean, *Aliens in America*, 14.

¹⁹⁷ Susan Claudia Lepselter, *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

¹⁹⁸ Dean, *Aliens in America*, 18.

¹⁹⁹ Dean, *Aliens in America*, 176.

later movement within media studies towards examining what the consequences of the decline in symbolic efficiency are within the context of mass media.²⁰⁰ The rise of UFO abduction phenomena and the TI movement have some parallels, insofar as both have clearly benefited from the growth of the Internet and an increased reliance upon user-produced content. Both also concern experiences that those subject to them frequently insist are incommunicable. Yet there are significant differences between them as instances of conspiracy theories that circulate through mass media but are used by adherents to account for everyday life.

Matheson makes this a similar point in his work on the sovereign citizens movement, offering a rhetorical reading of such matter as an antidote to its excesses. Their discourse is psychotic because they are unable to understand their claims as rhetorical. In other words, the potential for metaphorical displacement beyond literal interpretation of their claims is calcified. Instead, the metonymic linkages in their speech result in them taking their narratives at face value. As another psychotic community, TIs are performing a similar maneuver. TI narratives' focus on militarism and the surveillance state are indicative of the sublimation of these forces into everyday American life. Earlier, I noted that psychotic subjects do something similar in regard to mediating aspects of everyday life into fantastic narratives. The psychotic subject elevates some potential meaning or understanding that typically does not register as a possible implication by other people. Others may have knowledge or awareness of this potential meaning, but they tend to pay such limited attention. In this case, TIs achieve this by discussing the potential for technology to surveil its users and directly effect changes in a person's personality, as well as the limited recourse available to redress these conditions. As I mentioned before, these misgivings do have some

²⁰⁰Roger Luckhurst, "Slackademia," *Science Fiction Studies* 25, no. 3 (1998): 535.

legitimate basis and have been taken up as causes for concern in both scholarly and popular discourse. However, TIs elevate the significance of these facts to such an extent that it is the distinctive feature of their public personas. Group surveillance is a constant and the repression of these meanings by other users of technology is what enable TIs to adopt a position of marginality in relation to more mainstream society. The exaggerated emphasis on these facts is part of what seems to be driving a sense of the immanence of incidents like gangstalking or tapping one's home. Indeed, sometimes TIs will refer to the concatenation of such occurrences as "the targeted individual program," suggesting that there is a singular, centralized entity that is responsible for their suffering.

Positing a singular actor orchestrating the torture of everyday people should make the connections between TI media and conspiracy discourse clear. TIs believe that they have found and are pursued by an occluded power, one that is actually the lynchpin to understanding how the totality of operations of power in society actually functions in the Real. In psychoanalytic terms, Žižek describes this position as having identified the "big Other behind the big Other."²⁰¹ The subject maintains a paranoid or cynical distance from the Other in order to maintain a belief in the notion "of a big other that actually exists, in the Real, not merely as symbolic fiction." The meaning of this claim becomes clearer when juxtaposed with what Lacan ironically identifies as the "big secret of psychoanalysis," that "there is no Other of the Other."²⁰² "What does this mean," he asks, "if it is not that no signifier exists that can guarantee any concrete, serial manifestation of signifiers." Lacan intends to convey that the subject cannot necessarily rely on the efficacy of the

²⁰¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, (London ; Verso, 1999): 362.

²⁰² Lacan, *Desire and Its Interpretation*, 298.

Other understood as effective symbolic fiction. In other words, even the Other itself is predicated upon lack and prone to failure. To compensate for the underlying hole in the Symbolic, the conspiracy theorist produces an alternative symbolic structure that papers over the void. This results in an imagined social sphere animated by deterministic forces. This conclusion is not too far off in attitude from a commonplace observation about conspiracy theory, that they are more comforting to accept than the outsized role that contingency and chance play in the world's affairs.

Concerning mapping Žižek's remarks on the Other of the Other has resonance with Frederic Jameson's discussion of cognitive mapping, which he describes as a "modernist strategy, which retains an impossible concept of totality whose representational failure seemed...as useful and productive as its (inconceivable) success."²⁰³ In other words, it is a narrative strategy for inserting oneself into an otherwise unrepresentable whole. In another context, Jameson observes "conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content."²⁰⁴ Critiquing this position, Fran Mason posits that it might be more fitting to call conspiracy theory a "cyborg's cognitive mapping," because "the conspiratorial subject represents a postmodern self incapable of critical distance, the result of which is a self-reflexive subjectivity that is itself a reproduction of postmodern culture."²⁰⁵ If this sounds familiar, it is because cybernetics has influenced Lacan's

²⁰³ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 1991): 409.

²⁰⁴ Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Nelson Cary and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1988), 356.

²⁰⁵ Fran Mason, "A Poor Person's Cognitive Mapping," in *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America* (New York, NY, US: New York University Press, 2002), 53-54.

thinking, particularly in regard to the assumption that a subject or observer will be unable to adequately map their own position.²⁰⁶ As I explore in Ch. 3, TIs attempt to escape this through locating guarantors for their identity external to themselves and identifying with their mediated representations.

I have made the case for understanding TI discourse as psychotic in nature, insofar as it is organized around a radical foreclosure of certain meanings in its attendant Imaginary. Specifically, TIs are incapable of understanding themselves as anything other than subject to unrelenting harassment and surveillance on the part of the state. The foreclosure of a sense of indifference to their existence by the state eliminates contingency in how they relate to the world around them. It also assures an attendant feeling that the campaign against them is imminent, ongoing, and widespread.

Describing the TI phenomenon as a psychotic cultural structure means identifying a particular way in which it configures those who take it up as a belief. Yet the particular features of the delusion are contingent and formed by more global changes in contemporary life. As I argued earlier, part of what shapes the TI discourse is an inability to repress the potential surveillance inherent to the use of digital media. Another factor, which I explore in the next chapter, is a gradual shift in the manner in which users connect online, broadly deemed the rise of Web 2.0.” There, I

²⁰⁶ Céline Lafontaine, “The Cybernetic Matrix of ‘French Theory,’” *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 5 (September 1, 2007): 27–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407084637>; Lydia H. Liu, “The Cybernetic Unconscious: Rethinking Lacan, Poe, and French Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 2 (January 1, 2010): 288–320, <https://doi.org/10.1086/648527>; Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, “From Information Theory to French Theory: Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, and the Cybernetic Apparatus,” *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 1 (September 1, 2011): 96–126, <https://doi.org/10.1086/661645>.

explore how a shift towards an increased reliance on user-produced content is a condition of possibility for the growth of TI media.

Because of its concerns with signification and recognition, psychoanalytic theory may be particularly acute in tending to some of these conditions enabling the proliferation of TI media. Fundamentally, TIs believe that they have located an underlying structure that organizes society and produces an obscene violence but is not visible to others. They report on its traces, improvising upon received narratives whenever capturing and circulating another instance of the conspiracy. Yet rarely are such narratives tempered with an awareness of the point of origin of these ideas. The participatory aspect of this online community makes it especially easy for TIs to insert themselves into what is otherwise an unsignifiable totality, reducing a whole that resists complete description into some sort of narrative. It is not merely the ability to produce that narrative but publish it into a broader symbolic network outside themselves that enables the TI phenomenon. By making the narratives public, they become accessible for others. Having made the case that the TI phenomenon is a psychotic cultural structure, I now explore how this shapes them as a community.

3.0 A Social Link for a Private Language: TIs, Platforms and the Delusional Metaphor

Online communities have been around nearly as long as the digital communication technologies that enable them. They arguably even predate the development of the World Wide Web.²⁰⁷ More recently, Facebook has pivoted their marketing strategy towards emphasizing the online communities on hosted the platform. During the 2020 Superbowl, Facebook spent \$10 million dollars on a minute-long ad touting the diversity of “Facebook Groups,” a feature hosting online communities on their platform.²⁰⁸ TIs are just one of many groups that utilize Facebook to build community. In May 2014, Myron May posted one of his final comments in a Facebook group called “Targeted Individuals International” before going on to commit a mass shooting at a Florida State University library. The comment read, “Also, has anyone here ever been encouraged to kill by your handler with a promise of freedom?”²⁰⁹ May then proceeded to mail materials to another prominent TI that he had met through the group, Rene Pittman Mitchell.²¹⁰ Those documents

²⁰⁷ Jenny Preece, Diane Maloney-Krichmar, and Chadia Abras, “History of Online Communities,” in *Encyclopedia of Community: From Village to Virtual World*, ed. Karen Christiansen and David Levinson (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), 1029–30.

²⁰⁸ Salvador Rodriguez, “Mark Zuckerberg Shifted Facebook’s Focus to Groups after the 2016 Election, and It’s Changed How People Use the Site,” CNBC, February 16, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/16/zuckerbergs-focus-on-facebook-groups-increases-facebook-engagement.html>.

²⁰⁹ “FSU Shooter Myron May Left Message: ‘I Do Not Want to Die in Vain,’” NBC News, November 21, 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/fsu-shooter-myron-may-left-message-i-do-not-want-n253436>.

²¹⁰ “Letters Detail Thoughts of Gunman Killed at Florida University,” *Reuters*, November 21, 2014, sec. U.S., <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-florida-shooting-idUKKCN0J51WA20141121>.

outlined the basis of his belief that he was being surveilled by the federal government. Mitchell operates a blog that aggregates news related to TI interests. The blog also prominently advertises several books Mitchell has authored in the page's header. Another prominent case involves a TI named Gavin Long. Long had cultivated a large online following discussing ideas associated with the TI movement before committing tragic acts of violence.²¹¹ Even print books about gangstalking and targeting like those written by Mitchell have likely found their audiences through some kind of online avenue.²¹² These are some of the ways that platforms have enabled the proliferation of TI media.

The long permissive attitudes toward moderating content on these platforms has been shifting. Recently, YouTube has implemented a policy change that bans all content questioning the efficacy or safety of the COVID-19 vaccine from their platform.²¹³ Despite the adoption of new content moderation policies on social media platforms meant to address misinformation, like QAnon and denialism around the 2012 Sandy Hook shootings, the TI movement has been purged from few, if any, social media platforms.²¹⁴ The examples in the preceding paragraph in tandem

²¹¹ The New York Times, "The Baton Rouge Shooter, Gavin Long, Saw World 'Run by Devils' (Published 2016)," *The New York Times*, July 18, 2016, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/19/us/on-social-media-baton-rouge-suspect-saw-world-run-by-devils.html>.

²¹² "Renee Pittman Mitchell – MIND CONTROL TECHNOLOGY," accessed October 11, 2021, <https://youarenotmybigbrother.blog/category/renee-pittman-mitchell-2/>.

²¹³ Davey Alba, "YouTube Bans All Anti-Vaccine Misinformation.," *The New York Times*, September 29, 2021, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/29/technology/youtube-anti-vaxx-ban.html>.

²¹⁴ Sheera Frenkel, "QAnon Is Still Spreading on Facebook, despite a Ban.," *The New York Times*, December 18, 2020, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/18/technology/qanon-is-still-spreading-on-facebook-despite-a-ban.html>; "Twitter Bans Alex Jones and Infowars for Abusive Behaviour," *BBC News*, September 6, 2018,

indicate the importance of online interaction in the growth of the TI movement, as well as how such online activity has shaped the movement's distinct discursive character. Many of the core ideas and imagery associated with the TI movement are not new and find their origins in Cold War anxieties about technology.²¹⁵ The construction "targeted individual," however, condenses many of those themes into an identity. In other words, while some of the qualities associated with the term may not be wholly new, "targeted individual" can be taken up as a discernable position within a broader network of possible identities. In the past, before the term came into wider usage, it is possible that there have been some who felt that they had experienced phenomena similar to what TIs report (e.g., feelings of being stalked, having one's thought manipulated, being assaulted with some kind of energy weapon, etc.). There was not, however, was a shared and public vocabulary for the assertion that the paranoia and harassment TIs experience extends beyond themselves and is in fact a feature of the world. Rather than being resigned to a private, nagging feeling that they are being targeted by the state or something else, the TI narrative is encountered as a potential explanation and something external to the subject.

Even though the connection between social media platforms and the development of this new term is apparent, it is still unclear how best to conceptualize the relationship between the digital environment and TI media. Joshua Gunn writes that "psychotic rhetoric" as an "emergent *genre* and *style* of discourse," benefits from "the constant and relentless parade of immediacy...of social networking," such that it produces "the kind of discourse of someone who is constantly

sec. US & Canada, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45442417>; "Twitter Suspends 70,000 Accounts Linked to QAnon," *BBC News*, January 12, 2021, sec. Technology, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-55638558>.

²¹⁵ See Jeffrey Sconce's extensive discussion of these connections in his chapter on TIs in *The Technical Delusion*.

speaking certitudes.”²¹⁶ Gunn partly roots this effect in “social and political acceleration, hastened by technological innovations of speed.”²¹⁷ An example of this can be seen in a study of so-called “mind control experiences” on the internet. The researchers observe that participation-based mechanisms online have enabled otherwise “disenfranchised” persons “to create a complex, dynamic and information-rich community that serves to support and inform similarly affected people within the confines of a world view driven by potentially psychotic symptoms.”²¹⁸ Published in 2006, these “mind control” communities are no longer anchored by a few blogs and personal websites, but have instead been superseded by TI communities on platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. According to Anne Helmond, a process she terms “platformization” has made it so that both those previously independent sites and the platforms themselves are less sequestered and more readily integrated into each other.²¹⁹ Thus, the shift from diffusion to centralization is not particular to the TI community, but instead reflects broader changes in the growth of the internet.

In this chapter, I explore how such platforms facilitate the formation of a specific economy of trope online. In particular, I focus on how the emergence of TI discourse enables the cultivation of the TI identity in public. To do so, I conduct a rhetorical analysis of interactions between users on the platform Reddit’s message board or “subreddit” called “r/gangstalking.” Though there are plenty of other sites in which such contact between TIs occurs, r/gangstalking offers a diverse range of user-produced content, ranging from confessional posts to TI-inflected variants of popular

²¹⁶ Gunn, *Political Perversion*, 71.

²¹⁷ Gunn, *Political Perversion*, 70.

²¹⁸ Bell et al., “‘Mind Control’ Experiences on the Internet,” 91.

²¹⁹ Helmond, “The Platformization of the Web,” 5.

memes. Additionally, nearly all users post their content under some kind of pseudonym, providing them with an additional layer of anonymity in the semi-public space that is the subreddit.

I argue that we must understand TI discourse as indexing a profound paranoia about the nature of the social and that this is connected to its status as a kind of public delusion. Wolfgang Ernst observed that the notion of “the individual...seems to be coexistent with the discourse of privacy” and that “if the state of privacy is defined as being free from intrusion or disturbance in one’s private life or affairs, individual memory is degraded when it enters electronic circuits.”²²⁰ These suggestive remarks can attune us to what is peculiar about the posture adopted to within TI media. More specifically, Ernst has identified a tension inherent to liberalism that is embodied by the TI movement, namely the conditional nature of freedom from state interference. Moreover, TIs must publicly detail these violations of their privacy. These instances of privacy violation are often what spurs TIs to begin networking with one another within the semi-public sphere of platforms, as well as with those who seek to undermine their claims of harassment. Moreover, there is a confusion between media and reality that is a condition of the subreddit’s operation, insofar as TIs refuse to be “duped” or misled in their interactions on the platform. On this basis, I argue we ought to regard these activities as an instance of “uncanny infrastructure,” as detailed by Bernard Dionysius Geohagen.

²²⁰ Wolfgang Ernst, “Beyond the Rhetoric of Panopticism: Surveillance as Cybernetics,” in *CTRL [SPACE]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne, and Peter Weibel (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 462.

3.1 Situating TI contact

TI media is all over the internet but seems to flourish particularly on platforms in which people are meant to connect with one another. For example, there are regular conference calls held online by the group Targeted Massachusetts, in which anyone can call in and share their experiences with targeting or gang-stalking.²²¹ There are also numerous Facebook groups, Instagram accounts, Quora threads, and Pinterest boards, all of which are dedicated towards discussion of targeting. In these contexts, there are also many instances of imagined contact in which there is a lesser degree of interactivity. In articles, posts, or other online matter about targeting, it is very common to see scores of comments from users expressing their experience with similar phenomena. This is exemplified by the web page for Buchanan's editorial, where there are hundreds of comments from TIs seeking to meet other like them. Many of these comments detail experiences similar to what Buchanan describes in her editorial, insofar as they are narratives about targeting, gangstalking, and other linked phenomena. Some commenters even provide their personal contact information in these hopes that someone reading will be able to help them.²²²

As I have already detailed, the TI community is not limited strictly to interacting online and some organizations have leveraged their members to stage full on protests and demonstrations.²²³ Freedom for Targeted Individuals has hosted an annual "Targeted Individuals

²²¹ "Conference Calls," accessed October 7, 2021, *Targeted Massachusetts*, <https://targetedmassachusetts.org/conference-calls.html>.

²²² I personally have begun to receive unsolicited emails from TIs that reflect a similar tendency.

²²³ Targeted Individual Day, for example

Day,” typically in the last week of August. The organization’s site hosts several video montages of these in-person meetups, depicting people from all over the world holding signage related to the central concerns of the TI community.²²⁴ Targeted Justice’s site advertises packages to attend their meet-up in Austin, Texas which includes a commemorative t-shirt and planned activities like meeting with “legislators” and celebrating Cinco de Mayo.²²⁵ While I focus on online manifestations of the TI movement, these offline actors are important context.

3.2 TI discourse and collective authorship

In order to fully understand the how the TI tropic economy functions, it is essential to understand how digital platforms and psychotic structure work together in this context. The themes that TIs typically take up are “drive and *jouissance*-laden” topics connected to violence, torture, and exploitation.²²⁶ Such fixation is a consequence of a failure to differentiate themselves from the Symbolic, specifically in its capacity to function as a sort of impersonal witness that registers communicative acts.²²⁷ TIs view themselves as having been made to bear witness to gratuitous

²²⁴ “Targeted Individual Day 2020,” FFTI, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://www.freedomfortargetedindividuals.org/ti-day-2020>.

²²⁵ “Targeted Action 2021,” TARGETED JUSTICE, accessed October 7, 2021, <https://www.targetedjustice.com/targeted-action-2021.html>.

²²⁶ Michele Ribolsi, Jasper Feyaerts, and Stijn Vanheule, “Metaphor in Psychosis: On the Possible Convergence of Lacanian Theory and Neuro-Scientific Research,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (2015): 9, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00664>.

²²⁷ Hook, *Six Moments in Lacan: Communication and Identification in Psychology and Psychoanalysis*, 15.

harassment and violence without any accountability. Terms like “gangstalking” and “v2k” do not a priori signify anything without becoming habituated in speech as a kind of social link or bond. Lacan refers to discourse as a basic social link throughout *Seminar XX*, indicating that is the broader network of connections between signifiers that enables meaningful speech.²²⁸ In other words, “discourse” has a special connotation in Lacanian theory as something that is shared and mutually accessible by subjects. Nestor Braunstein writes that, “to enter into discourse is to engage in a link and, therefore, a loss of freedom. Madness creates an exception placing itself outside the exchange of speech, of discourses.”²²⁹ A tension seems to exist between arguing that the TI phenomenon is a psychotic cultural structure and Braunstein’s position that psychosis is by definition a departure from the ties of a social link. Braunstein’s remarks are helpful, yet it is unclear how we might reconcile them with the identity-forming discourses that have been deemed “psychotic” by other scholars.²³⁰

If we view TI discourse as a delusional metaphor that has propagated through digital media, I argue, this tension is resolved. This perspective allows us to better understand the appeal that such discourses might have for participants, as well as how such discourse shifts over time through collective authorship. In other words, TI discourse retains a consistency that enables us to talk about as a coherent body of ideas apart from any particular iteration. As a social link, however, it also enables a kind of paranoid speech that departs from widely held social conventions. Jodi Dean frames both official and unofficial accounts of what happened on September 11, 2001 as

²²⁸ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, 17.

²²⁹ Nestor Braunstein, “You Cannot Choose to Go Crazy,” in *Lacan on Madness: Madness, Yes You Can’t*, ed. Patricia Gherovici and Manya Steinkoler (New York: Routledge, 2015), 85.

²³⁰ In addition to my own work, see Dean, “The Psychotic Discourse of 9/11 Truth”; Matheson, “Psychotic Discourse.”

amounting to a confrontation with “the specific horror of the disintegration of the social link.”²³¹ The World Trade Center collapsing seemed unfathomable until it actually happened. Faced with this lack or hole in the Symbolic, “*jouissance* arises through connectivity, through the specificity and systematicity of the facts circling the hole of loss,” and this *jouissance* is sustained by “repetition, intensity, affect.” A similar dynamic is at work in TI media, wherein the existence of another person’s account of their experience as a TI can be taken as proof of the phenomenon’s general character and becomes an occasion to rehearse what TIs argue are the facts of their experience. The horror being confronted in the case of TIs is a sense a corrupt state is pursuing them personally. Even posts on r/gangstalking that challenge the reality of gangstalking or suggest that TIs take it less seriously have their message inverted. Skeptics and critics, then, count as further reason to maintain belief in the conspiracy. I return to this point about how some to refuse to be “deceived” by such views during my analysis of posts culled from r/gangstalking.

My intervention frames the media produced by TIs as a kind of collaborative narrative generated by its own adherents for the purpose of generating an alternative Symbolic that subsequently functions as a new social link. This alternate Symbolic becomes a site of intense affective investment, with the cost of foreclosing other possible attributions of meaning.²³² Colette Soler argues that we can observe such a gesture in Rousseau’s work, as it allowed for him to locate a “‘bad’ libido in the Other” and subsequently author an ideal order that served as a corrective.²³³ Another example of this can be found in Schreber’s “Order of the World,” according to Darian

²³¹ Dean, “The Psychotic Discourse of 9/11 Truth,” 162.

²³² Matheson, “Psychotic Discourse,” 201.

²³³ Colette Soler, *L'inconscient à ciel ouvert de la psychose*, (Paris: Presses universitaires du Mirail, 2002) in Darian Leader, *What Is Madness?* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 208.

Leader.²³⁴ I will discuss the specifics of Schreber's account in a moment. In both cases, the production of a kind of prosthetic symbolic enables the subject to stabilize what is otherwise an unregulated flow of jouissance.

In a chapter of *The Technical Delusion* that focuses on the cultural and scientific forbears that amalgamate and produce the TI conspiracy, Jeffrey Sconce observes that TI "forums function as collective delusions that provide a spectrum of individuals with a shared reference," though there is the caveat that "there is no therapist at the center to challenge the legitimacy of the TI scenario."²³⁵ Like the earlier "mind control experiences," TI media enable the generation of "complex support mechanisms without reference to a view of reality held by the authorities or even the mainstream of opinion."²³⁶ Though the authors of that paper do not make the following assertion, we can construe participation in both mind control and TI forums as symptomatic of a decline in symbolic efficiency, insofar as they evidence a fragmentation of consensus about how far the state has transgressed against its own citizens. Bearing in mind the absence of any limiting agent or principle, the forums, comments, and other media generated by the TI community are a collaboratively generated prosthetic symbolic order, similar to Rousseau's own literary productions. The core terms and investments of the movement provide users with a structure that they can then leverage to construct fantastical narratives of state interference in their personal lives. The "uncanniness" of this symbolic network lies in the fact that though it is a fiction and often

²³⁴ Leader, *What is Madness?*, 207.

²³⁵ Sconce, *Technical Delusion*, 280.

²³⁶ Bell et al., "'Mind Control' Experiences on the Internet," 91.

describes seemingly impossible events, a substantial portion of its authors take it for reality. Such a confusion is what sustains much activity on the subreddit.

Framing the online writing by TIs about TIs as an example of collective delusion and practiced conspiracy theory can expand our understanding of rhetorical processes, media, and delusion. This is the reason I have opted to describe the uptake of the TI movement among adherents as being akin to a kind of public facing delusional metaphor. Another way of thinking about a public delusional metaphor is that it provides a social link for discussing phenomena at the limits of language. Such a link allows for consistency in the otherwise aberrant speech of the psychotic. The term “delusional metaphor” originally appears in Lacan’s “On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis,” in reference to Daniel Paul Schreber’s Order of the World.²³⁷ The Order of the World was Schreber’s term for the idea about the world he had developed as a consequence of his hallucinations, a “‘miraculous structure’” communicated to Schreber that enabled him to explain his complex relationship with God.²³⁸

The delusional metaphor is a signifier that takes the place of the foreclosed Name-of-the-Father in psychosis.²³⁹ This repositioning allows for the subject to project some sort of order or consistency onto the symbolic order and by extension, develop an alternative identity. In the case of Schreber, the elaboration of the Order of the World as a delusional metaphor coincided with a relative stabilizing of his condition in comparison to his pre-episodic self.²⁴⁰ Vanheule note that

²³⁷ Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, 23.

²³⁸ Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, 32.

²³⁹ Stijn Vanheule, *The Subject of Psychosis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 100.

²⁴⁰ Vanheule, *Subject of Psychosis*, 120.

the creation of a delusional metaphor enables psychotic subject to finally address uncertainties about personal identity and others' desire, providing them "with an anchor in discourse."²⁴¹

For TIs, the compensatory symbolic serves them by providing them with a scheme for projecting themselves into an antagonistic relation to the broader social order. As I discuss, the peculiar relation of the psychotic to the Symbolic shapes how they understand themselves and their environment. The psychotic subject is immersed in an environment in which everything possesses meaning and from which the subject is not separate.²⁴² Participation in the construction of a prosthetic symbolic enables them to forge an intense investment in an alternate system of law. By distinguishing between the different functions that the Other serves for the subject and how it is implicitly positioned in TI media, we can better understand some of the movement's enigmatic features with regard to how they connect with one another.

²⁴¹ Vanheule, *Subject of Psychosis*, 115.

²⁴² On this point, Lacan observes that, "One of our psychotics tells us how foreign the world is which he entered some time ago. Everything has become a sign for him. Not only is he spied upon, observed, watched over, not only do people speak to, point, look, and wink at him, but all this- you see the ambiguity straightaway-invades the ambiguity straightaway- invades the field of real, inanimate, nonhuman objects. Let us look at this a but more closely. If he encounters a red car in the street- a car is not a natural object- it's not for nothing, he will say, that it went past at that very moment.....The car has a meaning but the subject is very often incapable of saying what it is." Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III: The Psychoses 1955-1956*, 9.

3.3 TI organizations and delusional metaphor

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, there is a wide range of online hubs that host TI content. There are also more formal organizations like Targeted Justice and Freedom for Targeted Individuals that offer membership and coordinate offline events. These organizations identify their purpose as raising awareness about gangstalking, v2k, and other common TI concerns. It is unclear how to best conceptualize the effects that this loose confederation of online communities has on the lives of those who consume its media or even those who produce it. While this might be a potentially valuable pursuit for a researcher trained in ethnography, I do not undertake that task here. Instead, I contend that we might understand user-produced TI media as public attempts at identity formation via the uptake of a delusional metaphor. This means that the ideas conveyed in TI media are governed by a kind of “supersignifier” that enables psychotic subjects to regulate flows of signification that would otherwise remain unwieldy and structureless.²⁴³ Todd McGowan argues that:

for the psychotic, the law exists, but it does not derive from a social authority. Instead, it represents an arbitrary restriction that an illegitimate external authority imposes on the subject. This authority remains obscure and unrecognizable, like the “shadow men” who populate Schreber’s delusion.²⁴⁴

In this case, the “illegitimate external authority” is represented as an intelligence community intervening in a TI’ life and for their own perverse gratification. The adoption of a delusional metaphor enables the subject to quiet existential questions that plague them in the

²⁴³ Vanheule, *Subject of Psychosis*, 170.

²⁴⁴ McGowan, “Psychosis of Freedom,” 53.

unconscious. Such an adoption is in response to the void associated with personal identity and the desire of other referenced earlier.

Adopting a critical stance and applying insights from psychoanalysis and rhetorical theory, the swathes of TI media observable online can be understood as a kind of public-addressed speech that lacks any pretense of being mediated. As I described in Ch. 1, the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father produces a hole in the Symbolic (understood as the reliable operation of signification) for TIs.²⁴⁵ Lacan posits in, “On a Question”:

it is the lack of the Name-of-the-Father in that place which, by the hole that it opens up in the signified, sets off a cascade of reworkings of the signifier from which the growing disaster of the imaginary proceeds, until the level is reached at the which signifier and signifieds stabilize in a delusional metaphor.²⁴⁶

In response to a traumatic encounter with lack, the psychotic endows the objects of the Imaginary with an intensity of meaning at the expense of the metaphorical operations inherent to the Symbolic.²⁴⁷ Psychotic subjects fail to integrate this signifier into their subjectivity because “something rotten in the law, such as the stain of private enjoyment that accompanies the public law, comes to the fore.”²⁴⁸ With respect to the law, TIs foreclose the possibility that the law is indifferent or impartial towards them, instead assuming that intelligence operations are interested in them on a personal level. As mentioned earlier, there is also often an imputation of ill motive to individual gangstalkers within this discourse, with TIs commonly asserting that gangstalkers take delight in ruining people’s lives. Moreover, there is also an emphasis on a conflict between both

²⁴⁵ Leader, *What Is Madness?*, 49.

²⁴⁶ Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 481.

²⁴⁷ Matheson, “Psychotic Discourse,” 200.

²⁴⁸ McGowan, “Psychosis of Freedom,” 51.

imagined and historical instances of surveillance and liberalism. One memoir written by a TI asserts that, “there is no record of any nation that has not historically been involved in the targeting of its own citizens for exposing corruption.”²⁴⁹

In an insightful footnote, Bruce Fink writes of the legitimization crisis facing liberalism and its connection to psychosis. In reference to the enslavement of Black people and genocide of indigenous peoples in American history, Fink states, “the more the law’s representatives appear untrustworthy, the more the law itself can be thrown into question, and the less we are inclined to accept the sacrifices exacted by the law (that is, accept limitation/castration).”²⁵⁰ The TI movement is a heavily online cultural discourse. Its emphasis on personal intrusion by the state has generated a public vocabulary that can be used to assert that one has experienced horrific harassment from a state. The law has violated its commitment to protecting its citizens from harm and become a malevolent actor.

“Delusion creates an anchor,” that can stabilize the process of signification for psychotic subjects and “an element of the delusion, called the delusional metaphor, functions as an alternative for the absent Name-of-the-Father.”²⁵¹ The installation of this signifier functions as a “quilting point” that governs and regulates the operation of other signifiers in the chain of signification, serving as the basis for what constitutes meaningful communication.²⁵² This explains how all roads lead back to the subject being a TI in terms of *meaning*, since that identity now

²⁴⁹ Michael D. Fleming, *Tortured in America: The Life of a Targeted Individual* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 7.

²⁵⁰ Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*, 254.

²⁵¹ Vanheule, *Subject of Psychosis*, 100.

²⁵² Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 682.

serves as the basis for all other meanings. Specifically, investment in TI identity by way of the movement's media provides these subjects with a battery of signifieds that might enable them to sate the unconscious questions that plague the psychotic subject at the level of the Symbolic.²⁵³ The signifieds that are commonly taken up by TIs become linked together in a metonymic fashion. This enables them to produce an internally consistent scheme for representing the mass surveillance campaign that TIs believe is personally harassing them. Vanheule notes that the delusional metaphor put an otherwise "vague sensation" that one is being "seized by an external force" and puts it into a signifying chain. Vanheule observes that "usually this chain eventually takes the shape of an explanatory theory in which the mad Other's intentions are explained."²⁵⁴ This chain of reasoning is one that is governed by the installation of a delusional metaphor in the

²⁵³ Vanheule argues that imaginary compensation enables the subject to acquire a "*signified* that responds to questions of the existence of the subject....Alternatively, a signified of how life should be lived can also be acquired by adopting the habits of others....life is lived by following *social life narratives*." ²⁵³ In other words, the videos, diagrams, and imagery provided by the movement provide subjects with a signified that temporarily fills the void in the Symbolic that the struggle to express. Recall that psychosis is distinguished by a sense that there is a meaningfulness beyond what is communicable by the subject. On this account, TI media would provide a set of signifiers for subjects to express their contradictory feelings of persecution and alienation by others in a broader social context. This is a contingent vocabulary and importantly, both adopted without irony and as a temporary means of suturing over the hole in the Symbolic. That is to say, it may stop some subjects, albeit temporarily, from becoming even more deeply controlled from the Symbolic and sequestered from others by virtue of the foreclosed social link. An additional benefit of this account is it can explain the persistence of some elements of the TI specific economy and in particular, the publication of videos that purport to document an incident of gangstalking. I revisit this point in Ch. 4 in connection with Lacan's theory of anxiety

²⁵⁴ Vanheule, *Subject of Psychosis*, 116.

place of the Name-of-the-Father. In other words, the delusional metaphor becomes the basis for determining what counts as meaningful signification. The result is the production of an Imaginary reality that has been organized according to that delusional belief.

As discussed in Ch.1, the rationale behind why a person was selected for gangstalking is a common object of analysis in TI media. In addition to speculating about the criteria for targeting, there is a great concern with what the intended outcome of the program is. A consistent refrain is that the goal of these shadowy actors is to isolate and wear down their victims, so that TIs are ultimately made to live in social isolation. This harkens to a point that is sometimes missed in discussions of the TI movement in both journalistic and academic portraiture. The persistence of concerns about gangstalking and the social isolation that it produces in TI media indicates a deep uncertainty about the meaning of social relations and how one ought to comport oneself knowing that you are perpetually imperiled and at constant risk for deception. Alyse Burnside draws attention to this and emphasizes the alienation expressed by TIs in online media.²⁵⁵ This connects to another point about paranoia. In Todd McGowan's reading, the paranoid is a subject who has fully submitted to social demand.²⁵⁶ By demand, McGowan is referring to Lacan's notion that there are numerous and incompatible directives from the Other that provide the subject with the means to position themselves for recognition from a "social authority."²⁵⁷ Gangstalking is directly connected to the prospect of being abandoned by the people closest to TIs in many iterations of the delusion. Targeting is understood as a deliberate and malicious effort to wear a person down

²⁵⁵Burnside, "Targeted."

²⁵⁶ McGowan, "Psychosis of Freedom," 72.

²⁵⁷McGowan, "Psychosis of Freedom," 49.

and make them feel unwell. Consequently, there is an uncertainty about whom one can trust and whether those people closest to the TI have been compromised and are working against them.

Above all and connected to my wager concerning the social character of the TI delusion, TI discourse becomes the primary system through which enjoyment is refracted and enables adherents to manufacture an alternative identity. Lacan argues that the psychotic is plagued by unconscious questions, which are not located “at the level of the ego” (i.e. the Imaginary) but instead at the level of the Symbolic.²⁵⁸ In other words, rather than fixating on any singular representation of the question, there is instead an uncertainty at the level of meaningfulness of these questions. The implicit questions concern existential matters about one’s sexual identity, the meaning of life in the face of death, and “what it is that really connects people in love” and parenthood.²⁵⁹ Vanheule observes that this is because on some level, all neurotic or psychotic subjects are forced to ask “‘Who am I?’” reflect on what constitutes their identity.

From a rhetorical perspective, TI media enables the formation of a public, insofar as it is “the site through which one can understand the ways that an economy of trope constitutes and by extension can meaningfully explicate the social.”²⁶⁰ The adoption of such a public delusional metaphor might provide psychotic subjects with Imaginary answers to these unconscious questions. In other words, through investing in the persona of TI, people are able to represent to themselves a coherent representation of a world governed by some kind of law, albeit one that is

²⁵⁸ Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 459.

²⁵⁹ Vanheule, *Subject of Psychosis*, 64.

²⁶⁰ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 142.

considered illegitimate and fixated on them personally. The elaboration of a delusional metaphor serves as a new social link and enables the formation of a community of TIs.

3.4 From the body to the social

I now move to the question of online communities. The TI community poses a puzzling case with respect to how people interact with one another online for a few reasons. First, much of what of TIs discuss concerns unverifiable personal experiences that others online attest to happening. While not necessarily unique to the movement, the signifiers that elicit investment and speculation from TIs are typically lack a tangible referent and instead are reliant upon individual judgement. For example, claiming that v2k technology has been used upon oneself means that one experienced foreign, intruding thoughts that did not come from one's own mind. Similarly, alleging the usage of DEW or "direct energy weapons" means that one has experienced burning sensations in highly localized areas of one's body from some kind of unknown device. The boundaries between inside and outside of oneself are of great concern. This fixation on the boundaries between oneself and the environment enables a great deal of discussion about how these two concepts or other associated ideas might actually be practiced in the world. Second, much of TI speech concerns their perceived violations of privacy by some outside agency. They might claim that these actors are literally intruding on a TI's home or even their thoughts. TIs might advance the notion that they are using some sort of advanced technology to manipulate a person's body and thoughts from without.

Their position as subjects is sustained by the tension stemming between their calls to be left alone and their appearance in public. The latter enables them to forge imaginary bonds of

affiliation. If the memes, blogs, and other media are any indication, TIs invest in their identity beyond merely seeking answers for disturbing phenomena or trying to assemble for political action. They enjoy their identity in the Lacanian sense, in that it is an investment or commitment that exceeds its pragmatic capacity and indeed, often towards very non-pragmatic ends, “what serves no purpose.”²⁶¹ Returning to Fink’s premise that the illegitimacy of law makes subjects less willing to submit themselves to castration, we can understand psychosis as what Russell Grigg calls a “*failure of the regulation of jouissance*.”²⁶² Grigg points to Schreber and the numerous psychotic phenomena he experienced, like his belief that God was turning him into a woman, as evidence of how Schreber was invaded by jouissance, an excessive meaningfulness that becomes unbearable. In TI media, we can find an analogue in the form of v2k, dew, and other technologies that are cited as the source of various disquieting phenomena that TIs experience. Becoming a TI, then, is an attempt to stabilize and lend order to otherwise intense and undesirable phenomena.

To explain how these dynamics unfold in a digital setting, I develop a brief sketch of how online communities have been treated by scholars thus far in order to underscore the role of Web 2.0’s shift toward user-generated content as a condition of possibility for the manifestation of TI media. I place special emphasis on the role of habitual media usage as a force for sustaining the meaning of TI media in public settings. I explain how these mediated interactions shape the position of subjects that take them up through reference to Christian Lundberg’s distinction between the general and specific economies of trope, with an emphasis on the latter’s capacity to

²⁶¹ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, 3.

²⁶² Russell Grigg, “The Enigma of Jouissance,” in *The Literary Lacan: From Literature to Lituraterre and Beyond*, ed. Santanu Biswas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 296–97.

shape identarian commitments through public speech.²⁶³ Psychoanalysis can offer insight into how this set of beliefs organized around the individual, obsessed with privacy and possibility of social isolation I can serve as the basis for collective identity. In reference to the standard objection as to whether psychoanalysis can serve as the basis for a social critique, Žižek claims that:

the Social, the field of social practices and socially held beliefs, is not simply on a different level from individual experience, but something to which *the individual him- or herself has to relate*, something which *the individual him-or herself has to experience as* an order which is minimally “reified,” externalized.²⁶⁴

In other words, positing individual experience as separate or disconnected from socially held belief is a mistake. Psychoanalysis can help us understand how the individual shapes themselves in relation to an imagined social world.

3.5 Specific economies and online communities

Because of the unruly nature of the TI community and the interplay between its online and offline iterations, it may instead be more fruitful to think about the formal characteristics of TI discourse rather than attempting to address the specific features of each site. This means attending to the formal properties of the discourse in question in order to articulate an account of its conditions of possibility. Lundberg makes a distinction between a general and specific economy of tropological exchange.²⁶⁵ The term general economy indicates “the general relationship between

²⁶³ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 74.

²⁶⁴ Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, lxxii.

²⁶⁵ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public*, 74.

the sign and the genesis of the subject,” which serves as “the regulatory principle” for “specific economies of tropological exchange.” Specific economies of tropological exchange, however, are “discrete configurations of tropes that individuals and groups take up in assuming public identitarian commitments.” In other words, while the specific economy is dependent on the general economy, identity formation isn’t reducible to the latter.

Online communities have long been an object of scholarly interest, with numerous methodological approaches being adopted in order to speak to the complexity of these gatherings online. Nancy Baym’s early work sets the agenda in this regard, examining the role that forums had for soap opera fans.²⁶⁶ danah boyd’s work emphasizes the wide variety of gratifications obtained by teens through their online media usage.²⁶⁷ Similarly, Felicia Wu Song’s work on online communities at the dawn of Web 2.0 utilizes ethnographic work to pose questions about the effects that wider usage of online communities might have for deliberative democracy.²⁶⁸ Another notable study is Kristin K. Barker’s work on electronic support groups, in which Barker argues that some forums function effectively as echo chambers for patients who believe they are suffering from fibromyalgia.²⁶⁹ P.H. Bülow offers a counterpoint to such a position, arguing that fibromyalgia patients must necessarily narrate their experience of pain with their words. Given

²⁶⁶ Nancy K. Baym, “Interpreting Soap Operas and Creating Community: Inside an Electronic Fan Culture,” in *Culture of the Internet*, ed. Sara Kiesler (New York: Psychology Press, 2014), 103–20.

²⁶⁷ danah boyd, *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

²⁶⁸ Felicia Wu Song, *Virtual Communities: Bowling Alone, Online Together* (Peter Lang, 2009).

²⁶⁹ Kristin K. Barker, “Electronic Support Groups, Patient-Consumers, and Medicalization: The Case of Contested Illness,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 49, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 20–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002214650804900103>.

fibromyalgia's status as a contested illness, this position opens them up to doubt and puts them in the position of being doubted by those in positions of medical authority.²⁷⁰

A smaller group of media scholars have been turning to psychoanalysis to conceptualize how the processes of identification, recognition, and connection that constitute the basic relations of online communities unfold on digital platforms. Aaron Balick offered an early and influential account of the psychology underlying online interaction on social networking sites from a Jungian perspective.²⁷¹ Balick wagers that relational theory can offer much to the study of online social networking because it concerns “*the nature of what happens between subjects.*”²⁷² Greg Singh advances this line of research by taking up the question of how the desire for recognition underwrites the publication of user-created content with the advent of Web 2.0.²⁷³ Specifically, Singh characterizes his study as focusing on the “affective and psychological position of the individual subject in relation to either the identification of self with data presence, or to self-identification with one's data profile.”²⁷⁴ Jacob Johanssen achieves something similar, detailing how users relate to their own watch history in data about trends in watching, noting the perverse

²⁷⁰ P.H. Bülow, “Tracing Contours of Contestation in Narratives about Chronic Fatigue Syndrome,” in *Contesting Illness: Process and Practices*, 2008, 137.

²⁷¹ Aaron Balick, *The Psychodynamics of Social Networking: Connected-up Instantaneous Culture and the Self* (London: Karnac Books, 2013).

²⁷² Balick, *Psychodynamics of Social Networking*, 14. Italics in original.

²⁷³ Singh, *The Death of Web 2. 0*.

²⁷⁴ Singh, *The Death of Web 2. 0*, 147.

logics of relation that platforms deploy in order to entice users to give up their data.²⁷⁵” The virtual is merely the techno-form of psychic configuration as old as the species itself,” Jerry Aline Flieger observes.²⁷⁶ In other words, digital technology does not change the basic situation of the subject. Flieger’s prescient study comes before the emergence of social networking sites proper but anticipates some of the problematics that have been taken up by more contemporary scholarship. Of cyberchat, Flieger asks: “Are my others who they appear to be? What is human, what is monstrous?” I add to this burgeoning body of literature by offering an account of how trope facilitates the formation of identitarian publics in an online setting.²⁷⁷ While I develop this account further later on, for now note that this means that I emphasize the formal role of trope in enabling the processes that make these interactions possible. I also emphasize how the possibility of deception identified by Flieger persists throughout attempts to shape oneself and relate to others in these digital environments.

The habitual aspect of TI media production is partly what distinguishes TIs from earlier cultural depictions of affiliation between madness, paranoia, and technology. Referencing Schreber’s extensive literary account of his delusions, Lacan observes that psychotics tend to produce a great volume of material that offers minute detailing of the various aspects of their delusions.²⁷⁸ Anecdotally, TI media also seems to adhere to this pattern, with many users

²⁷⁵ Jacob Johanssen, *Psychoanalysis and Digital Culture: Audiences, Social Media, and Big Data* (New York: Routledge, 2018): 156.

²⁷⁶ Jerry Aline Flieger, *Is Oedipus Online?: Siting Freud After Freud* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 37.

²⁷⁷ Note that Lacan often characterizes his approach as being apposite to conventional understandings of communication. See *Écrits*, 204.

²⁷⁸ Lacan, *The Psychoses 1955-1956*, 77.

constantly posting and producing new content about their experiences as TIs. Vanheule regards Schreber's writing and publication of his memoirs as a dominant yet accessible form of cultural production that may have enabled him to avoid becoming even more deeply enthralled to his delusions.²⁷⁹ Such a position is similar to the observation made by Sconce at the beginning of this chapter concerning TI forums, that engagement in online groups may potentially have some beneficial effects for participants.

Rhetoricians have long been interested in how we might better understand rhetorical processes as not being situated within an audience-rhetor dyad, but as something instead more diffuse and unconfined. Jenny Edbauer Rice's notion of a rhetorical ecology is representative of this approach, insofar as Rice offers an account of rhetoric as an open system of encounters rather than discrete, isolated situations.²⁸⁰ Similarly, Joe Edward Hatfield observes that:

by stressing the process of rhetoric's public distribution within a global affective field comprising diverse lived experiences, material constraints, and ever changing structures of feeling, the transition from...situation to multiple interacting rhetorical ecologies underscores how traditional components of the rhetorical situation are never settled but always temporally and spatially in flux.²⁸¹

Laurie Gries's work complements this perspective, insofar as it offers a framework for understanding rhetoric as something unfolding over time as things enter into relation to one

²⁷⁹ Vanheule, *Subject of Psychosis*, 120.

²⁸⁰ Jenny Edbauer, "Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (September 1, 2005): 5–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773940509391320>.

²⁸¹ Joe Edward Hatfield, "The Queer Kairotic: Digital Transgender Suicide Memories and Ecological Rhetorical Agency," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 29.

another.²⁸² Understanding the circulation and production of TI media requires theorization about the nature of rhetorical habits in a society increasingly mediated by digital platforms. They provide a window into a specific economy of trope that is sustained by metonymic interpretation. While my approach does not necessarily sit in opposition to the others outlined in this section, the key difference is my focus on the constitutive role of trope and specifically, how the uptake of a discourse as a delusional metaphor enables the stabilization of signification.

3.6 Habit, media, and habitual media

Habit has been a subject of constant theorization within communication studies because it enables one to speak of adaptation as well as consistency. Indeed, an early *Quarterly Journal of Speech* article addresses the then-nascent phenomenon of people adopting certain habits of speech from radio broadcasts.²⁸³ A jockey might use a phrase peculiar to themselves quite often and unwittingly, only to have scores of listeners deliberately incorporate into their own speech.²⁸⁴ More recently, Wendy Chun has theorized new media as being habitual in character. Writing about the collapsing boundaries between publicity and privacy, Chun states, “new media as erosion depends on the prior acceptance of networks as fundamentally personal and private, a notion that depends

²⁸² Laurie Gries, *Still Life with Rhetoric: A New Materialist Approach for Visual Rhetorics* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015): 11.

²⁸³ Henry Adams Bellows, “Broadcasting and Speech Habits,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 17, no. 2 (April 1, 1931): 245–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335633109379806>.

²⁸⁴ Bellows, “Broadcasting,” 247.

on certain habits of privacy that often undermine the very privacy sought.”²⁸⁵ For Chun, the desire for habitual mediation of self via online platforms raises questions about the fairness of outcomes with respect to communicative infrastructure.²⁸⁶

While TI media fails to ever reach a threshold of engagement to truly say that they “go viral,” reproduction and propagation of TI media are key dynamics that give shape to the community and so makes virality a relevant term. Tony D. Sampson has argued for a theory of cultural contagion that views the subject or vector as a somnambulist.²⁸⁷ Though technology factors heavily in Sampson’s account, somnambulism is not deployed in the same way as Marshall McLuhan’s sense of the term, who used the term to denote the uncritical acceptance of technological change.²⁸⁸ The sleepwalking subject in Sampson’s account is one that is only partly aware of the various forces exerting influence over them, constantly engaging in acts of imitation and invention that reproduce behaviors observed in the environment. For Sampson, part of the confusion around how to conceptualize virality is puzzling out how the individual fits into larger patterns of behavior, noting that “the viral atmosphere marks the point at which the thought of the self ‘arises from an unconscious imitation of others.’”²⁸⁹ In this respect, virality can be a useful

²⁸⁵ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008): 13.

²⁸⁶ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 16.

²⁸⁷ Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 13.

²⁸⁸ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 11.

²⁸⁹ Sampson, *Virality*, 59.

idiom in accounting for why certain cultural artifacts seem to achieve a level of sustained interest from audiences that then go on to reproduce and share their own contribution.

Virality also speaks to the experience of psychosis as described in Lacanian theory in two ways. First, Sampson's description of processes of unconscious imitation has some resonances with the notion of imaginary compensation. Referencing Helene Deutsch's as-if mechanism in schizophrenia, Lacan posits that prior to the outbreak of a psychotic episode, some subjects might sustain themselves by "means of imitation."²⁹⁰ During this phase, such subjects might not seem distinguishable from non-psychotic subjects, though they lack an understanding of what their choices signify due to a failure to incorporate the paternal function. In other words, such subjects might be able to reproduce such behavior but not conceptualize how it signifies in relation to other positions within a broader system. Second, Sampson's account of the mechanisms of virality provides agency to the act itself, as a kind of external force exerting influence on those who would reproduce it. This is comparable to various descriptions of psychosis from Lacan, in which the subject feels themselves invaded by the signifier and is possessed in their being by language. Agency is located in the word itself, not in the person saying it.

In an analysis of philosopher Daniel Dennett's work on the meme, Žižek characterizes the Lacanian theory of language as memetic in nature, similarly "penetrating" the subject in a parasitic manner in order to reproduce itself.²⁹¹ For Žižek, what is remarkable about this phenomenon is how it elicits incredulity. The subject maintains a "fetishist disavowal" toward the meme as a

²⁹⁰ Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 192.

²⁹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 122, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203699874>.

self-reproducing units so as to protect the narcissistic interests of the ego.²⁹² In other words, subjects foreground themselves as a decisive agent having produced the speech rather than being used by the meme instrumentally in order to propagate the meme. One way of thinking about the point is to consider how the difference between the usage of the active and the passive voice when describing the reproduction of the meme. One emphasizes the role of the person, the other the agent of the meme. The key difference between a psychotic and other subjects is that while the former does propagate itself in a similar fashion, they do not see themselves as a distinct node in the communicative process, as mediators themselves. This can offer a partial explanation in accounting for the lack of awareness in the posture that TIs adopt when propagating their beliefs, something I engage at length in the following chapter.

As Chun notes, however, there are some questions that virality seems unable to satisfactorily address, particularly regarding the endurance of certain artifacts online. Such artifacts “are as much instances of found habituation as they are of found collectivity.”²⁹³ Moreover, the figure of the virus in grounding discussions of virality implies some sort of “patient zero” or other point of initial origin, though locating such may not better enable one to narrate and assess the outcomes of the viral phenomenon in question. Finding the exact origins of TI media, as seen in the previous chapter, is quite difficult. As a diffuse vernacular belief system, however, we do not need access to the very first iteration to explain how the network of TI media is tropically organized and sustained. Moreover, one risk is potentially overvaluing the significance of such an item.

²⁹² Žižek, *Organs without Bodies*, 123.

²⁹³ Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same*, 174.

The different beliefs comprising the delusion could not have emerged from that single initial iteration, as much of what the community believes is an amalgamation of popular history about the American intelligence community's operations against its own citizens and what have been conventionally identified as delusions of persecution. Sconce suggests that there is probably quite a bit of influence from Francis E. Dec's paranoid writings about the Worldwide Communist Gangster Computer God in the TI movement's concerns today.²⁹⁴ Dec as a lawyer from Long Island who communicated widely about his belief that the Worldwide Communist Gangster Computer God as behind a conspiracy to enslave and exploit humanity. As a structure of belief, the TI movement enables constant and justified paranoia on the part of those who believe it. This is because it is partly a response to the traumatic discovery of a state that violates its avowed principles and engages in transgressive acts against its own citizens and others around the world.

Chun's emphasis on habit also resonates with a push to understand conspiracy theory as something active and practiced. Hayes asserts this thesis in their study of how the ufology community has sustained decades of speculation surrounding a supposed encounter that is documented in government paperwork. This tactic renders visible what Hayes calls the "morphology" of a theory, that is, how it transforms and adapts over time in response to contingent events. As Hayes observes, "there are no checks and balances on the way in which information is shared or distorted. YouTube, especially, has become a haven for conspiracy theories and theorists."²⁹⁵ In tandem with David Lafferty's observation that "conspiracy theory is a creative

²⁹⁴ Sconce, *Technical Delusion*, 237–41.

²⁹⁵ Matthew Hayes, "'Then the Saucers Do Exist?': UFOs, the Practice of Conspiracy, and the Case of Wilbert Smith," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 51, no. 3 (February 1, 2018): 688, <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcs.2017-0028.r1>.

enterprise,” we can now understand the body of media created by TIs as a collectively authored explanation for the persistence of certain phenomena characterized as hallucinatory or the attendant feelings of paranoia and persecution.²⁹⁶

To be clear, much like the concept of delusion, Lacan does not value the received notion of hallucination very highly. He argues that in general, the subject is constantly representing to themselves numerous signifieds that are not present before them (for example, if you are hungry at work and remember that your lunch is in the fridge), yet we do not demarcate such experiences as hallucinations. “Hallucination,” Lacan says, is “the invention of reality” and “the support for what the subject is experiencing.”²⁹⁷ By this, he means to point out that subjects are constantly representing to themselves things which are not directly before them, such as a worker who is hungry and remembers that their lunch is in the fridge. When teasing out what might be rightly identified as a hallucination, Lacan instructs analysts to instead tend to “the reciprocal contrasts, the complementary oppositions, that the subject himself points out” when identifying something as a hallucination.²⁹⁸ In the case of TIs, this means that it is right to conceptualize reports of “v2k” and other hallucination-inducing technology as such because they are reported as significations experienced as occurring internal to the subject but that come from some outside force.

The question of activity and passivity extends further. Lacan argues that the psychotic is a “martyr of the unconscious” in the sense of being “a witness” whose speech is “open testimony.”²⁹⁹ Stijn Vanheule clarifies this claim by arguing that the psychotic subject excludes themselves as a

²⁹⁶ Lafferty, “A Literary-Biographical Approach to the Study of Conspiracy Theory,” 823.

²⁹⁷ Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 142.

²⁹⁸ Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 143.

²⁹⁹ Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 132.

participant when accounting for “the production of formations of the unconscious.”³⁰⁰ Subjects see themselves as passively involved, insofar as the formations of the unconscious they observe are taken either as “being impenetrable” or being forced upon the subject by some sort of external entity. Attributing such responsibility for signification is the role played by the influencing machine in the delusions of Tausk’s patients or of God in Schreber’s delusions. For TIs, the external actor is one or several of the federal agencies typically associated with intelligence gathering. More precisely, in TI discourse, the role of the intelligence correlates to what Žižek identifies as the “real Other,” insofar as they are perceived as a seemingly unlimited nexus of power, particularly when it comes to the ability to “know/’register” the significations of the subject.³⁰¹ Lacan observes that “the unconscious of psychotics is such a good grammarian and such a bad philologist.”³⁰² This contrasting claim is meant to illustrate that while the psychotic subject can produce speech that obeys rules at the syntactical level, they fail to understand the potential plural meanings that those signifiers convey.³⁰³

As mentioned earlier, psychotic subjects tend to fixate on charged themes that other subjects, while aware of them, tend to repress from their awareness. In this case, TIs are sometimes cast as bizarre or unusual for their emphasis on the capacity of the federal government to surveil and oppress virtually any target given sufficient reason and motivation. This observation doesn’t register as a relevant piece of information for many people most of the time. Since there is no disavowal of probable flows of signification (which is a result of the foreclosure of the Name-

³⁰⁰ Vanheule, *The Subject of Psychosis*, 72.

³⁰¹ Slavoj Žižek, “The Big Other Doesn’t Exist,” *The Journal of European Psychoanalysis* 5, no. Spring-Fall (1997).

³⁰² Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III: The Psychoses 1955-1956*, 41.

³⁰³ Matheson, “Psychotic Discourse,” 200.

of-the-Father), these processes that are obscured in other subjects are instead observable on the surface of the psychotic. This explains the kernel of truth at the core of the TI movement's claims. We all are being surveilled on some level by our digital technologies. TIs, however, literalize this surveillance through metonymic interpretation. This means instead of understanding electronic communication as something that could potentially be surveilled, it really is actively occurring to TIs in their everyday lives. In the next section, I turn to how habit and drive collide on digital platforms.

3.7 Habit and drive

Drive is a complex notion across varieties of psychoanalytic theory. For example, some reconstructions of Freudian thought characterize the subject as being driven principally by a conflict between pleasure and self-destruction, between Eros and Thanatos. "Every drive is virtually a death drive" Lacan says.³⁰⁴ This indicates that rather than positing multiple drives (like Eros and Thanatos), there is a single conception of drive that can account for seemingly contradictory impulses.³⁰⁵ Jodi Dean, writing about the role of drive in connection to blogging, states that "under conditions of the decline of symbolic efficiency, drive is not an act. It does not break out of a set of given expectations because such sets no longer persist as coherent

³⁰⁴ Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 719.

³⁰⁵ One such interpretation of Freud can be found in Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1985).

enchainments of meaning.”³⁰⁶ In other words, the subject remains invested in a pattern of behavior that they know will not yield satisfaction. Drive thus obtains jouissance through failure to achieve one’s desired action. This becomes a sort of self-perpetuating routine, a persistent pattern reliant upon the frustration of achievement as a kind of gratification in its own right. For example, many users lament their usage of social networking sites like Facebook but may nonetheless habitually check them in hopes of finding something worthwhile. Žižek describes this desire to enjoy to a point of excess, even self-annihilation, as a sort of “‘undead’ urge.”³⁰⁷ Rather than merely subsisting, all subjects experience a compulsion to exceed the symbolic mandate provided to them.

So far in this chapter, I have detailed some of the distinctive features of the TI community as a specific economy, specifically emphasizing the uptake of TI narratives as delusional metaphor that takes the place of the Name-of-the-Father. I’ve placed stress on how the perception of there being others out there is one condition that enables While not the only explanation, the appeal of this account is that it explains how this discourse can become elevated to the point that it becomes an identitarian movement focused on contact in public. In this section, I want to focus on the ways in which consistency emerges within this ecology via habitual publication. Habits produce order from what would otherwise be diffuse activity. I ultimately argue that while TI communities may seem like an exceptional case, they in fact readily exhibit a basic form of relationality that is paradigmatic for online platforms. TIs desire recognition from others that they really are who they believe they are by virtue of their intensive investment in an alternative Symbolic order. Other

³⁰⁶ Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2010), 35.

³⁰⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London ; Verso, 2008), 395.

users similarly utilize personal accounts on such platforms because it functions as a stable field of representation before the Other.

3.8 Analysis of r/gangstalking posts

The r/gangstalking subreddit describes itself as “a subreddit that focuses upon presenting information about predatory gangstalking and also to exist as a community to organize as a group to spread awareness and education.”³⁰⁸ Created on December 11th 2011, many of the subreddit’s posts consist of personal narratives describing people’s experiences with gangstalking and in some cases, even the conditions that they believed caused the stalking to stop. Other posts include user-generated memes that address themes of being a TI, gangstalking, and other associated phenomena. Typically, these creations elevate TIs or encourage them to remain positive and not succumb to the pressures imposed by stalkers. There are also numerous threads and comments from people who identify themselves as skeptical of the TI movement. These posts typically encourage TIs to stop taking the movement’s claims seriously and occasionally allege that adherents are either schizophrenic or abusing drugs like methamphetamine.

In this section, I analyze a handful of the “top” posts of all time on this particular subreddit. While the algorithm used to determine which posts end up as “top” (as contrasted with “new” and “hot” modes of organization), is no longer publicly disclosed, it presumably includes some combination of the site’s “upvotes” on a particular post, as well as the number of impressions generated by the post. I have selected the top posts of all time on the subreddit for analysis for a

³⁰⁸ “R/Gangstalking,” *Reddit*, accessed September 18, 2021, <https://www.reddit.com/r/Gangstalking/>.

few reasons. First, in discerning the structure of delusion, there is no singularly definitive iteration. Instead, commonalities between different instances of delusion ought to be examined instead. On this point concerning delusion, Lacan observes that “it’s always the same structuring force, as it were, at work in a delusion, whether it’s the whole or one of its parts that is under consideration.”³⁰⁹ That is to say, regardless of which variety of delusion or even particular iteration of said delusion that is selected, the same forces maintaining it are at work. Joshua Gunn writes that if we grant the validity of Dean’s and Žižek’s theses about the demise of symbolic efficiency, Michael Calvin McGee’s point “about the fragmentation of ‘the text’ takes on a new character: the critic of contemporary, public discourse is now consigned to ceaselessly and unrelentingly constituting the context.”³¹⁰ Following Gunn’s directive, I have attempted to assemble the context of at least one site in which TI discourse flourishes. Second, it seems plausible to conclude that the “top” posts of all time have been more consequential than other posts.

Despite characterizing r/gangstalking as a vibrant hub for those who would believe themselves to be targeted or gangstalked, this does not mean that it is a forum where people uncritically accept the reality of such phenomena. Indeed, many of the most significant posts are occasioned by users who seek to inform users that in fact they are mistaken or deluded. One user writes in response to just a pushback:

Your "semblance of reality" (this is your term) does not include the phenomena described by those that write in this sub that describe techniques like NLP, street theater, seemingly arranged objects into a pattern, demons, synchronic weirdness, telepathic machines, externally source verbiage (maybe you have heard a little voice in your mind telling you something, like advice), smart dust, RNM (do you want that explained), dew, radar, masers or people following you and talking seemingly about what you experienced in the last twenty four hours without any

³⁰⁹ Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 19.

³¹⁰ Gunn, *Political Perversion*, 71.

apparent consciousness of this, or being followed by cars, or cars pulling up to their property, or brain implants, things in one home being moved or taken, causal connections that most are not aware of. All seemingly within the sense that it is personal, intentional, directed maliciously at the posters, directed at victimizing them, directed to undermine their sense of self, directed at ruining their lives. If something was missed maybe you can mention it....Why do you post here?³¹¹
This comment condenses much of what is distinctive about the TI movement.

Another popular thread features a user who presumably does not identify as a TI addressing them in a harsh tone, stating “you people are so fucking arrogant it is disgusting. Why the fuck do you think you are interesting enough for some shadowy organization to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars tracking you? Take my advice, nobody gives a fuck about you.”³¹² Another user responds:

Sounds like something a bootlicking shill would say. How do you explain the fact that the same Palantir software (developed and sold by fascist technocrat and vocal Trump supporter Peter Thiel) that is being used by police departments to systematically track, stalk, and harass civilians is the same software ICE uses to systematically track and round up immigrants and throw them into concentration camps?

The two continue bickering over the actuality of what TIs describe until the latter user implores the former to “just admit that America is an imperialist fascist police state that was founded on genocide, slavery, and oppression. Oh wait, you won’t because you’re just a shill sucking on the establishment teat.” This exchange is indicative of the psychotic tendency to impute

³¹¹ “This Sub Was Visited by Thousands Last Night When the Sub Was Mentioned in This Post on Askreddit. Some Posts Were Removed, a Few Locked. If You Are Interested in This Topic Take a Few Days to Read about It before Posting.” Reddit Post, *R/Gangstalking*, June 9, 2019, www.reddit.com/r/Gangstalking/comments/byqekv/this_sub_was_visited_by_thousands_last_night_when/.

³¹² “The Global Targeted Individual Movement Made Huge Strides on TI Day 2019...,” Reddit Post, *R/Gangstalking*, June 3, 2020, www.reddit.com/r/Gangstalking/comments/gvp2wa/the_global_targeted_individual_movement_made_huge/.

too much meaning to words. While the claims made by the TI are mostly accurate and correct, they take overemphasize one possible attribution of meaning to them, namely that they are further evidence of a clear and self-evident reality. Matheson describes this as a “depressive relation,” one of a “hyper-accumulation of *meaning*, the Imaginary relationship between the object and ego of psychoses’ subject.”³¹³ In the case of TI discourse, each actual instance of government surveillance or civil rights violations is incorporated into a representation of the world in which they are personally subject and privy to such transgressions.

A third typical kind of post on r/gangstalking is when a user describes the gangstalking stopping. In one such post, a user describes how it was:

A BIG step forward for me was to understand, that this voices, that gaslightings, street Theatre, electromagnetic feelings and shooting to my balls, was all me. Not really me. More like a second me. Like another Person(s) in my Brain. It is a BIG step , cause it is sooooo unbelievable, that it was me having this dreams and thoughts (mostly violent or negative thoughts like rape scene or family is in danger). And it is unbelievable, that someone talking to you in your Brain. Like you created a second me.³¹⁴

This same user describes being diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, to which they say they responded, “it’s about Mind Control, Remote Neural Monitoring and Gangstalking. They didnt even know, what Gangstalking is.” The user reports that they have gone on antipsychotic medication, specifically aripiprazole. Interestingly, though they report most of their symptoms subsiding after beginning medication, they claim that “The Electromagnetic feeling are still there.” Most are supportive of this user, though the response to the post is not at all uniform. One user

³¹³ Matheson, “Psychotic Discourse,” 201.

³¹⁴ “My Personal Experience (It Stopped),” Reddit Post, *R/Gangstalking*, December 24, 2017, www.reddit.com/r/Gangstalking/comments/7lsey2/my_personal_experience_it_stoped/.

writes, “although I’m not sure of the authenticity of your post I’m glad you fixed your problem. This doesn’t apply to everyone though as organized stalking is a real tactic used in today’s society, there are many that have attested to being trained in organized stalking.” Another user who presumably doesn’t identify as a TI, says, “this person is explaining that he got help and that medication has helped him, and here you psychotic fuckwits are trying to tell him he’s wrong and you know more than medical professionals.” In a separate post later in the thread, the same user who was critical of others’ responses explains, “I’m upset that people here are pushing someone to stop getting help when it’s stopping them from being so delusional.”

In a different thread, another user discusses harboring similar doubts about stalking after getting sober. Describing the development of an opiate dependency into an addiction to both opiates and methamphetamine, the user reports “terrible bouts of paranoia and delusion” and that they “would be positive that people were following me, watching me.”³¹⁵ The user in question reports that they have been sober for four and half years and have left Denver, which they say is “where the homeless population is adamant it’s the worst gang stalking city in America.” Where the police have been convicted for helping these ‘crews’ stalk people.” They go on to say that they now have to laugh at themselves and the way they characterized the issues that they were dealing with at that time. They conclude their post by saying that “I think some people have issues sorting through what is real and what isn’t, and I guess that’s what the point of gang stalking is.” Predictably, another user finds such talk to be a deliberate attempt at misleading TIs. “I don’t do drugs at all and my stalking is incessant,” they write in response to the above experience. “You’re

³¹⁵ “Having Doubts about Stalking after Sobriety,” Reddit Post, *R/Gangstalking*, March 14, 2020, www.reddit.com/r/Gangstalking/comments/firb8t/having_doubts_about_stalking_after_sobriety/.

clearly a paid shill/disinformation agent. It's your job to make those without proper knowledge of awareness of this topic to automatically discredit those suffering through this awful experience." They then cite "former FBI agent Ted Gunderson" and Dr. John Hall as two people whose credibility is being called into question by implication. Gunderson wrote many books detailing law enforcement investigatory strategies for the general public. Most notably, TIs frequently cite his claim that "The CIA and the FBI are behind most, if not all, terrorism." Hall, in contrast, is a San Antonio-based podiatrist who has published several books about the TI movement and identifies as one himself.

These posts are representative of much of the activity that occurs on the r/gangstalking subreddit, in which users discuss and theorize the reality of such a program in a public forum. Whether promoting the actuality of the phenomenon or denigrating those who take it to be true, all users address in some way the notion that it is real. Returning to the notion of the Symbolic as not just allowing for the operation of meaningfulness but also the propriety of such significations, r/gangstalking illustrates how the rejection of established protocols for signification plays out. On this point in "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious," Lacan writes:

This locus is nothing but the locus of signifying convention, as is seen in the comedy of the distressed complaint of the Jew to his pal: "Why are you telling me you are going to Cracow so I'll believe you are going to Lemberg, when you really are going to Cracow?" Of course the aforementioned flock-movement can be understood in the conventional register of a game's strategy, where it is on the basis of a rule that I deceive my adversary; but here my success is assessed as connoting betrayal—that is, it is assessed in the relationship to the Other who is the guarantor of Good Faith.³¹⁶

³¹⁶ Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 436.

Glossing this passage, Matheson writes that “Deception only works if a system of rules exists in which one move can be predicted but another is taken.”³¹⁷ In this case, those TIs who remain invested in the discourse anticipate all claims disputing the reality of organized stalking as being just such an effort to deceive them. This resistance to being duped in order to maintain an investment in an alternative system of signifying convention is a hallmark of the psychotic position.³¹⁸ They read things too literally, that is, metonymically, to let go of their investment in the persecutorial fantasy.

Such a defense is only possible on the basis of the belief that there is in fact some hidden or obscured order that really does possess the consistency that others fail to acknowledge.³¹⁹ “Les non-duped errent” or “the non-duped wanders” is a phrase that Lacan uses to convey this notion in his later works. Possessing audible similarity in French to “nom du père,” or the Name-of-the-Father, those subjects who resist opting into Symbolic fiction remain insensitive to the structuring role of such fiction in maintaining reality.³²⁰ In the case of TIs, this resistance to being deceived leads them to double down on the notion that they personally are being subjected to organized stalking and other forms of harassment. Through metonymic, literalist readings of the material on r/gangstalking, they maintain the depressive relationship to meaning at the expense of contingency and the possibility of ignoring some signs as non-meaningful.

³¹⁷ Calum Lister Matheson, “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud,” in *Reading Lacan’s Écrits: From ‘The Freudian Thing’ to ‘Remarks on Daniel Lagache’* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 149.

³¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, “How the Non-Duped Err,” *Qui Parle* 4, no. 1 (1990): 9.

³¹⁹ Žižek, “How the Non-Duped Err,” 12.

³²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, ed. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2006), 368.

TIs and the Infrastructural Uncanny

Having argued that psychosis is the primary mode of relating to the signifier in TI media and demonstrated that comments of r/gangstalking are consistent with such, I now want to conclude by turning to the question of how this case might provide us some insight into other online activity. Specifically, I argue that we might fruitfully regard TI media as an instance of the infrastructural uncanny. The “infrastructural uncanny” is a term coined by Bernard Dionysius Geohagen to refer to “a range of unsettling phenomena that tend to emerge in periods of rapid expansion in the means of technological conveyance....The uncanny emerges amidst a slight rupture or assonance, either internal to a networked relay or in its relationship to the embedding environment.”³²¹ Geohagen notes that infrastructural expansion is often accompanied by a promise of smoother and faster integration between discrete sites.³²² The infrastructural uncanny provides an idiom for identifying where this promise falls short of what it is supposed to deliver as a consequence of those gaps or lapses in efficacy. The uncanniness is generated by those failures. Moreover, Geohagen’s emphasis on gaps is consonant with Lundberg’s account of the Imaginary and its smoothing over of the failures of communication in the form of feigned unicity.³²³ My intervention here thus merges the analytic aim of Geohagen’s sense of the uncanny to engage with other applications of the term from within psychoanalytic literature.

Whether rhetorical ecology or specific economy, both terms are meant to emphasize the fact that rhetorical activity does not ever take place in isolation but rather as part of a dynamic,

³²¹ Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, “Mind the Gap: Spiritualism and the Infrastructural Uncanny,” *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 4 (June 1, 2016): 900. <https://doi.org/10.1086/686945..>

³²² Geoghegan, “Mind the Gap,” 900

³²³ Lundberg, *Lacan in Public: Psychoanalysis and the Science of Rhetoric*, 3.

shifting network. Habits provide a middle term for discussing how flux and consistency coexist alongside one another. What I am specifically interested in talking about how part of the audience for much of this media regularly receives it providing unmediated access to some fundamental but suppressed aspect of reality. Remember that they are “martyrs of the unconscious,” merely passive participants in the process of signification rather than active agents. The suspicion evinced by the inherently secretive nature of the things they fixate on, such as MK-ULTRA. Since many of the records documenting MK-ULTRA’s operation were ordered destroyed, there will likely never be a complete picture of the operation’s activities.³²⁴ This produces a sense of something being hidden or obscured that compels some to dig deeper. As Gunn puts it, “it would seem the invention of mystery and intrigue is necessary to compel the blind obligation that sustains a public.”³²⁵ Thus, the perception of there being some kind of unknown or suppressed knowledge to be discovered is partly what enables the cohesion of the TI movement as public.

There’s also some resonance with the uncanny in a looser sense that isn’t necessarily committed to the more specific Lacanian sense used thus far but might still help account for aspects of TI media. This applies to both its content and its appearance within contemporary media infrastructure. First, many TI videos adhere to generic conventions of user-created media forms like a vlog or animated documentary. With respect to the latter, many TI videos are only unusual in terms of their explicit content. Oftentimes, people simply film themselves speaking into the camera. One imagines that if you could not understand the language a TI were speaking, there

³²⁴ Sharon Weinberger, “When the C.I.A. Was Into Mind Control,” *The New York Times*, September 10, 2019, sec. Books, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/10/books/review/poisoner-in-chief-stephen-kinzer.html>.

³²⁵ Joshua Gunn, “Death by Publicity: U.S. Freemasonry and the Public Drama of Secrecy,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2008): 269, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rap.0.0029>.

might not be anything that could alert the viewer to there being anything notable about the clip. As you can see, the basic units used to construct the media are derived from a widely accessible form of cultural production. Vanheule argues that in Schreber's case, drafting his memoirs and making them public provided him with a sense that there was a significance to what he had experienced and perhaps more importantly, gave him a "socially valued subjective position towards others" through assuming the role of author.³²⁶ Vanheule contends that this is implicit for Schreber, as a message returned in inverted form. If we extrapolate that logic to the case at hand, it seems reasonable to infer that part of the attraction for the continued publication of TI media online is that it reifies their position in a relatively stable field of representation. This field is what enables them to assume a symbolic role that would likely be otherwise be met with resistance from others. This is why the particular concerns driving the network of TI discourse matter here as well.

In the conclusion of his essay on the topic, Freud identifies two varieties of the uncanny. The first concerns ostensibly paranormal activities, such as "the omnipotence of thoughts, instantaneous wish-fulfillment, secret harmful forces and the return of the dead."³²⁷ Describing these as animistic beliefs, he notes that they typically evince a feeling of uncanniness when, despite having discarded them as false beliefs, they seem to have actually played out. For instance, Freud cites a case in which someone wishes to themselves in thought that another should die and then the person in question passes. The second variety of uncanny is derived from "repressed childhood complexes," which manifests when such complexes "that have been *surmounted* appear to have

³²⁶ Vanheule, *The Subject of Psychosis*, 120.

³²⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin, 2003), 154.

been confirmed.”³²⁸ In other words, like the abandoned animistic beliefs that seem to have bearing on the present, ideas and fears about how the world work appear to have renewed purchase. “Madness” is identified as an example of the former sense of uncanny at work since such a state discloses certain mental processes “whose stirrings” the observer “can dimly perceive in the corners of his own personality.”³²⁹

Returning to the infrastructural uncanny, Geoghegan deploys the term in service of a historical study examining how spiritualism was dependent upon these incapacities, stating that “spiritualism did not imitate media: it offered a means to scale between the gaps in...emerging technical forms.”³³⁰ Another treats fake news as an instance of this phenomenon, focusing on a story about French President Emmanuel Macron that bore such close resemblance to a legitimate article that it was circulated in several journalistic outlets.³³¹ To be clear though, I am not focusing on the technical aspects of infrastructure. Rather, I’m arguing that an account of infrastructural conditions is necessary to explain the uptake of ideas expressed in TI media as a public delusional metaphor. Such is especially pronounced with TIs, who feel they are subjected to surveillance and harassment from electronic and digital infrastructure in all areas of line. Moreover, as Sconce observes, the media plays an integral role in technical delusion because media convey meaning.³³²

³²⁸ Freud, *The Uncanny*, 154-155.

³²⁹ Freud, *The Uncanny*, 150.

³³⁰ Geoghegan, “Mind the Gap,” 902-3.

³³¹ Jonathan Gray, Liliana Bounegru, and Tommaso Venturini, “‘Fake News’ as Infrastructural Uncanny,” *New Media & Society* 22, no. 2 (February 1, 2020): 317-41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819856912>.

³³² Sconce, *Technical Delusion*, 293.

Matheson describes a Lacanian uncanny as being rooted in signification, as being “a repressed signifier that bleeds through a more familiar one. The phenomenon occurs with confusion of symbol and reality.”³³³ On r/gangstalking, this means there is a pattern of reception that regards these accounts as authentic and confirmation of one’s belief that they are in fact being targeted. Other viewers might struggle to find coherence in the narrative. Those who take TI narratives as actual documentation and disclosing some part of the world focus in on a few elements that they then foreground. TIs do disagree over the precise details of much of what they discuss but certainly don’t when it comes to some of the basic themes. The uncanny aspect of r/gangstalking is that from one perspective, it clearly contains numerous claims that cannot be true. Yet from another, that of the users who claim they are TIs, the claims must be taken as indication that targeting is real. This dynamic is what lends the board its uncanniness.

3.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attended to the formal aspects of the online TI community. I first situated my work alongside existing work in online communities. Following that, I argued that one way of accounting for the activity on r/gangstalking is to understand them as attempts to stage a process of metaphorization that results in the uptake of a delusional metaphor. TIs are engaged in a psychotic mode of reading the various signifiers that they encounter because of the foreclosure

³³³ Calum Lister Matheson, *Desiring the Bomb: Communication, Psychoanalysis, and the Atomic Age* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2018), 42.

of the Name-of-the-Father and its substitution by a delusional metaphor. This foreclosure enables the TI to operate under the pretense that they have unmediated access to the Symbolic. Put differently, TIs operate as if they are not subject to the basic protocols or rules governing the operation of language as a social link.³³⁴

These claims are developed through understanding the public interactions of TIs as a mediated psychotic structure, one that enables contact between users who might otherwise lack a shared link for making sense of their experiences. Formally speaking, the TI conspiracy narrative comes to assume the same structural role that the Name-of-the-Father would for other subjects. This temporary suturing of the hole in the Symbolic enables them to address the unconscious questions of their being concerning their position in relation to others. The formation of this new persona points to the significance of social relations in TI narratives, in which the antagonists are the faces of people seen in public and the worst outcome that a targeted person can experience is not immense physical harm or torture, but isolation from those closest to them. As a result, TIs may seek recognition from others online that would be rejected by those closest to them offline. I next analyzed how the habitual nature of these platforms exploits the drive of the subject. I concluded by arguing that we might regard r/gangstalking as an instance of the “infrastructural uncanny.” The confusion between fiction and reality as a condition for the board’s operation, as well as the resulting unwillingness to be “duped,” is what sustains it.

Part of the advantage of this intervention is that it enables a perspective that can account for the uptake of TI media by individual users and explain the public addressed nature of these videos. It also situates TI media not as a totally marginal phenomenon, but one that can be used as

³³⁴ Matheson, “Psychotic Discourse,” 194.

an illustrative example when it comes to the practice of conspiracy theory. In this case, the infrastructural conditions are such that individual users are pushed to publish and interact with one another as if the conspiracy were being revealed. The result is a kind of collaborative compensatory narrative that bears similarity to things like fan fiction. In the next chapter, I further examine the role of self-publication within this specific economy.

4.0 Making it Public: The Yieldable Object and TI Testimonial Videos

The personalization of the internet has fundamentally altered the underlying economics and affordances of online experience. Big Data and targeted advertising work in tandem in order to provide more narrowly focused pitches to potential customers. Perhaps the most famous anecdote concerning this phenomenon is the story of a father who discerned that his teenage daughter was pregnant after Target started mailing advertising materials intended for expecting mothers to their family home.³³⁵ Though there has been some criticism of the framing in the piece, the purchase of this story and others like it on the popular imagination speaks to how such experiences of being selected out of a broader aggregation of data have becoming increasingly common in online and offline experience alike. Casey Boyle argues that this is not just limited to the commercial realm because “as digital tools mediate more of our activities....every action we take now generates to a growing store of data that are then used for policy decisions.”³³⁶ Some, like Ian Bogost, consider such developments to be an outgrowth and intensification of previous corporate data aggregation practices.³³⁷ Bogost notes that “the data-privacy invasion is not a comic-book enemy of fixed form, one that can be cornered compromised, and defeated.” Bogost’s

³³⁵ Charles Duhigg, “How Companies Learn Your Secrets,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 2012, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/magazine/shopping-habits.html>.

³³⁶ Casey Boyle, “Pervasive Citizenship through #SenseCommons,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (May 26, 2016): 280, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2016.1171695>.

³³⁷ Ian Bogost, “Welcome to the Age of Privacy Nihilism,” *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/08/the-age-of-privacy-nihilism-is-here/568198/>.

remarks are meant to underscore the diffuse nature of corporate surveillance. However, I believe that we need to understand part of TI discourse as an attempt to literalize ubiquitous surveillance into a single actor.

As psychotic subjects, TIs are “martyrs of the unconscious,” with Lacan emphasizing the sense of “martyr” as being someone who has borne witness.³³⁸ On this point, Andrea Ward offers the helpful suggestion that “the psychotic carries his unconscious- visible for all- right there *on the* surface, in the imaginary. In doing so he exposes a truth which, while *visible* for all, is not *readable*, as it is not symbolically mediated.”³³⁹ Psychotic subjects also stage this incapacity in their own speech and it is observable in the uptake of their delusional metaphor.³⁴⁰ Cathrine Bjørnholt Michaelsen argues that following the uptake of a delusional metaphor, “the anonymous ‘it speaks’ of the unconscious is transposed onto the image of a specific external agent such as God, Satan, the CIA, or the next-door neighbor.” In other words, the Symbolic order gains a direction and order that would otherwise be absent for the psychotic.

As I argued in the previous chapter, we can fruitfully understand the memetic spread of the TI phenomenon as a delusional metaphor that is held in common within the TI community- and perhaps even more widely. Lacan reminds us that “in the very text of the delusion,” we find “a truth that isn’t hidden as it is in the neuroses, but made well and truly explicit and virtually

³³⁸ Lacan, *The Psychoses 1955-1956*, 132.

³³⁹ Andrea Wald, “On A Breakdown in Science: The Paranoid’s World and the Baroque,” *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* 31, no. II (2010): 196.

³⁴⁰ Cathrine Bjørnholt Michaelsen, “On a Language That Does Not Cease Speaking: Blanchot and Lacan on the Experience of Language in Literature and Psychosis,” *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 12, no. 2 (May 3, 2020): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17570638.2020.1774966>.

theorized.”³⁴¹ My wager is that through their relentless emphasis on electronic surveillance, state intelligence, and privacy violations, the TI movement indexes wider shifts in the meaning of these phenomena in the unconscious. As a result, the emergence of TI media needs to be situated within this broader context of personalization, data aggregation, and targeted advertising.

The construction “targeted individual” has a resonance with an understanding of the broad vulnerability of all users of digital media to be subject to this kind of passive surveillance. *The New York Times*, for instance, was able to piece together dozens of individual smartphone users’ movements through commercially available records. What distinguishes TIs from others, however, is that their identity depends upon testifying to being specifically selected out of a broader pool of potential candidates for a campaign of *active* harassment that is local to their bodies and daily experience. In other words, the agent doing the selecting is not the sort of passive curatorial mechanisms typically employed by Target and other corporations to select a pattern out of the clamor of data. Instead, in TI narratives, the actors responsible for the harassment are typically identified as “gangstalkers,” the people who function as emissaries of whichever institutional power is believed to be spearheading the campaign. In the contemporary technological milieu, nearly all users of digital media are targeted by ad-tech and other impersonal agents, not to mention the passive surveillance conducted by the NSA and other agencies.³⁴² This sense of being specially selected is probably part of the reason why MK-ULTRA and contemporary mass surveillance are

³⁴¹ Lacan, *The Psychoses 1955-1956*, 28.

³⁴² Mark Mazzetti and Michael S. Schmidt, “Ex-Worker at C.I.A. Says He Leaked Data on Surveillance,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2013, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/10/us/former-cia-worker-says-he-leaked-surveillance-data.html>.

elevated to such an important status within the community.³⁴³ The former provides a compelling and provocative example from American history of an instance in which regular citizens were subjected to cruel and inhumane psychological testing without their awareness or consent. Perhaps MK-ULTRA is valued as even greater source of information by TIS due to the program's clandestine nature and the destruction of government papers documenting its activities. The fixation on contemporary surveillance works according to a similar logic, perhaps serving as more relevant or compelling evidence of the state's willingness to intrude on the rights of all citizens without concern. Interestingly, the kind of corporate surveillance that has become more commonplace in recent memory attracts far less concern than its state counterpart.

One way of understanding some of the cultural production from TIs online is that they are attempts to become a part of a wider network of evidence documenting proof of the phenomenon. In this chapter, I focus principally on the practice of uploading videos of oneself describing one's experience as a TI. These testimonials make up a significant portion of TI media uploaded to YouTube. I argue that this practice functions as a guarantor of their identity and affords them the capacity to represent their identity within a stable field.³⁴⁴ More specifically, they are seeking recognition before the Other in a kind of public space. In the previous chapter, I described how the online contact between TIs may function as a kind of compensatory symbolic that might enable them a kind of gratification in the face of foreclosure. I continue that line of inquiry here by

³⁴³ For an account MK-ULTRA and other government programs that have captured TI attention, see Sconce, *Technical Delusion*, 264–65.

³⁴⁴ Daniel Frederick Beresheim, "Circulate Yourself: Targeted Individuals, the Yieldable Object & Self-Publication on Digital Platforms," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 37, no. 5 (October 19, 2020): 395–408, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2020.1800060>.

focusing specifically on the notion that these videos function as “containers” of the subject and enable them to become part of a broader archive of TI videos and by extension, the unconscious. Put differently, recording and uploading a video of one’s experience as TI reifies one’s experience, externalizing it and making it available for others.

To achieve this, I detail and leverage Lacan’s notion of the yieldable object as described in his seminar on anxiety, a concept meant to explore the possible implications of preserving aspects of oneself through different recording media. Though many of the technical aspects of today’s media differ significantly when compared with what was possible in Lacan’s time, the basic situation remains the same. I first offer an account of the political dimensions of publicity on social networking sites. I next describe Lacan’s notions of the *objet petit a* and the yieldable object with particular emphasis on the role of *objet a* in psychosis. The chapter concludes with a reading of two TI testimonials by way of the yieldable object, in which I argue that TIs can offer an insightful example into the changing nature of the role of publicity on social networking sites.

4.1 Centering the self online

The personalization of media and its aggregation of data about users has caused significant changes that require us to revise assumptions about how these technologies function in principle. Henry Jenkins argues that a “sticky mentality” or one driven towards centralizing, encourages marketers to find ways to serve multiple audiences via offering users “limited and controlled ways

for individuals to ‘personalize’ content.”³⁴⁵ One obvious driver of the personalization trend has been the potential profit to be earned through marketing products directly to customers who have already demonstrated an interest in a product or something adjacent to it. Joseph Turow and Nick Couldry write about the how the invention of new methods for recording user activity requires us to rethink the boundaries of communication studies, calling for “primary attention to surveillance as a key infrastructural dimension of economic and social life.”³⁴⁶ Turow and Coudry rightly point out the potential for “social discrimination” as a result of this arrangement. This suspicion is partly confirmed by the work of Bol et al. They caution that targeted ads often tend to rely upon broad demographic stereotypes and can exploit people’s fears, as in the case of health-related adverts.³⁴⁷ The relationship between users and marketers is one that is grossly asymmetrical with respect to access to information. Yet there is some basis to challenge received wisdom about the efficacy of targeted advertisements. In 2013, eBay stopped advertising via Google after discovering that such advertising exerted virtually no influence over their sales.³⁴⁸ Moreover, some have expressed concerns over the degree to which Google may curate its results and advertisements in a way that

³⁴⁵ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (NYU Press, 2013), 6.

³⁴⁶ Joseph Turow and Nick Couldry, “Media as Data Extraction: Towards a New Map of a Transformed Communications Field,” *Journal of Communication* 68, no. 2 (April 2018): 422, <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqx011>.

³⁴⁷ Nadine Bol et al., “Vulnerability in a Tracked Society: Combining Tracking and Survey Data to Understand Who Gets Targeted with What Content,” *New Media & Society* 22, no. 11 (November 2020): 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820924631>.

³⁴⁸ Ray Fisman, “Did EBay Just Prove That Paid Search Ads Don’t Work?,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 11, 2013, <https://hbr.org/2013/03/did-ebay-just-prove-that-paid>.

disproportionately harms smaller businesses.³⁴⁹ The outcry over potentially improper usage of user data in the case of Cambridge Analytica reveals the extent to which people identify themselves or their political agency with their data profiles.³⁵⁰ Regardless of the underlying economics, the movement toward personalization only seems to be intensifying in the present.

Rhetorical scholars have developed varied approaches to the digital, both emphasizing the role of the individual rhetors behind the screen in addition to figuring digitality as a less discrete, ambient force. Jeffrey T. Grabill and Stacey Pigg have argued that in digital forums, the “messiness” of rhetors’ identities functions as a rhetorical resource for facilitating discussions about an object of shared concern, allowing them to discuss ideas not merely as concepts but as material situations impacting real people.³⁵¹ Similarly, Jeff Rice argues that “Blogging or any other networked exchange...is a way of generating identity, not at the personal level....but at the disciplinary, compositional, technical, professional and other levels that we perceive as having traits, characteristics, and features of writing.”³⁵² T.A.M Carnegie argues that we should “critically examine the interface” and its role in guiding users through the operation of the larger digital

³⁴⁹ Kirsten Grind West Sam Schechner, Robert McMillan and John, “How Google Interferes With Its Search Algorithms and Changes Your Results,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 15, 2019, sec. Tech, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-google-interferes-with-its-search-algorithms-and-changes-your-results-11573823753>.

³⁵⁰ Confessore, “Cambridge Analytica and Facebook.”

³⁵¹ Jeffrey T. Grabill and Stacey Pigg, “Messy Rhetoric: Identity Performance as Rhetorical Agency in Online Public Forums,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (March 1, 2012): 171, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2012.660369>.

³⁵² Jeff Rice, “Networked Exchanges, Identity, Writing,” *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 23, no. 3 (July 1, 2009): 314, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651909333178>.

system that it veils by conceptualizing the interface via the rhetorical category of *exordium* or introduction.³⁵³ Boyle et al. argue that the idiom of transduction should supplant understanding digital rhetoric as solely consisting of “interactivity between separate nodes,” claiming that transduction enables the critic to speak to the multiple levels of registration that occurs in digital communication.³⁵⁴ Joe Hatfield offers an account of how we might figure individual users within such a scheme, “clicking, scrolling, gazing, commenting, re-posting, and creating and sharing common multi-media texts, all consist of bodily actions targeted toward circulating the felt weight of exigence and promoting the growth of the network as a whole.”³⁵⁵ In Hatfield’s account, “degrees of affect” from prior events are carried forward into a variety of discourses and work to shape “any seemingly new act of rhetorical invention.”³⁵⁶

TIs, whether they realize it or not, are mapping how individual users relate to platforms in a clear fashion that is perhaps less evident in other groups of users due to the normalization of the practice. To be active online requires one to forfeit a degree of privacy and to become aware that one is entering into mediated contact with others. While ad-tech represents one possible point in the trajectory of personalization, sharing oneself with others can assume other, more deliberate forms. The practice of self-publication online provides users with a technical means of creating

³⁵³ Teena A. M. Carnegie, “Interface as Exordium: The Rhetoric of Interactivity,” *Computers and Composition*, A Thousand Pictures: Interfaces and Composition, 26, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 171, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2009.05.005>.

³⁵⁴ Casey Boyle, James J. Brown Jr, and Steph Ceraso, “The Digital: Rhetoric Behind and Beyond the Screen,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (May 27, 2018): 258, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2018.1454187>.

³⁵⁵ Hatfield, “The Queer Kairotic,” 28.

³⁵⁶ Hatfield, “The Queer Kairotic,” 30.

something that is a stand-in for the self online. Matheson identifies an “exchange anxiety” around the need to give up part of oneself in order “to participate in the linguistic economy,” identifying personalized digital platforms like Tinder and LinkedIn as spaces in which this sort of reaction is particularly evident.³⁵⁷ Identifying themselves with their updates, photos and other markers of self online, “the subject’s own identity is something like the fecal object that is given in response to the Other’s’ demand but not without misgivings.”³⁵⁸ Jacob Johanssen argues that the sort of relationship that this fosters between platforms and subjects is necessarily perverse in nature. Since the “individual archive” of a user’s data must be melded together with that from others in order to become meaningful for the platforms themselves, belying the individual user’s investment in a platform.³⁵⁹ People identify themselves with their data but there is an uncertainty about what they should give up and under what conditions

4.2 The internet as public sphere

The Internet has long been seen as an agent for delivering the truth and for enabling and perhaps even enhancing better political discourse. The received narrative figuring the internet as a liberatory technology is perhaps best emblemized by John Perry Barlow’s “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace.” In that text, Barlow announced that the internet would be a free speech utopia and one “naturally independent of the tyrannies” that governments have

³⁵⁷ Matheson, “Filthy Lucre,” 11.

³⁵⁸ Matheson, “Filthy Lucre,” 10.

³⁵⁹ Johanssen, *Psychoanalysis and Digital Culture*, 147.

conventionally imposed upon the expression of ideas.³⁶⁰ Though such a proposal seems untenable in the present, the text is important for rhetorically associating the nascent internet with a kind of “lifestyle libertarianism” that ultimately had the effect of “shutting down or misdirecting substantive discussion of such issues as content and infrastructure regulation, global governance, access, privacy and intellectual property rights.”³⁶¹ This framing of the Web as a forum for free discussion has had longstanding ideological consequences.

Scholarship has shown a tendency to gravitate toward conceptualizing the politics of the Internet via Jürgen Habermas’s public sphere theory, in which he argues that the emergence of spaces like coffee houses, salons and others in Enlightenment-era Europe served as the basis for the possibility of a group of private citizens around an object of “common concern.”³⁶² Scholars like Lincoln Dahlberg³⁶³ and Terje Rasmussen³⁶⁴ have adapted the Habermasian model for their own inquiries into the democratic possibilities on the internet. Other approaches seek to complicate the model and address its potentially exclusionary nature through introducing counterpublics that function as spaces of discourse that sit in opposition to a hegemonic public. Mark Davis even

³⁶⁰ John Barlow, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” *Duke Law & Technology Review* 18, no. 1 (August 11, 2019): 5.

³⁶¹ Aimée Hope Morrison, “An Impossible Future: John Perry Barlow’s ‘Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,’” *New Media & Society* 11, no. 1–2 (February 1, 2009): 67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444808100161>.

³⁶² Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), 36.

³⁶³ Lincoln Dahlberg, “The Internet, Deliberative Democracy, and Power: Radicalizing the Public Sphere,” *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 3, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 47–64, https://doi.org/10.1386/macp.3.1.47_1.

³⁶⁴ Terje Rasmussen, *The Internet Soapbox* (Scandinavian University Press, 2016).

posits an “anti-public sphere” as space in which “factual information is often misrepresented and argument is routinely skewed to achieve certain preordained conclusions, with a level of hostility to democratic conventions and institutions that in general exceeds the aspirations of ‘counterpublics.’”³⁶⁵ Zizi Papacharissi’s work in this area has examined how “social media facilitate feelings of engagement” and “help activate latent ties that may be crucial to mobilization of networked publics.”³⁶⁶ Concerning the power of a symbiotic relationship between media consumption and production to inflect political processes, Jenkins argues that “the political effects” of online fandom culture are not merely that there is an enhanced circulation and consumption of texts, but also that participants gain access to “new social structures” and “new models of cultural production.”³⁶⁷ TI media occupies a peculiar place within these discourses, given that it rends together participatory culture and political discourse and could arguably be regarded as kind of misinformation.

Jodi Dean offers a powerful critique against such understandings, claiming that “publicity...is the ideology of technoculture.”³⁶⁸ In contrast to viewing the internet as a public sphere, Dean argues we should instead understand the Web as a multitude of conflicting and

³⁶⁵ Mark Davis, “The Online Anti-Public Sphere,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (February 1, 2021): 144, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420902799>.

³⁶⁶ Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 8.

³⁶⁷ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture : Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 246, <https://doi.org/10.18574/9780814743683>.

³⁶⁸ Jodi Dean, “Why the Net Is Not a Public Sphere,” *Constellations* 10, no. 1 (2003): 101, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.00315>.

antagonistic forces sustained by communicative capitalism.³⁶⁹ In other words, rather than supposing that the Internet provides all with equal access and ability to participate in free discussion, Dean advises us to regard such narratives as an alibi for the commodification of users' online activity. In sum, while there is no consensus concerning the nature of online publics, scholars have had to devise increasingly sophisticated frameworks to account for the rapid changes wrought forth online. Understanding the political function of online publicity should have implications for such scholars. Dean states that publicity is driven by calls for disclosure and by a demand for secrets to be revealed that will "realize the public as the ideal self-identical subject/object of democracy."³⁷⁰ TIs stage this tension between publicity and mediation on the one hand and secrecy on the other in their characteristic way.

As noted earlier, there is a fraught relationship between TIs and mediation. Indeed, it is not inaccurate to claim that psychosis is a rejection of the mediating work achieved by metaphor in favor of metonymy. The mediation of the self towards a mass public is no exception. In the next section, I develop an exposition of Lacan's notion of the *objet petit a* and its relation to psychosis and more specifically, its paranoiac form. Introducing these concepts will better position us to understand how TI videos come to function a stand-in for the subject.

³⁶⁹ Dean, "Why the Net," 106.

³⁷⁰ Dean, "Why the Net," 101.

4.3 Objet petit a and psychosis

The *objet petit a* is Lacan's term for the envelopment of desire around objects that are perceived as capable of eliminating the lack that serves as the basis for the subject. Sometimes rendered as "object-cause of desire" in English, Lacan himself insisted that the term remain untranslated in order to retain the status of an algorithm.³⁷¹ The *objet a* is "the object that cannot be swallowed...which remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier."³⁷² In other words, there is something about the object which causes an excess of desire in the subject, as if there were something beyond the object that could satisfy the lack inherent to the subject. The recalcitrant nature of the object in the Real gives rise to its Symbolic integration. This is a structural feature of desire and as such cannot be abated. Lacan explains, "the subject is something lacunary, and it is in the lacuna that the subject establishes the function of a certain object, *qua* lost object. It is the status of the *objet a* in so far as it is present in the drive."³⁷³ The sense of "lost object" here refers to the notion that this object, if recovered, could eliminate the constitutive lack of the subject. That lack that is inherent to the subject is what causes them to desire, and each new object is "caught in the rails of metonymy," serving as a promise to alleviate the subject of their excess desire.³⁷⁴ People may attribute great significance to material things or fantasize about professional and

³⁷¹ Alan Sheridan, "Translator's Note," in *The Seminar of Jaques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1977), 282.

³⁷² Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 270.

³⁷³ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 185.

³⁷⁴ Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 431.

personal success, but Lacan's position is that attaining such things merely sets the subject up to look for a new object.

Desire metonymically bounces from one object to another, "hook[ing] on wherever it can," weaving bundles of unrealizable gratifications around one object and then moving to another and then another.³⁷⁵ Since desire is in principle incapable of being extinguished, the identity of the desideratum is constantly shifting, "externally extending toward the *desire for something else*."³⁷⁶ In this way, the relation between desire and desideratum is analogous to the relation between signified and signifier. As Dylan Evans puts it, "although the truth about desire is present to some degree in all speech, speech can never articulate the *whole* truth about desire; whenever speech attempts to articulate desire; there is always a leftover, a surplus, which exceeds speech."³⁷⁷

Incapable of having it all, the subject vacillates between objects, substituting one object for another. Even so, this does not lead to the extinction of desire, something that is considered an impossibility from a Lacanian perspective. Moreover, *objet a* provides a term for identifying how the subject deals with excess desire through the selection of a partial object. While many different things can assume the position within that structure, its function is not extinguished by any one object and so the object-cause of desire is fungible. Each of these partial objects are taken as a kind of "missing piece" that would enable the completion of the subject. These can take many forms for the subject. They may desire material goods like clothing or food, or a romantic partner, or any number of other things that are perceived as being able to provide total satisfaction and complete

³⁷⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Pierce (Malden, MA: Polity, 2015), 103.

³⁷⁶ Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 431. Emphasis in the original.

³⁷⁷ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 37.

the subject. Being caught in the rails of metonymy, however, the selected object is unable to exhaust the desire of the subject. The will thus find different objects or configurations of fantasy to sustain this pursuit of impossible fulfillment.

Communication scholars have leveraged *objet a* as a tool for theorizing how desire operates in public. Jason D. Myres's work exemplifies this approach, in one instance offering a novel theory of publics by describing their formation along five registers of *objet a* that are articulated by Lacan in *Seminar X*: the oral, anal, scopic, vocatory, and superegoic registers all make up the "montage of drive."³⁷⁸ In another instance, Myres examines how Stephen Hawking's distinctive voice enabled the formation of the public as an *objet a* and "rhetorical device," insofar as the silence of the public serves as a "(mis)taken cause" of the sentiments applied to Hawking's voice.³⁷⁹ Also focusing on the vocative register is Nathan Bedsole's work on Gore Vidal and William F. Buckley in order to advance a view of the voice as not merely providing a supplemental quality to argument, but in fact as a kind of constitutive lack inherent to public life and argumentation itself.³⁸⁰ Through examining discourse that fixated on the role of Vidal and Buckley's voices in the documentary film *Best of Enemies*, Bedsole claims that the voice is "a negativity that structures the enjoyments by which our public lives are made"³⁸¹ Gerald Vorhees identifies a similar function of the voice in

³⁷⁸ Jason D. Myres, "Five Formations of Publicity: Constitutive Rhetoric from Its Other Side," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 104, no. 2 (May 2018): 197, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2018.1447140>.

³⁷⁹ Jason David Myres, "The Bit Player: Stephen Hawking and the Object Voice," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (March 14, 2016): 166, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2016.1142111>.

³⁸⁰ Nathan Henry Bedsole, "Voice as Little Object (a)Rgument: On Hearing Gore Vidal and William F. Buckley Jr.," *Argumentation & Advocacy* 54, no. 4 (November 2018): 282, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511431.2018.1509594>.

³⁸¹ Bedsole, "Voice," 336.

video games, noting that, “games that are read and subvocalized generate some friction, some possibility for the play of meaning and the disruption of the imbedded ideological content and form of the videogame.”³⁸² Though not in the field of communication proper, Yannis Stavrakakis has argued that in advertising, “fantasy reduces the constitutive lack in the subject to the lack of the product that it simultaneously offers as an *objet petit a*, as a promise for the final elimination of this lack.”³⁸³ What each of these interventions demonstrate is the potential to identify how lack enables the proliferation of desire not just at an individual level, but at a collective one as well.

In psychosis, the situation of the *objet a* is different from its status in other subjects because the object itself is not yet separate from the subject. Vanheule reconstructs the refinement of Lacan’s account of psychosis in the 1960s by tending to the role of *objet a* in psychosis. The key feature distinguishing the neurotic from the psychotic in this account is the position of the subject in relation to *objet a*. The neurotic subject is able to achieve relative stability with respect to their position towards the Symbolic by locating *objet a* external to themselves in the field of the Other.³⁸⁴ Situating *objet a* external to themselves provides the neurotic with the grounding needed to believe that the Other is also something that desires. In contrast, the psychotic subject experiences *objet a* as an internal element that the subject must confront. For example, many TIs will describe having voices projected into their heads by their harassers or otherwise not being in control of their conscious thoughts. This sense of a loss of control or agency occurs internally to

³⁸² Gerald Voorhees, “Materialist Fantasies: The Voice as *Objet Petit a* in Digital Games,” *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 8, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 260, https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.8.3.247_1.

³⁸³ Yannis Stavrakakis, “On the Critique of Advertising Discourse,” *Third Text* 14, no. 51 (June 1, 2000): 88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820008576856>.

³⁸⁴ Vanheule, 134.

the subject, even if they were to locate its origin in some external source. It is thus experienced as an external imposition.

Having rejected the law as a shared basis for meaning, the psychotic subject is no longer encumbered by limitations upon their desire and finds themselves in a meaning-laden environment on the basis of metonymic associations. “Everything has become a sign for him,” Lacan says, adding that for the psychotic, everything “has a meaning but the subject is very often incapable of saying what it is.”³⁸⁵ While the neurotic subject regards the symbolic order as incomplete and vexing, the psychotic subject encounters it as inherently meaning-laden and intentional, even if they cannot say in exactly what sense. Where others find contingency, the psychotic sees necessity. Vanheule recovers a formulation on the matter from one of Lacan’s unpublished papers. In this paper, Lacan posits that the psychotic subject “has its cause in its own pocket.” Vanheule glosses the statement as meaning that the subject experiences “an overwhelming non-signified excitation that manifest itself within.”³⁸⁶ Not yet having submitted to the Symbolic in the same manner as the hysteric, this unsignifiable excess is why psychosis might properly be described as a problem of regulating *jouissance* through social links.³⁸⁷ This was my point in having described TI speech as a kind of public-facing private speech in the previous chapter. Vanheule goes on to observe that conventionally, “people living through a psychosis...feel that their sense of life has changed. A strange force, which manifests itself as an experiential fact that cannot easily be named, seizes the subject.”³⁸⁸ Due to a failure to differentiate themselves from the Symbolic, psychotic subjects feel

³⁸⁵ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III: The Psychoses 1955-1956*, 9.

³⁸⁶ Vanheule, *The Subject of Psychosis*, 137.

³⁸⁷ Vanheule, *The Subject of Psychosis*, 163.

³⁸⁸ Vanheule, *The Subject of Psychosis*, 138.

as though they are inhabited by a force beyond themselves. Somewhat ironically, this is due to the non-extracted nature of *objet a* in psychosis, due to this sense of external control originating within the subject. This unnamable excitation becomes a point of fixation.

The seizure of the subject's being by some alien power is readily observable in TI media. Typically, many of these narratives begin with an account of TIs feeling as though they are being controlled or observed by some kind of foreign intelligence. Those feelings can be accompanied by a lingering sense that one is not responsible for one's thoughts and perhaps even that some other consciousness is able to discern or command what one is thinking. Even those who buy into the movement's core ideas but don't assert being manipulated at the bodily level often start to read otherwise innocuous signs in their environment as indicators of a deeper level of control (for example, in videos documenting "gangstalking," people sitting in parked vehicles might be taken to be doing reconnaissance work.) Rather than locating such thoughts as internal to the subject, as their own perception, locating the efficacy of such sensations outside of oneself enables the subject to avoid establishing the boundaries between themselves and world that are required for other psychical structures. The source for those thoughts is guaranteed by an object beyond the subject and the influence of the object is experienced as unavoidable and intolerable.

A further distinction that enhances the strength of this analysis is one drawn between paranoiac and schizophrenic structures within psychosis. Paranoia is structured around a notion that the Other is driven by an obscene jouissance and seeks its own satisfaction in the persecution of the subject.³⁸⁹ Vanheule helpfully notes that the paranoid subject is not driven by belief per se,

³⁸⁹ Vanheule, *The Subject of Psychosis*, 139

but rather “interpretation.”³⁹⁰ Since the psychotic subject has no issue when it comes to obtaining belief, the *objet a* of their delusions repeatedly appear in a way that only serves to confirm their existing sense that a mysterious Other is intent on making them the object of their torment. The traces of conspiracy are self-evident and everywhere.

A schizophrenic structure, in contrast, lacks any footing in the Symbolic and experiences the *objet a* as divorced from the signifying structure. Alphonse De Waelhens writes that while the Other is fully excluded from experience of the schizophrenic, “reference is there but it is also hopelessly distorted and truncated” for the paranoiac.³⁹¹ In other words, if the paranoiac mistakes fiction for reality, the schizophrenic experiences that fiction as utterly senseless and untethered to their own corporeality. The general TI narrative adheres closely to the paranoiac structure, insofar as they see themselves at the center of an insidious plot executed on behalf of the government. The actors who serve on behalf of that organization are seemingly omnipotent and are suspected of being driven by obscene motivations. The relationship of the paranoiac subject to the Other and truth is also distinct relative to that of the schizophrenic. De Waelhens also argues that the Other is not seen as an instrument towards realizing truth but rather as a “witness of the truth” and that the paranoiac confuses themselves with the Other in this regard. As witnesses to the truth, paranoiac subjects effectively deny their mediation by and through language. Instead of relying upon the Symbolic, paranoiac subjects remain stuck in the Imaginary and as discussed previously, interpret its meaning without doubt.³⁹² This leads de Waelhens to claim that “testimony would be

³⁹⁰ Vanheule, *The Subject of Psychosis*, 140.

³⁹¹ Alphonse De Waelhens, *Schizophrenia: A Philosophical Reflection on Lacan’s Structuralist Interpretation*, trans. W.A Ver Eecke (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1978), 156.

³⁹² Waelhens, *Schizophrenia*, 152.

completely futile” for the paranoid subject, insofar as they lack any conception of the Other as a participant in the disclosure of truth. Rather, truth is self-evident and obvious from the perspective of the paranoid. More succinctly, de Waelhens says that the paranoid’s “speech is not really addressed to any real person.” By this, de Waelhens invokes the notion of Other as third in this section. Specifically, this is a sense of other as the kind of broader context or abstraction of the speaking situation.

Derek Hook has argued that we should understand the capacity of the Other to register signification as being like that of a referee, insofar as they “adjudicate” or provide “symbolic registration” of a subject’s signification.³⁹³ Matheson proposes that our understanding of this competence can be enhanced if we draw upon the rhetorical tradition and understand it as concerning the “propriety or decorum” of speech, specifically insofar as it concerns “the appropriateness of Symbolic linkages.”³⁹⁴ With this particular aspect of the Symbolic in mind, we are now better positioned to understand the claim that paranoid speech has no real addressee. Paranoid speech lacks an ironic awareness with how an auditor might interpret the linkages being drawn between ideas. In the case of TIs, this means fully identifying with a position that conforms to the received image of a paranoid person to a nearly parodic degree. Lacan is clear that “the modern ego” is “the paranoid subject of scientific civilization,” specifically in the sense that subjects establish an ideal-ego via inferences made from others’ speech about how they themselves are seen as a potential object relative to others.³⁹⁵ If all knowledge is ultimately paranoid, then

³⁹³ Hook, *Six Moments in Lacan*, 15.

³⁹⁴ Calum Lister Matheson, “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud,” in *Reading Lacan’s Écrits: From ‘The Freudian Thing’ to ‘Remarks on Daniel Lagache’* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 152.

³⁹⁵ Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 852.

what distinguishes paranoia in psychosis from paranoia in general is persistently mistaking conjecture as unmediated truth. In other words, the paranoid believes in the Other-of-the-Other, that there is something guaranteeing their significations. TIs are remarkable because they resist how language mediates and conditions their identity. As I've mentioned before, the lack of irony on the part of the psychotic is a consequence of them remaining at the Imaginary level.

4.4 The search for the cause of gangstalking

The paranoid nature of the structure provides adherents to the TI narrative with an opportunity to speculate about why they are selected. Despite the wide variety of speculative answers, they nearly all comport with the premise that the Other is bent on receiving their own satisfaction at the expense of the subject. For example, on the “question-and-answer” site Quora, there are many posts concerning gangstalking or TIs, and questions about why some people are chosen for targeting are some of the most common in the genre. On a post asking “How are targeted individuals chosen and why?,” one respondent explains that he witnessed a murder and that companies like Google and Lockheed Martin are colluding to stalk him.³⁹⁶ Another anonymous respondent to the same query says it is because they are “Arab and muslim” and attest to over 15 years of surveillance, attributing its beginnings to when they “started reading up on the Illuminati.” Tomo Shibata, a prominent TI activist, and author of *The Invisible Maiming Torture Enterprise of Organized Stalking Assaults*, argues that law enforcement has a particular bias against those “with

³⁹⁶ “How Are Targeted Individuals Chosen and Why?,” Quora, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.quora.com/How-are-targeted-individuals-chosen-and-why>.

perceived psychiatric disability” due to the relative ease with which their testimony can be undermined.³⁹⁷ Shibata also suggests that survivors of parental sexual abuse are particularly vulnerable, citing psychiatrist Judith Herman’s work on the subject. While these are just a few of many potential examples, it can be concluded that while there is wide dissensus about the cause of targeting within the community, the reasons generated by the community tend to concern exploitation by some figure driven by an obscene enjoyment. While individual participants may disagree and vacillate over the reasons for being selected as a TI, there is an implicit consensus that such a program exists and there is some rationale for why TIs specifically were chosen. Even in cases where it is alleged that the TI program is a contemporary COINTELPRO operation being waged against regular people, TIs typically mention the irredeemably rotten personalities of the people involved.

In this section, I have meant to provide a brief synoptic account on the role of *objet a* in psychosis and how it is implicated in our understanding of the TI movement. In doing so, I also drew a distinction between paranoiac and schizophrenic structures within Lacanian thought, arguing that the TI movement should be considered paranoiac on the basis of its peculiar relation to *objet a*. While I remain focused on the TI movement for the remainder of this chapter, I emphasize a mode of *objet a* that is not peculiar to them and can inform our understanding of more widespread patterns of social media usage.

³⁹⁷Tomo Shibata, *The Invisible Maiming Torture Enterprise of Organized Stalking Assaults* (Createspace Independent Publishing, 2012), 21.

4.5 The yieldable object

The notion of a “yieldable object” emerges late in *Seminar X* as a special instance of the *objet a*. The yieldable object is a technical object that can serve as a stand-in for the natural object that is the subject’s corporeal being.³⁹⁸ This is an instance of *objet a* that “sets aside the possibility of having it in store, in stock, in retail circulation.” Specifically, Lacan says that in this case, it is not “an investment in the a” but rather “investiture.”³⁹⁹ Though sparing in his elaboration of the distinction, we can understand the latter term as a reference to the subject’s identification with its own self-representation. The yieldable object functions as a stand-in for the subject, able to function competently as an extension of the ego-ideal. In other words, in order to comport with the demands of the Other, subjects adopt phallic qualities or those qualities believed to be considered desirable by the Other. The subject maintains an identification with this externalized ideal as a result, it serves as substitute for the subject’s presence.

Lacan identifies how emergent technologies have facilitated the possibility of separating the specular image of the body from its corporeality. While Lacan points out the possibility of lining up “the shelves of a library” with yieldable objects “in the form of gramophone record or reels of tape” in his own time, the technical means of storing such objects in this way have greatly proliferated.⁴⁰⁰ If we extend his thinking into the contemporary era, I believe Lacan offers tools to account for why people may feel compelled to present themselves online. If the self emerges out

³⁹⁸ Lacan, *Anxiety*, 313. I follow Alain Badiou and Vanheule’s lead here in drawing a distinction between existence and being.

³⁹⁹ Lacan, *Anxiety*, 314.

⁴⁰⁰ Lacan, *Anxiety*, 315.

of a dialectical movement between lack and desire, the publication of materials depicting the self allows for one to become part of a broader network of others seeking similar recognition. In the case at hand, TI testimonies are an efficient means of conveying such experiences and detailing what are taken to be its essential elements. The TI video functions as an externalization or alienation of that experience, a gesture that enables them to participate in the specific economy of the TI movement. In this way, some TIs are able to articulate an aspect of their experience as a targeted person that seems irreducibly unique through these broader practices.

The relation of the psychotic subject to the yieldable object should be understood as metonymic in nature given such a subject's nature to the Symbolic. Words are things for the psychotic and possess an inherent efficacy.⁴⁰¹ Other subjects have greater uncertainty about how to relate to the Symbolic as a shared fiction with pragmatic consequences. In other words, the psychotic subject does not understand the Symbolic as being a system of signification organized by rules that subjects obey without conscious awareness.⁴⁰² Moreover, there is often a sense of urgency surrounding TIs need to convey their experiences to other people. Oftentimes the TI program is described as a violation of human rights on a world historical scale. The abstract nature of both the claims of harm against TIs (voice beings inserted into one's head, "street theater," etc.) and the stakes behind them speak to a sense of disconnect from a wider Symbolic understanding of what motivates outside interest in social movements. While pitching the stakes at the highest level of abstraction might be *grammatically* how one makes a powerful appeal, this perspective is divorced from an understanding of the affective flows governing such investment.

⁴⁰¹ Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*, 95.

⁴⁰² Leader, *What Is Madness?*, 49.

Perhaps there is a sense of direct efficacy behind the publication of the videos as well, in the sense that merely publicizing their narrative might allow them to seize control of it. As mentioned earlier, many TIs tend to be quite prolific in their publications, so there may also be a kind of therapeutic aspect to simply getting something out there. Moreover, the publication of their image makes it a part of broader symbolic network sustained by a shared discursive link. Per Sconce's suggestion that perhaps people are shifting towards an understanding of themselves as nexuses of information integrated into socio-technical systems, these videos can be understood as attempts to seek verification of their identities before the Other. In tandem with the notion that these videos lack a real addressee, we might better understand them as an attempt to externalize an ego-ideal in a stable field of representation, in this instance a media platform.

For my purposes, I focus on videos in which TIs appear on camera and provide an account of their experience of being targeted. There are a substantial number of TI videos on YouTube that take this form. Users often use a front-facing camera and recount individual experiences in connection to being targeted or their own theories about the nature and purpose of the program. If we regard these posts as yieldable objects, then we can understand their publication as securing their presence before the Other in a stable field of representation. In the conclusion of his work on technical delusion, Jeffrey Sconce identifies the persistence of influencing delusions as a sign that "both sane and insane are learning to think of themselves as avatars operating within the field of information, understanding that power's most salient location is now information itself. "'How should I behave?'" becomes "'How should I signify?'"⁴⁰³ In this sense, TIs are not distinct from the ordinary user of social media who updates their personal profile or publishes images of themselves

⁴⁰³Sconce, *The Technical Delusion*, 241.

to a broad audience. They do, however, serve as a particularly clear case of how this relation unfolds. In what follows, I analyze videos from two prominent TIs that conform to the generic features previously outlined. I tend especially to the role of self-publication in these videos and how this documentation and circulation of these self-representations work in tandem with other aspects of the movement.

4.6 Myron May's final video

In Myron May's final video published before he committed a mass shooting, he describes how both "voice of god" and "image induction" technology were being used against him by his persecutors.⁴⁰⁴ Both of these technologies are purported by May to be the instruments enabling the manipulation and communication of his aural and visual perceptions. May mentions that there was a period of about "two months," where he did not yet realize that he was a targeted individual. During this time, he said that he began hearing voices around his apartment that would comment on his behavior in the third person, noting changes in May's location within the house and other unremarkable incidents. May specifically identifies that there was a moment where he did not wash his hands after using the bathroom in which the voices commented, "Oh, he's not even going to wash his hands!" Rather than experiencing his ego as a unity, May is narrating the growing fissure between his ego *qua* consciousness and his conscious thought. Rather than being solely the author of his thoughts, he is instead audience to them as well.

⁴⁰⁴ The Apprentice of Honor, *Myron May Mind Control Victim*, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1vIkUZjRl4>.

In the video, May attributes the commentary he experiences in his consciousness to his upstairs neighbors having rigged his home for surveillance before he learned about the TI movement. Another way to understand the phenomenon that May is describing as “Real aspects of signification” which emerge from the effects of the rejection of a paternal signifier.⁴⁰⁵ Tom Eyers glosses the phrase as referring to “those signifiers torn away from the negative constitution of meaningful communication... that...must be presupposed, if kept at bay, for *any* signification to be operative for the subject.” The premise is that meaningful communication is partially constituted through making judgements about what is or is not of importance in a particular instance. Not everything is meaning-laden or significant and being able to maintain a distinction between the two is partially what distinguishes psychotic from non-psychotic subjects.

The claim is connected to the observation made by Lacan when he describes the psychotic subject seized by delusion as situated in “a language devoid of dialectic,” as discussed in the previous chapter.⁴⁰⁶ This failure to become beholden to the social aspects of language can result in a subject with unclear boundaries determining inside and outside, self and other. This is what is identified in *Seminar III* as Wolf Man’s “lining” and is “nothing but the Symbolically mandated split caused by the necessity for the identification with the image of the other.”⁴⁰⁷ Lacan states that it is as if Wolf Man is talking to his own ego, which is precisely what May seems to be describing

⁴⁰⁵ Tom Eyers, *Lacan and the Concept of the “Real”* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012), 41, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137026392>.

⁴⁰⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 231.

⁴⁰⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan III: the Psychoses*, 14 in Eyers, *Lacan and the Concept of the ‘Real’*, 41.

in this clip. May's ego is not even a singular entity, but instead takes the form of an audience providing running commentary on his behavior. This 'lining' is the very basis of distinguishing between the inside and outside of a subject. May's experience of interiority has instead become one of exteriority; this commentary has the effect of objectifying him and depriving himself of a sense of autonomy. This is an instance of the externalized *objet a*. The source of conscious experience is now experienced as something fundamentally outside of May himself.

These fraying boundaries lead to the formation of an alternative identity within that signifying system. As Matheson notes, part of what distinguishes the psychotic is their refusal to fully identify with the socially circulated linguistic token used to represent an individual.⁴⁰⁸ The submission of signification to the regulatory force of the delusion is what occurs in metaphorization. This is part of the process of a delusional metaphor coming to perform functions that would typically be reserved for the-Name-of-the-Father.⁴⁰⁹ Todd McGowan describes the "Name-of-the Father" as "the symbolic iteration of social authority as such."⁴¹⁰ McGowan identifies "God" as one such historical example of such a signifier but there could be many others. In this instance, May's publication of his video clearly was meant to convey an explanation of the experiences and motives informing his violent attack in his absence. In describing his motivation behind the attack, however, he also is providing a substantial account of his experience of his gradual uptake of his delusion.

⁴⁰⁸ Matheson, "Psychotic Discourse," 199.

⁴⁰⁹ Vanheule, *The Subject of Psychosis*, 100. Note that in Vanheule's interpretation of Lacan, what distinguishes a delusion is not the content of any particular belief but rather how it is detectable through "ruptures" in the subject's speech. Ibid. 98.

⁴¹⁰ McGowan, "Psychosis of Freedom," 51.

May's final address before his violent acts provides us with valuable insight into how the uptake of signifiers from TI media might function for others. May describes the gradual splitting of his ego away from himself first as an opaque voyeuristic force. He later explains that discovering TI media allowed him to make sense of his experiences as something many people experience and ultimately results in him growing to understand himself entirely as a TI. For other TIs more broadly, these are the conditions that enable them to participate in the movement as a specific discursive economy. While tragic, May's address allows for valuable insight for understanding how collapsing boundaries between inside and outside can result in the fabrication of a new identity that is understood in terms of a delusion. In other words, this kind of cultural production could allow for the metaphoric displacement without necessarily being understood as such. An account of the relation between the proliferation of these public systems of delusion and the individual subjects that contribute towards them can explain both the relative consistency that such structures provide, as well as the variations that seem to be particular for the TI. Beyond merely functioning as a kind of public psychotic speech, May's final video serves as a stand-in for himself with the foreknowledge that he will not be able to convey his story.

4.7 Doreen Dotan

Doreen Dotan is the name of a prominent TI who has produced videos that exemplify this genre of TI media. Dotan has posted many videos over the years that detail her experiences of covert harassment. Currently, Dotan appears to operate a blog that is focused primarily on religious

matters and written in both English and Hebrew.⁴¹¹ The concerns in Dotan's output that is focused on being targeted or gangstalked are typical of many TI videos. In what follows, I analyze a video that was reposted by another user, purportedly with Dotan's permission, in which she explains her experience of being targeted and offers some advice to other TIs.⁴¹²

Dotan begins the video by introducing herself as a someone who "has been chronicling the encroaching electronic surveillance in my hometown spot in Israel." Announcing that she has seen videos by other TIs online, Dotan notes that "if you are a targeted individual there's no doubt in your mind about it" and begins to recount several experiences in which the targeting was apparent to her. In the first instance, Dotan describes an experience at the post office. She states that providing her identification number to a worker who was assisting her resulted in her name flashing on the clerk's screen in a manner the employee characterizes as highly unusual. In the next, she describes being on a phone call to set up her internet and having the party on the other end remark that they heard clicking that was evocative of a phone being tapped. The last occurrence Dotan recounts is dropping her cell phone off for repair and having them ask if she works for Shin Bet, since the worker discovered "a component...integrated in such a way that if I try to take it out I would have had to destroy your cell phone." Dotan's basic point is that while the experiences one has as a TI are self-evident, "basically you're not a targeted individual until someone else has noticed that there's something wrong with you."

Dotan then poses what she appears to think will be taken as an unusual point by other TIs: "you should never ever think its about you." In other words, they need to remember that their status

⁴¹¹ "DOREEN DOTAN'S ARCHIVE," accessed August 14, 2021, <http://doreendotansarchive.blogspot.com/>.

⁴¹² QueenBee Nightly, *FOR TARGETED INDIVIDUALS, A Guide for Survival*.

as TI is woven into the unconscious and so has nothing to do with them on a personal level. In other words, Dotan is reminding them to relate to the plot against them as something that can be accounted for by reference to factors external to the TI and not necessarily because of decisions they have made. Žižek makes a similar point to Dotan by way of a joke concerning the Other's knowledge. Žižek recounts:

For decades, a classic joke has circulated among Lacanians to exemplify the key role of the Other's knowledge: a man who believes himself to be a grain of seed is taken to a mental institution where the doctors do their best to convince him that he is not a seed but a man. When he is cured (convinced that he is not a grain of seed but a man) and is allowed to leave the hospital, he immediately comes back trembling. There is a chicken outside the door and he is afraid that it will eat him. 'My dear fellow,' says his doctor, 'you know very well that you are not a grain of seed but a man.' 'Of course I know that' replies the patient, 'but does the chicken know it?'⁴¹³

This joke serves as an example of what a decline in symbolic efficiency looks like in practice. Though the man is fully convinced that he himself is not a grain any longer, the truly important thing is that the Other (or in this case, the chicken) is also aware. In other words, the man is concerned that the Symbolic has shifted in an adequate way such that he is now safe from the chicken.

Dotan is asking for TIs to adopt a posture similar to that of the man in Žižek's joke. Rather than attribute every misfortune to a unified conspiracy against them, Dotan advises TIs to instead understand their situation as being part of a broader pattern of harassment engaged against others. As Tony Myers puts it, "the different aspects of my personality do not claim an equal status in the Symbolic- it is only the self or Selves registered by the big Other which display Symbolic

⁴¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 351.

efficiency, which are fully recognized by everyone else.”⁴¹⁴ This explains why we might understand TIs’ public personas as seemingly breaking with decorum; the experiences they describe are so out of step with others’ sense of reality that it elicits concern or fascination rather than solidarity. The important thing to Dotan’s mind is that TIs retain their composure without forgetting that they have been specifically designated for harassment.

Building upon my prior observation that TIs identify with many characteristics conventionally associated with paranoia, Dotan’s remarks serve as a useful example of how the identification with such a station enables a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. TIs expect their narratives to be met with skepticism and on some level, the actual claims one would expect to hear from them are likely to be met with ready dismissal by those who are not TIs. Part of the rationale for this speculation is that TIs’ self-image is furnished by traits and habits that track with conventional depictions of paranoia. I do not think this is by chance, but instead an instance of their “martyrdom.” In other words, their fixation on things like mind-control technologies and intelligence community intrigue is because they already have strong cultural associations with covert state action to manipulate and control a population. TIs insert themselves directly into such narratives because that is a dominant mode of representing omnipresent and seemingly omnipotent control over a group by an elite minority. Thus, we can understand Dotan’s emphasis on preserving TI identity even when she is cautioning against taking every sign as indication of harassment as an attempt to hold on to this narrative and the role that it creates for a TI to “bear witness.” Though not deliberate, TIs embody dominant representations of paranoia because they want others to associate themselves with such paranoia.

⁴¹⁴ Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 51.

Dotan's performance in the video evokes her personal experiences as a TI and urges others to be moderate in what they are willing to attribute to being targeted. In this way, Dotan provides TIs with the permission to not attribute everything to a conspiracy against them while still maintaining their investment in their identity as victims of the conspiracy. Part of the appeal of such a video might be the personable and relative levelheadedness of Dotan in comparison with other videos from the genre. Similar to Myron May's video, Dotan's video allows for a displacement of self into a digital space, allowing for her to offer advice to other TIs who may be unsure of what they should do with knowledge of their status.

4.8 Conclusion

I have argued here that we can understand the practice of uploading TI videos as one that functions as a guarantor of identity with a stable field of representation. Building upon the previous chapter's characterization of the TI community as concerning itself with a prosthetic symbolic, these videos are addressed towards others who opt in to this alternative Symbolic. TIs are not unique with respect to this practice, as many equate the digital presence bearing their real names with their flesh and blood selves. What is unique about TIs is the lack of self-awareness in doing so. Matheson's "exchange anxiety" speaks to the process of positioning oneself towards the Other in an effort to be recognized as possessing phallic qualities. On this count, TIs skip a step. Instead of asking, "how can I become desirable?," TIs are plagued by the question of "why am I so desirable?"

Moreover, we can now offer a rejoinder to de Waelhen's observation that the paranoid subject has no use for testimony. Rather than engage one another or dispute particular issues, TIs simply offer endless and individualized variations utilizing the same constellation of ideas. Their words and image ought to be sufficient proof for the reality of the experiences they describe to their audience, to the extent that they may engage in an exaggerated performance of what is typically deemed paranoia. As we will see in the next chapter, the failure of the *a* to be externalized in psychosis manifests itself most obviously in the gangstalking phenomenon in the form of projecting the *objet a* onto strangers in public.

The case clearly illustrates a need to understand the practice of self-publication on social networking sites as mode of externalizing oneself into a broader technical and social field. As Sconce observed, people have become more comfortable with understanding themselves as both consumers and producers within media systems. This intuition informs not only the TI movement's core ideas, but also how people tend to orient themselves in general on such platforms. Scholars ought to continue to tend to how users orient themselves towards each other in digital environments, in the particular sense of a substitute for the subject's corporeal being. It also raises the question of how digital environments shift the practice of publicity. E. Cram has noted that in digital self-portraiture, "the photographed is both subject and object while the relationship to the camera invites an inventional space of fantasy and becoming."⁴¹⁵ As I have argued, through projecting a recording of themselves discussing their experiences, TIs become part of the movement in a digital space. The composition of the videos I've discussed here as well as others

⁴¹⁵ E. Cram, "'Angie Was Our Sister:' Witnessing the Trans-Formation of Disgust in the Citizenry of Photography," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 4 (November 1, 2012): 421, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2012.714899>.

like them make sense if we regard them as attempts to meld one's specular image into the broader public repository of TI media. This attempt to seize attention and become part of the archive is both a general condition of social media usage and something that requires us to rethink how appearance in public has changed in the contemporary era. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the boundaries between online and offline were becoming increasingly porous. Ricky Crano, for example, argues that the regular usage of videophonic technology such as Zoom remake subjectivity "around diminished affective powers and ubiquitous self-reflection."⁴¹⁶

Additionally, Jenell Johnson has argued for understanding appearance in public as a kind of "embodied capacity."⁴¹⁷ In the conclusion of her essay, Johnson suggests that for some contending with disability, "virtual appearance" can be not just "difficult, but a source of harm."⁴¹⁸ Some have raised concerns about the Internet as a potential hazard for mental health workers to consider when dealing with patients experiencing delusions about being targeted or gangstalked. I have previously argued we need to appreciate the role that publicness plays in the TI movement. However, I am not endorsing a position on how this subculture may affect those who engage in it, nor whether it is beneficial or to their detriment. Instead, I propose that it may be useful for future research into the movement to consider how publicness factors into the appeal of the TI movement. After all, the role of social media is ubiquitous in stories about TIs, suggesting that scholars would

⁴¹⁶ Ricky Crano, "Room without Room : Affect and Abjection in the Circuit of Self-Regard," *M/C Journal* 24, no. 3 (June 21, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2790>.

⁴¹⁷ Jenell Johnson, "Breaking Down: On Publicity as Capacity," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (May 26, 2020): 175, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2020.1752128>.

⁴¹⁸ Johnson, 181.

do well to understand how digital spaces with varying levels of publicity, whether YouTube or a private Discord server, help sustain it.

In this chapter, I have examined the practice of self-publication in the TI community and argued it is a means of verifying one's identity before the Other. In the next chapter, I explore a different kind of TI media production that supplements such a practice: the documentation of gangstalking.

5.0 Caught on Camera: Proof of Gangstalking, Documentary Media, and Anxiety

How would you know if you're being followed? What about being watched? In an era with no shortage of mechanisms for collecting and distributing data, the term "followers" typically refers to those subscribed to receive updates on one's social media activity. While "watchers," has not become a part of common parlance, the actors doing the watching are much more likely to be apps passively extracting and exporting data about you as a user than some shadowy person literally observing your every move. Even so, suppose that one did seriously entertain the suspicion that eyes are on you. Many would likely try to find some means external to their own perceptive faculties and judgment, like capturing the incidents through photography or video. This predicament is a problem intimate to the TI community, insofar as each member by definition sees themselves as party to unjustified and life-disrupting surveillance. Additionally, TIs are generally not seen as credible outside of the spaces that they have created for themselves to discuss their surveillance. In order to correct this credibility gap, a widespread practice throughout the TI community is the documentation of gangstalking. More than merely producing evidence, however, publication and commentary on such videos functions as a means of joining a public of other TIs and making allegations of gangstalking a public object.

Much like the other aspects of the community that I have examined so far, gangstalking videos do not remain in the private archives of TIs but are instead distributed through online platforms as part of an effort to participate in a wider public. The production of such an archive on public platforms like YouTube enables bonds of affiliation to forge and for people who may otherwise be experiencing feelings of being watched or harassed to cast their experiences in collective terms. This transformation of private experience into public objects enables the

suggestion that those experiences are of a type, something that many others have also undergone. It also performs an identity-shaping function, insofar as such online materials are often cast in a personal register. Understood in this way, it is clear that “videos are not ‘messages’” but rather “are the mediating mechanisms via which cultural practices are originated, adopted and (sometimes) retained within social networks.”⁴¹⁹ Such videos also speak to a more general issue concerning how the expansion of digital platforms has contributed to a weakened sense of shared authority. Simply put, there is far too much information and too many channels through which to receive them. Even though we seemingly have all of the tools at our disposal for informing ourselves, fully informing ourselves seems unachievable.⁴²⁰ In more technical terms, these videos are indicative of a decline in symbolic efficiency as it has manifested itself online. Put in different terms, the perplexing nature of what these videos depict and the significance that TIs attribute to them is indicative of a broader fragmentation of social consensus. This weakened consensus has been in part wrought forth by the expansion of digital platforms.

Throughout this dissertation, I have discussed how fears and reports of gangstalking are a persistent theme within TI media. In this chapter, I examine how the media purportedly documenting gangstalking enables TIs to play games of presence and absence with respect to their persecutors and the alleged surveillance campaign that they stage against their victims. Their efforts to document gangstalking produces the very object that they seek. More specifically, I analyze these videos with an eye toward the function that their production and circulation serves

⁴¹⁹ Jean Burgess, “‘All Your Chocolate Rain Are Belong to Us’?: Viral Video, YouTube and the Dynamics of Participatory Culture,” ed. Geert Lovink and Andreas Treske (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2020), 102.

⁴²⁰ Andrejevic, *Infoglut*, 12–13.

for the wider community. The possibility of interpreting what is captured on video as anything other than perfectly clear proof of gangstalking is foreclosed. In other words, there is such intense investment in the idea that gangstalking is real that any other interpretation is not seen as possible.

The sites that serve as the setting for these videos are varied. Sometimes, TIs film people and vehicles in parking lots, grocery stores, and other spaces in which there tends to be lots of bustling activity from others. In other instances, these videos may be recovered from `home surveillance devices. What is key is that such footage often features some activity that is regarded as a sign in Lacan's special sense of the term by the person filming. Though he speaks of the signifier a great deal, Lacan also defines a sign through a reference to the robin redbreast. The bird's namesake marking provides a "natural meaning" to others in the species and "links the bearer of this sign to its perceiver."⁴²¹ In other words, while signifiers point to other signifiers, signs are regarded as having a denotative, natural meaning. They are regarded as complete and stay rooted in the Imaginary. The perceiver in this case is the TI, who has detected someone or something that bears the sign of gangstalking and this subsequently affirms their own identity. The genre also includes clips typically cut from local news media broadcasts and that TIs are claim as instances of gangstalking caught on tape. Occasionally, such segments do address seemingly actual incidences of stalking or harassment, but do not feature someone who appears to identify as a TI. In other cases, such clips merely profile someone who meets the description of a typical TI. The vernacular clips often depict activity that is seemingly unnoteworthy, yet both the producers of such media as well as a segment of the audience forcefully assert that evidence of the conspiracy has been captured. I argue that the production and circulation of this media is an identity-affirming

⁴²¹ Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 167.

practice that enables TIs to represent themselves in relation to the Other. Through attempting to record what they believe are incidents of gangstalking, TIs produce media that reflects how they see themselves in relation to the wider symbolic order and more specifically, their own position within it.

5.1 Stalking and gangstalking

Stalking is a very real behavior that can cause immense distress to victims and serve as a prelude to an escalation in violence. Bran Nicol notes that the word's etymological roots stem from the Old English “-*stealican*,” from *bestealican* or “to steal along.”⁴²² Nicol connects the root word to hunting, in that “we imagine one person persecuting another in the way a hunter...tracks an animal he is going to kill and use for food or clothing.” Sheridan et al. state that it is difficult to define what constitutes stalking, calling it “an extraordinary crime, given that it may often consist of no more than the targeted repetition of an ostensibly ordinary or routine behavior.”⁴²³ What constitutes stalking is also dependent on a number of other variables. While stalking can include illegal activities like trespassing, Sheridan et al. make the observation that some behaviors associated with stalking, such as regularly appearing near someone's dwelling, can in one case be regarded as innocuous and as menacing or perhaps even criminal in another. Part of what determines the difference between stalking and activity that might otherwise be considered

⁴²² Bran Nicol, *Stalking* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 16.

⁴²³ Lorraine P. Sheridan, Eric Blaauw, and Graham M. Davies, “Stalking: Knowns and Unknowns,” *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 4, no. 2 (April 1, 2003): 150, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838002250766>.

appropriate (for example, within the bounds of courtship rituals,) is an indication on the part of the victim that such attention is unwanted, as well as wider cultural norms.⁴²⁴ In the United States, the prevalence of stalking for any individual tends to be highly influenced by gender and sexuality. A study examining these variables conducted between 2010 and 2012 found lifetime prevalence factors for stalking of 15.6% for heterosexual women, 19.5% for lesbians and 31.9% of bisexual women.⁴²⁵ Men experienced stalking at lower rates with heterosexual men experiencing a lifetime prevalence rate of 5.2% and bisexual men a rate of 6.9%, but gay men were more than twice as likely to experience stalking as heterosexual men, with a rate of 11.4%.⁴²⁶

While stalking is a very real and troubling occurrence, gangstalking is a much more curious phenomenon, insofar as there is less research on the topic and victims of gangstalking seem to be describing improbable or even impossible phenomena. As I have described earlier in this dissertation, the basic definition of gangstalking is stalking carried out by more than one person. Many of the claims levelled by TIs, however, include fantastic details like mind control and go well beyond that general definition. Moreover, stalking in most cases “concerns the actions of single individuals,” as described in the preceding paragraphs, rather than a group of people working in concert.⁴²⁷ One psychological study based on an anonymous, self-reported

⁴²⁴ Lorraine Sheridan, Joshua Arianayagam, and Heng Choon (Oliver) Chan, “Perceptions and Experiences of Intrusive Behavior and Stalking within a Culture,” *Psychology, Crime & Law* 25, no. 4 (April 21, 2019): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2018.1529233>.

⁴²⁵ Jieru Chen et al., “Sexual Violence, Stalking, and Intimate Partner Violence by Sexual Orientation, United States,” *Psychology of Violence* 10, no. 1 (2020): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1037/vio0000252>.

⁴²⁶ Chen et al., 5.

⁴²⁷ Sheridan and James, “Complaints of Group-Stalking (‘Gang-Stalking’),” 2.

questionnaire concluded that, “many stalking behaviours described were simply impossible” and the others allowed for only two possible inferences, that “the stalking was delusional or the individuals were victims of elaborate and extremely expensive behaviour organized, for no apparent reason, by those with huge personal wealth or by governmental agencies.”⁴²⁸ Nonetheless, it does appear that the distress, fear, and anger generated by the harassment is very real for victims of gangstalking, even if the incidents are not veridical.

Gangstalking deserves special consideration not only because multiple stalkers working together deviates from common accounts of how stalking occurs, nor because the phenomena associated with it is highly unusual. Additionally, it seems plausible that part of what has enabled the proliferation of claims about gangstalking is the emergence of online communities and other forums in which people can interact and share their accounts. This means that the possibility of gangstalking is sustained through the labor of trope in online public forums and thus warrants a rhetorical inquiry. Reports of gangstalking and identification as a TI are closely related, though not all TIs are necessarily gangstalked nor do all gangstalking victims claim to be TIs. Though different in some ways, reports of gangstalking possess some similarities with “The Truman Show delusion (TTSD),” in which the afflicted believe their every movement is being broadcast for the enjoyment of a viewing audience, much like the film that gives the diagnosis its namesake.⁴²⁹ Joel Gold and Ian Gold, who coined the term, write that, “TTSD is a delusion of control, but with an exceptionally light touch: the controller doesn’t have to move your body or insert thoughts into

⁴²⁸ Sheridan and James, “Complaints of Group-Stalking (‘Gang-Stalking’),” 18.

⁴²⁹ Joel Gold and Ian Gold, *Suspicious Minds: How Culture Shapes Madness* (New York: Free Press, 2015), 5.

your mind.”⁴³⁰ Indeed, perhaps this forfeiture of the integrity over one’s mind and body is a distinguishing difference between someone who has succumb to TTSD and another who has become fixated on gangstalking. Another psychological study examining self-reported gangstalking survey data concluded that “‘ghostly episodes’ and ‘group-stalking’ accounts share a core experience.”⁴³¹ They acknowledge that while “many delusional ideations or anomalous experiences are inherently private or solitary experiences,” they possess a shareable quality that “entails a shared process of meaning-making or the social construction of narratives.” Thus, such anomalous experiences are made sense of through whatever cultural frameworks are available and subsequently can be understood as rhetorically inflected.

While it is doubtful that such phenomena are literally occurring, the interpretive frames for making sense of such intense and unusual experiences are cobbled together from whatever cultural detritus is available. Whether ghosts, gangstalkers, or any other possible explanation, these experiences will be made to cohere according to whatever conventional resources are available for signification. Lacan draws a distinction between “the world” and “the stage that we make this world climb onto,” in his tenth seminar.⁴³² The world is that which is made to “to be staged in keeping with the laws of the signifier.” In other words, there is contradiction and nothing guaranteeing in advance that the events of the world will cohere. Such coherence through the work of signification is only achieved as an effect of *Nachträglichkeit*, or “deferred action,” the process

⁴³⁰ Gold and Gold, *Suspicious Minds*, 212.

⁴³¹ Rense Lange et al., “Haunted People Syndrome Revisited: Empirical Parallels between Subjective Paranormal Episodes and Group-Stalking Accounts,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 23, no. 7 (August 8, 2020): 545, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2020.1767552>.

⁴³² Lacan, *Anxiety*, 33.

of retroactively determining the meaning of some event.⁴³³ In other words, sometimes the significance of something will only come into focus following some later event that brings the meaning of the first into relief. For example, in reflecting upon a failed romantic relationship, people will sometimes examine memories from earlier on in the course of the relationship, hoping to gain insight into the circumstances that later lead to its dissolution. The meaning behind the earlier memories is being modified to reflect the later experience of separation, even if those earlier memories were not necessarily regarded as significant. On a much wider scale, this is what the “laws of the signifier” do for Lacan. They produce a coherence and order behind events that make otherwise contingent phenomena seem inevitable. Lacan continues this line of argument by revealing that, “the stage is the dimension of history.”⁴³⁴ He argues that “what culture transports to us in the guise of the world is a stack, a shop crammed full of the flotsam and jetsam of worlds that have followed one after the other.” In other words, culture writ large contains within it a host of contradictory ideas that in E. Chebrolu’s words, “direct the subject’s desire.”⁴³⁵ The different components of a culture do not necessarily cohere or mutually reinforce each other but nonetheless, the subject will be goaded into desiring some aspects of it rather than others.

The inheritance of such frames for making sense of intense and anomalous experiences does not mean that we should merely write off such frames as incoherent or nonsensical. If anything, the accretion of such symbolically charged frames for interpreting intense and anomalous experiences requires that we take the words of those who experience them seriously.

⁴³³ Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 711.

⁴³⁴ Lacan, *Anxiety*, 34.

⁴³⁵ E. Chebrolu, “The Racial Lens of Dylann Roof: Racial Anxiety and White Nationalist Rhetoric on New Media,” *Review of Communication* 20, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2019.1708441>.

Such experiences are of “the world” for them, even though a critical stance requires us to inspect how they come to be “staged” according to the laws of the signifier. I will now move toward discussing the role that production and distribution of videos depicting gangstalking plays in my account.

5.2 Who is watching whom?

Beyond merely functioning as a means of affirming the position of the TI, such videos are also indicative of the ubiquity of recording technologies and the specter of constant surveillance. As Tom Sherman observes, “The technology of video is now as common as a pencil for the middle classes.”⁴³⁶ TI discourse often emphasizes how being targeted results in a total absence of privacy, with people’s personal living spaces becoming compromised by surveillance technology and even intruders. Yet a subset of these videos, those filmed by TIs in public space, are indication of a much more diffuse and abstract proliferation of surveillance. Thus, while perhaps thematically concerned with governmental surveillance, the TI media sphere is just as much sustained by *sousveillance*. Of the difference between the two, Jean-Gabriel Ganasica writes, “In the case of *sousveillance* the watchers are socially below those who are watched, while in the case of surveillance it is the opposite; they are above.”⁴³⁷ In a brief piece assessing the political potential of *sousveillance*, Glencora Borradaile and Joshua Reeves argue that “*sousveillance* practices like

⁴³⁶ Tom Sherman, “Vernacular Media,” in *Video Vortex Reader #3: Inside the YouTube Decade*, ed. Geert Lovink and Andreas Treske (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2020), 163.

⁴³⁷ Ganasica, “The Generalized *Sousveillance* Society,” 493.

cop-watching” are politically ambivalent by way of reference to Jodi Dean’s work on communicative capitalism.⁴³⁸ While a potentially important resource in the effort to build political power, such activity can also function as a red herring. Merely transmitting information across these communication networks does not have the same impact or is a substitute for offline activities more closely associated with political change, like organizing.

The attempts to document gangstalking, though not thought of in such terms by TIs, are a form of sousveillance, insofar as TIs imagine themselves to be documenting a corrupt state’s actions. They often expressly state that they believe they have recorded some aspect of the overarching conspiracy on camera. The people depicted in the video are purported to be the gangstalkers themselves, caught carrying out their assignments in public space. This effort speaks in part to the role of populist commitments woven into TI discourse, insofar as the basic social antagonism is understood to reside between innocent citizens and corrupt elites. In documenting gangstalking, TIs believe that they are capturing such conflict in an unmediated form. In keeping with the insights from Borradaile and Reeve, I argue that videos of gangstalking are emblematic of some of the central tenets of Dean’s communicative capitalism. Much like the TI testimonials of Ch. 3, gangstalking videos are elevated to great significance within the community and are treated as if their publication is a kind of political speech. This is precisely how communicative capitalism works, by allowing users to “feel political” when they utilize technology for political speech.⁴³⁹ Dean writes that, “Communicative capitalism captures our political interventions,

⁴³⁸ Glencora Borradaile and Joshua Reeves, “Sousveillance Capitalism,” *Surveillance & Society* 18, no. 2 (June 17, 2020): 275, <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v18i2.13920>.

⁴³⁹ Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism & Left Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 47.

formatting them as contributions to its circuits of affect and entertainment- *we feel political, involved, like contributors who really matter.*”⁴⁴⁰ The production and circulation surrounding gangstalking videos embodies this cultural logic, in which videos that may seem to depict nothing at all are instead received as revelatory disclosures and proof of wide-ranging conspiracy against ordinary people. Such a tendency is not unique to TI media, but it serves as an especially clear instance of such logic. It also speaks to how totalizing this logic has become, informing even fringe materials like gangstalking videos.

5.3 Gangstalking videos as inartistic proof

Before approaching the media depicting gangstalking as rhetorical artifacts, it will be useful to briefly outline how anxiety manifests itself in both neurotic and psychotic subjects. I develop a more extensive account later in this chapter, but a short discussion of the distinction here should partly clarify the rationale to produce such videos on the part of TIs. Typically, anxiety is understood in relation to neurotic subjects, who understand the Other as lacking and subsequently seek to recover *jouissance* through various compensatory strategies. Viewing the Other as lacking, means that the subject does not relate to the Symbolic as a totalizing entity, but instead encounters language and the conventions governing it as something fundamentally incomplete and inadequate for expressing the fullness of desire. They make up for this inadequacy by assuming an uncertain position in relation to the Other and vacillating over the adequacy of that position.

⁴⁴⁰ Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*: 49. Italics in original.

Thus, Lacan formulates the basic question evinced in anxiety as not merely “What does the Other want from me?,” but more precisely, “What does He want concerning this place of the ego?”⁴⁴¹ The difference is that rather than just concerning themselves with resolving the many contradictory commands that are imposed on the subject through language, the subject is also concerned with assuming the proper relationship towards those commands. Rather than just blindly following these rules, the anxious subject is also uncertain about *how* they should follow such commands, whether cheerfully, begrudgingly, or something other way. Neurotics relate to the Other as having a desire of its own, to which they must be responsive.⁴⁴² The supposition that *objet a* is in the field of the Other is what “mediates the relation” between the Other and the subject.⁴⁴³ In the words of Stijn Vanheule, “The neurotic’s belief is that by focusing on the virtual object in the Other, an experience of gratification will finally be reached.”

Psychotic subjects do not desire properly, due to their failure to separate themselves from the Symbolic. Recall, for example, Lacan’s example of the psychotic subject who knows with certainty that there is some meaning behind the presence of a red car.⁴⁴⁴ While they might not be able to say exactly what that meaning is, they do not doubt that the appearance of the car is intentional and meaning-laden. Since there is a lack of separation from the Symbolic, they do not regard the Symbolic as desiring nor enigmatic. The psychotic’s certainty about the meaningfulness of the signs they encounter precludes such a relationship. Instead, as I argued in Ch. 2, the psychotic understands the Other as having some sort of plot or perverse scheme that organizes

⁴⁴¹ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety*, 6.

⁴⁴² Vanheule, *The Subject of Psychosis*, 135.

⁴⁴³ Vanheule, *The Subject of Psychosis*, 134.

⁴⁴⁴ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III: The Psychoses 1955-1956*, 9.

their actions. Vanheule goes so far as to claim that “a strange force” that cannot be readily named or articulated “seizes the subject.”⁴⁴⁵

The *objet a* is not “extracted” in psychotics, meaning that it is a concrete, tangible thing, in comparison to the less clearly defined and more enigmatic object possessed by the Other in the case of neurotics. The literalization of *objet a* is an effect of the failure to install the Name-of-the-Father and the attendant decline in symbolic efficiency that such failure yields. Just as words are things for the psychotic, so too are the various objects which plug themselves into the structural lack and transform the flow of desire into something literal. As Vanheule puts it:

Whereas in neurosis the object *a* is a presumed element of being in the Other which fascinates the subject, in paranoia the jouissance emanating from the Other is experienced as being directed towards an element in one’s own actual being: the Other hunts for the essence of one’s own being, which is why all intrusions have such a devastating effect.⁴⁴⁶

The *objet a* for paranoiacs are those traces of the Other’s untoward interest in the subject themselves. Vanheule describes jouissance as “emanating” from the Other because jouissance is experienced as an imposition from signification by psychotics. They see themselves as “innocent victims of a jouissance-driven” Other who abuses the impartial tools of law for their own enjoyment.⁴⁴⁷ Instead, the psychotic “is confronted with an overwhelming non-signified excitation from within” that causes the subject to lose its “footing in the signifier.”⁴⁴⁸ Vanheule is positing that the psychotic subject is animated by an intensity felt in the body that cannot be adequately mediated through language. This lingering excess is the “non-extraction” of *objet a* and “manifests

⁴⁴⁵ Vanheule, *The Subject of Psychosis*, 138.

⁴⁴⁶ Vanheule, *The Subject of Psychosis*, 139.

⁴⁴⁷ Vanheule, *The Subject of Psychosis*, 140.

⁴⁴⁸ Vanheule, *The Subject of Psychosis*, 137.

itself as an experiential fact that cannot easily be named.”⁴⁴⁹ Returning to the red car example from earlier, the car’s meaningfulness for the psychotic subject is taken as self-evident and not a product of the subject’s own musing. For TIs specifically, then, many of the characteristic concerns of the movement function as the *objet a* qua sign of intrusion; v2k, gangstalking, disrupted home environments and other indications of the conspiracy all fit within the schema described by Vanheule. These all serve as indications or proof that the conspiracy against TIs is actual. Like others in the grips of paranoia, “this position is not based on belief, but on interpretation” since the various objects “repeatedly ‘demonstrate’ that the Symbolic universe is driven by a mad and maddening force.”

In the case of TIs, this may be why they produce volumes of footage purporting to have caught gangstalking on camera that may not appear to document anything at all to others. This pretense to having caught gangstalking on camera speaks to a basic feature differentiating psychotic subjects from neurotic subjects, who are otherwise understood as the norm.⁴⁵⁰ As I have argued throughout this dissertation, one distinctive feature of psychosis is a literalism in interpretation that confuses object and sign, so that the two are indistinguishable. On this point, Friedrich Kittler writes:

paranoia which according to Freud or Charles William Morris is, like all psychoses, just the confusion of words for things, of designata and denotata, is knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] itself. When the Symbolic of signs, numbers, and letters determines the course of so-called realities, securing evidence [*Spurensicherung*] becomes the first duty of the paranoiac.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁹ Vanheule, *The Subject of Psychosis*, 138.

⁴⁵⁰ Eysers, *Lacan and the Concept of the “Real,”* 42.

⁴⁵¹ Friedrich Kittler, *The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 89.

Documentation of gangstalking functions as a defensive gesture against the notion that it is unreal and the allegation that TIs lack any basis for their claims. As I have already mentioned, many of the titles of such videos characterize the contents as possessing irrefutable or undeniably clear proof of gangstalking. This titling practice speaks to a foreclosed capacity to understand that such materials may be read in multiple ways, beyond just “proving” the reality of gangstalking. Indeed, many of the comments beneath these videos suggest that the only stalkers depicted are the people filming the videos, since the attention of the camera could be seen as prying into others’ affairs.

Another thing that such documentation achieves is similar to the videos discussed in Ch. 3, insofar as the result is the inauguration of a public archive that can be cited as proof. This recursive gesture enables gangstalking to function as an organizing term in TI fantasy. Kittler again proves insightful on this matter. In a separate essay focused on Fleschig, Schreber, & Freud, he observes, “The unrecognized Real at the theoretical margin of psychoanalysis is the flow of information.”⁴⁵² Kittler places great stress on the fact that in Freud’s reconstruction of the Schreber case, Freud omits any discussion of Fleschig’s training as an anatomist. Fleschig understood cognition primarily in neurological terms. As a result, in his treatment of Schreber, Fleschig would speak candidly about the physical aspects of the brain that could be causing his patient’s delusion. Kittler thus makes a compelling case for understanding Schreber’s fixation on nerves in his scheme of the universe as the byproduct of Fleschig’s engagement with him, rather than nerves being a detail selected at chance. This exposure to such information was what fomented Schreber’s fixation on nerves as the point of contact with the divine. While it is impossible to generalize about

⁴⁵² Kittler, *The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence*, 67.

the impact that mental health workers might have on TIs in the context of this research, Kittler's point reminds us that TIs' obsession with surveillance technology and government plots are reflections of the wider culture from which they emerge. TIs are "martyrs of the unconscious" and reflect linkages made in the Symbolic without necessarily realizing it. While it may be difficult to draw direct analogues between the relationship between Schreber and Fleschig, and the situation of TIs today, the former case instructs us to understand TIs' choice of object as incidental and a reflection of the resources afforded by their communicative environment.

Whether citing the USA PATRIOT Act, gangstalking, Edward Snowden's disclosures, v2k, or "direct energy weapons," these notions are all available as potential resources for explaining why TIs experience the phenomena that they report. A contemporary example of this dynamic has been garnering media interest in the United States. Mainstream American news has been flooded with news about so-called "sonic attacks" at U.S. embassies around the world. Diplomats typically report hearing unusual noises in their lodgings. Soon after, they report a bevy of symptoms including headaches, vertigo, difficulty sleeping and other indications of discomfort. Designated "Havana Syndrome," after the location where such symptoms were initially reported, the syndrome has enjoyed great skepticism regarding whether or not it is an actual illness. Moreover, there are many parallels between what is described and what TIs report experiencing. One commentator points out that while Havana Syndrome is treated as a serious issue in mainstream media, TIs and those who claim they've been gangstalked are readily dismissed.⁴⁵³ In drawing a connection between the two, I merely mean to point out that the concerns furnishing TI

⁴⁵³ Robert Skvarla, "Concussion Without a Concussion, Truth Without Truth," *Mondo Americana* (blog), October 11, 2021, <https://medium.com/mondo-americana/concussion-without-a-concussion-truth-without-truth-251b913b6d2f>.

fantasy are partly the result of a culture in which stories of surveillance and covert intelligence operations have become commonplace. The crucial difference is that TIs are seen as fringe and potentially unwell, whereas stories about Havana Syndrome have been largely promoted by legacy news media who retain an air of credibility. Their potential validity as an explanation is tropically maintained through the repeated connections of otherwise contiguous phenomena. All of this is to say that whatever is available as information has the potential to become the object of a delusion and that TIs tend to gravitate towards objects already associated with paranoia and secrecy.

5.4 Media and naturalism

The notion that such phenomena need merely be recorded and distributed also indicates a commitment to a belief in a naturalism inherent to the production of such media. TIs do not believe that additional context needs to be provided to persuade a viewer that what they have filmed is an instance of gangstalking. If anything, such recordings deliberately skirt such background in favor of highly contextual recordings that presume the viewer can easily understand what the significance of the clip is. Sherman argues that rather than “the formal ‘aesthetics’ of vernacular video, it might be better to speak of anesthetics. The term anesthetic is an antonym of aesthetic. An anesthetic is without aesthetic awareness. An anesthetic numbs or subdues perceptions.”⁴⁵⁴ Rather than attuning us to the conditions of its production, vernacular video presents things as if they were to be taken at face value.

⁴⁵⁴ Sherman, “Vernacular Media,” 163.

The confluence of naturalism and media is something that communication scholars have fruitfully probed for some time now. Even in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle discusses the inartistic proof as a means of persuasion that concerns documentation or some other mediated means of conveyance.⁴⁵⁵ Laws, witnesses, contracts, tortures, and oaths all hang together as technical means of evincing persuasion that are not reliant upon technē, in contrast to the artistic proofs of rhetorical address. Carolyn Miller, however, makes the convincing case that following the theoretical interventions of Bruno Latour and his reception within rhetorical theory, “the distinction between artistic and inartistic proofs is untenable.”⁴⁵⁶ In accepting Miller’s objection, we must consequently understand presentation of evidence as atechnic or non-persuasive as an inherently rhetorical gesture. As I argue later, the footage produced by TIs is presented as an indexical representation of the gangstalking experience. Examining the status of archival footage as inartistic proof in conspiracy theory already has been explored in reference to the infamous Zapruder film by Amanda Michelle Grue.⁴⁵⁷ What makes the footage in this instance interesting for those who are not convinced that it depicts gangstalking is that it may not signify anything in particular. As vernacular video, they simply try to depict things as the cameraperson sees them.

⁴⁵⁵ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 38.

⁴⁵⁶ Lynda Walsh et al., “Forum: Bruno Latour on Rhetoric,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 47, no. 5 (October 20, 2017): 458, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2017.1369822>.

⁴⁵⁷ Amanda Michelle Grue, “The Use of Archival Footage in Documentary Rhetoric” (Thesis, Montana State University - Bozeman, College of Arts & Architecture, 2006), <https://scholarworks.montana.edu/xmlui/handle/1/1392>.

Though rhetorical scholarship is now relieved of its anxiety concerning whether images may be regarded as rhetorical, there is still an uncertainty about whether images, as well as video footage, are capable of being considered arguments. Cara Finnegan's influential essay on the naturalistic enthymeme argued that Farm Service Administration photography positioned spectators in such a way that they were left to infer that the images in such photography were unmediated representations of poverty around the United States. The naturalistic enthymeme is the inference supplied by the audience that photographs are "fundamentally 'realistic.'"⁴⁵⁸ Damien Pfister and Carly Woods update the predicament for today's digital environment, instead arguing that spectators now have a tendency to see all images as the product of artifice, editing, and mediation.⁴⁵⁹ One study focuses on Peircean diagrammatic reasoning and posits that even if we may not regard solitary images as argumentative, perhaps videos could be regarded as asserting claims and making conclusions. While images are static and could be read to imply any number of things, video's effect of sequencing images and putting them into motion adds propositional content. With illation as the distinguishing feature relative to images, videos documenting gangstalking might be regarded as arguments, insofar as they assert the existence of some kind of

⁴⁵⁸ Cara A. Finnegan, "The Naturalistic Enthymeme and Visual Argument: Photographic Representation in the 'Skull Controversy,'" *Argumentation and Advocacy* 37, no. 3 (January 1, 2001): 136, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2001.11951665>.

⁴⁵⁹ Damien Smith Pfister and Carly S. Woods, "The Unnaturalistic Enthymeme: Figuration, Interpretation, and Critique after Digital Mediation," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 52, no. 4 (March 1, 2016): 236, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2016.11821872>.

targeting program.⁴⁶⁰ While perhaps the conclusions derived from such arguments are dubious, understanding them as argumentative in nature can help account for the emphasis on the titling and description of such media as irrefutable or undeniable. The states of affairs exhibited in such videos are presented as if they were self-evident, when in fact the content of them is banal and belies the provocative descriptions supplied by their creators.

On the basis of the foreclosure of other possibilities about what might be occurring, we can understand these videos purportedly documenting gangstalking as being structured by anxiety in the sense elaborated by Lacan in his seminar on the subject. These videos often depict TIs in close proximity to the people they believe are responsible for their torment. Though the videos rarely depict anything a non-TI would consider particularly remarkable, my claim is that we can understand the purpose of the production and circulation of such videos as identity-forming in nature. Regardless of the scale of these videos' viewership, habitually documenting one's environment and sharing the findings fulfills the psychotic urge to produce evidence that one is not deluded. In step with communicative capitalism's principle that online political activity provides an unwarranted sense of significance for those who engage in it, we can understand TIs' assembly and circulation of these videos as a practice that affirms both their own identity and the wider conspiracy.

As I've already suggested, as well, there is a resonance between psychosis and the need to marshal evidence or documentation of the reality of one's delusions. Introducing anxiety into the analysis will help us understand how TIs position themselves in relation to their pursuers in these

⁴⁶⁰ Marc Champagne and Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen, "Why Images Cannot Be Arguments, But Moving Ones Might," *Argumentation* 34, no. 2 (June 1, 2020): 232, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10503-019-09484-0>.

media. In order to accomplish this, I first lay out Lacan's theory of anxiety. Calling anxiety "an affect," I explain how his theory sits in relation to Freud's notions of affect and anxiety respectively. I next offer an account of how the category of anxiety has been leveraged in communication studies. Following that, I develop readings of several of gangstalking videos to demonstrate how the production and circulation of such videos could be regarded as efforts to produce evidence of their persecution while still maintaining an appropriate distance from the harm they perceive. In more technical terms, they are trying to find an appropriate mode of relating to the Other. I conclude the chapter by discussing the implications of the case for understanding the changing nature of surveillance and how it is represented in mass media.

5.5 Anxiety

Anxiety" is a key Lacanian concept for understanding how TIs can maintain their investment in their fantasy of being pursued. It also accounts for understanding why they post in such a prolific manner. Anxiety is something that all subjects experience as a consequence of their inability to understand how they appear before the Other. Owing to our fundamental incapacity to understand precisely how we are located within the world, we all experience anxiety concerning how we ought to position ourselves in relation to the laws and rules that are presumed to be structuring that world. In Lacanian theory, the subject maintains the integrity of their position by controlling the conditions of presence and absence under which they relate to the Other. In brief, Lacan supposes that anxiety is marked by a feeling that they have lost control of these conditions. In more technical language, the Other has become overproximate to the subject, depriving them of a sense of agency or autonomy. An example of this might be the brief shock we can experience

when, in conversation with another, they make a particularly sharp judgment about what we are thinking or planning to do. This sort of exchange reminds us that we are not fully aware of how we are seen by others and that they know things about us that we may not know about ourselves.

Before further describing Lacan's theory of anxiety, it is important to understand its basis in Freud's work. In his 1926 work, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, Freud states "the first determinant of anxiety, which the ego itself introduces, is loss of perception of the object (which is equated with the loss of the object itself)."⁴⁶¹ Anxiety is a "rescuing signal" to be understood as having its origin as a "product of the infant's mental helplessness."⁴⁶² Earlier in his thinking, Freud hypothesized that anxiety stemmed from birth trauma and found himself in agreement with Otto Rank, an early member of Freud's psychoanalytic movement who had promoted such a theory.⁴⁶³ This later, revised theory that partially serves as the basis for Lacan's own theorization, posits two varieties of anxiety. The first is an involuntary response to danger that is analogous to the harm sensed during birth. The other is described as the ego subjecting itself to a diminished version of a perceived threat, as a kind of inoculation against the full effects. Another key point, that Lacan later places great emphasis on, is that anxiety lacks an object. While fear [*Furcht*] possesses a definite object, anxiety [*Angst*] "has a quality of *indefiniteness and lack of object*."⁴⁶⁴ Thus, we can understand Freud's theory of anxiety as a kind of prophylactic generated by the ego to protect

⁴⁶¹ Sigmund Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. 20 (1925-1926): Autobiographical Study, Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, The Question of Lay Analysis and Other Works.*, ed. James Strachey and Anna Freud (Hogarth, 1966), 170.

⁴⁶² Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety," 138.

⁴⁶³ Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety," 161.

⁴⁶⁴ Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, 165. Italics in original.

its integrity in the face of uncertainty and perceived danger. Rather than subject itself to the paralyzing effects of total uncertainty, the ego adopts a defensive posture in order to regulate the bodily response to such uncertainty.

Lacan references *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* extensively in the introduction to his tenth seminar, but in truth, he develops the bulk of his theory from a different moment in the Freudian corpus. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes watching his grandson play on the floor with a wooden reel that had a piece of string affixed to it.⁴⁶⁵ The child alternates between casting the wooden spool away and then drawing it near again, shouting “*fort*” and “*da*,” or “there” and “here” in English. Freud theorizes that the game the child is playing with the wooden spool is a means of compensating for its lack of control over the presence of the mother.⁴⁶⁶ This is achieved as a form of compensation through the child assuming a position of control relative to the reel’s conditions of presence and absence. Freud writes, “At the outset he was in a passive situation he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an active part.”⁴⁶⁷ This compensatory practice is adopted as a means of substituting the child’s mother for another object of cathexis. The game is part of the child’s coming to realize that it is not the sole object of the mother’s desire and seeking other modes of gratification.

Lacan, in contrast to Freud, does not see the child’s selection of a substitute for the mother as the most important insight to be gleaned from this episode. Instead, Lacan emphasizes how “a

⁴⁶⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961), 9.

⁴⁶⁶ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 10.

⁴⁶⁷ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 10.

void” is generated where the mother was originally located.⁴⁶⁸ This enables the child to repeat the game endlessly, drawing near and pushing away what the subject believes the Other desires from them. As described earlier, this is why Lacan says that the basic question plaguing subjectivity in relation to anxiety is not “What does the Other want with me?” but rather, “what does He want concerning the place of this ego?”⁴⁶⁹ The subject is barraged with a stream of contradictory messages concerning how they ought to position themselves in relation to the Other but must nonetheless find a stance to assume in relation to the broader network of symbols. This constant pushing and pulling to no avail does not extinguish desire but in actuality sustains it. Lacan argues that this game is an attempt on the part of the child to apprehend the spool as symbol, though “the symbol is already there...and englobes him from all sides.”⁴⁷⁰ In other words, though the child may be playing games of presence and absence with the spool *qua* signifier for the first time, they were already immersed in the Symbolic before they even attempted to participate in it. The child’s control over the toy is just one example of this proxy-seeking behavior.

This endless repetition and repositioning is the subject’s response to a Symbolic that is separate from them. For this reason, Lacan calls anxiety “a signal...that does not deceive.”⁴⁷¹ This poses an interesting case for psychotic subjects, insofar as I have maintained throughout this dissertation that part of a psychotic psychical structure is a lack of division from the environment. Everything is taken as having a meaning for the psychotic at the expense of contingency and intentional action that doesn’t signify anything. Soler helpfully points out that what anxiety and

⁴⁶⁸ Lacan, *Anxiety*, 65..

⁴⁶⁹ Lacan, *Anxiety*, 64–65.

⁴⁷⁰ Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 81.

⁴⁷¹ Lacan, *Anxiety*, 261.

psychosis share in common is both certainty and foreclosure.⁴⁷² It is clear that anxiety is not merely another form of psychosis, Soler claims, but rather that “the definition of foreclosure should be extended...the certainty of anguish indisputably indicates that it refers not to the deceptive signifier....but to a real...that must be isolated.” In other words, in the process of signification, there is some element that resists being integrated into representation. This is Lacan’s Real and is knowable from the effects that it produces, those ruptures or gaps produced from failure in signification. “The psychotic situates himself as the universal referent” of signification, which leads to a feeling of being targeted.⁴⁷³ The character of anxiety concerns the uncertain nature of the significations that the subject encounters, calling into question their position, autonomy, and relation towards the Other.

TIs’ namesake indicates that they understand themselves as being of great significance and interest to the intelligence community. In addition to building a TIs’ public profile through publishing videos on the topic, the practice of documenting gangstalking is an attempt to assuage any uncertainty about such beliefs by capturing incontrovertible proof of a harassment campaign. TIs themselves do not doubt that they are at the center of just such a campaign, but a consistent refrain throughout TI media is that TIs are dismissed as “crazy” or untrustworthy. In “On A Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis,” Lacan observes that within psychosis, subjects have a “certainty” about the “signification of signification...takes on a weight proportional to the enigmatic void that first presents itself in the place of signification itself.”⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷² Colette Soler, *Lacanian Affects: The Function of Affect in Lacan’s Work* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 19.

⁴⁷³ Soler, *Lacanian Affects*, 27.

⁴⁷⁴ Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 451.

The psychotic subject feels certain about the presence of meaning even in the most ambiguous phenomena.

In fact, Lacan goes so far as to say that what distinguishes a “normal subject” from the psychotic is the capacity to not “take seriously certain realities that he recognizes exist.”⁴⁷⁵ Neurotic subjects are able to doubt or otherwise ignore things about which they have knowledge and this doubt is characteristic of neurosis as a psychical structure. In contrast, psychotic subjects take their knowledge a little too seriously. In tandem with Lacan’s observation about the “signification of signification,” we are now better positioned to understand what is depicted in many of these videos. Across these videos, there is often a pattern or structure identified that is to be seen as sign of gangstalking, similar in character to some of the experiences that Myron May described. As discussed in Ch. 3, May asserted that “dark sunglasses” were a sure sign of his harassers’ presence. Gangstalking videos will similarly identify some other sort of recurrent feature that may not necessarily signify anything to others but is taken as significant by the TI. In this way, we can explain the otherwise banal conditions documented by TIs as an attempt to document an abstraction that they take for granted but is not meaningful for others. In other words, it is an overinvestment in a structure that may not signify anything at all but is instead taken as an all-revealing sign of the wider conspiracy against the TI.

Lacanian anxiety has had some uptake within communication studies, as it allows for critics to discuss how control over the proximity of a desired object facilitates the flow of affect. Marnie Ritchie leverages the concept in her study of the bureaucratic mechanisms that are responsible for “managing anxiety over several institutions” and educating “sectors of the

⁴⁷⁵ Lacan, *The Psychoses 1955-1956*, 74.

American public on how to feel and respond to anxiety” with respect to matters of national security.⁴⁷⁶ Similarly, Calum Matheson offered a case study of the Jade Helm-15 to argue that anxiety is “an inherently rhetorical phenomenon” that “depends on a particular relationship to language and the breakdown of language.”⁴⁷⁷ Examining the proliferation of white nationalism on digital platforms and turning to Dylann Roof’s “rtf88” manifesto as exemplar, Chebrolu theorizes racial anxiety. Chebrolu argues that the white ego invests in an ‘*excretable object*’...obtained by the white ego to stabilize the signifier of whiteness.”⁴⁷⁸ In a similar vein, Eric King Watts argues that the persistence of a “Zombie Apocalypse” sustains fantasies of a post-racial society, in which “the re-exertion of a white (masculine) sovereignty” serves as “a mode of racial reclamation- as a violent, murderous way to set things right (again).”⁴⁷⁹ Each of these studies focuses on how manipulating the position of the subject in relation to the object of desire is really a way of controlling how they are positioned relative to an enigmatic Other. Hugh S. Manon argues that contemporary ASMR videos, in which a listener hears a highly-amplified whisper, are a kind of “trigger-chasing,” insofar as anxiety indicates the lack of lack that enables the subject to remain

⁴⁷⁶ Marnie Margaret Ritchie, “Diffuse Threats: US Counterterrorism as an Anxious Affective Infrastructure” (Thesis, Austin, TX, University of Texas at Austin, 2018), 18, <https://doi.org/10.15781/T2F766S31>.

⁴⁷⁷ Calum Matheson, “‘What Does Obama Want of Me?’ Anxiety and Jade Helm 15,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 102, no. 2 (April 2, 2016): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2016.1155127>.

⁴⁷⁸ Chebrolu, “The Racial Lens of Dylann Roof,” 3.

⁴⁷⁹ Eric King Watts, “Postracial Fantasies, Blackness, and Zombies,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 14, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2017.1338742>.

grounded and secure in their position.⁴⁸⁰ Resorting to ASMR enables the listener to become objectified, to short-circuit “desire by demanding jouissance, directly, thus circumventing any necessity for prohibition as a support and nullifying the anxiety that comes with too much fulfillment.”⁴⁸¹

Gangstalking videos similarly serve the purpose of providing an on-demand jouissance from otherwise asignifying patterns or behaviors in public. Recall that psychosis is effectively a problem of unregulated jouissance due to the subject remaining undifferentiated from the Symbolic. Documentation of gangstalking lets TIs feel a sense of grounding their identity by fabricating the presence of an individual agent of the conspiracy in their immediate presence. In the next section, I examine some exemplary gangstalking videos that demonstrate my claim that their production is primarily about affirming TI identity through the generation of evidence.

As discussed earlier, the subject’s unease about the autonomy of Symbolic order stems partly from not knowing where they themselves fit within it. Lacan offers a short narrative that illustrates what this could look like in practice. He recounts hearing of a celebration in which people would wear animal masks.⁴⁸² He then describes finding oneself alone with another partygoer wearing a praying mantis mask. Not knowing what one’s mask was and presumably aware of mantis’s cannibalistic tendencies, Lacan says the subject of the story would experience anxiety. This narrative is meant to illustrate the subject’s lack of certainty concerning how they are and how they ought to be positioned relative to the Other. Moreover, the subject understands

⁴⁸⁰Hugh S. Manon, “ASMR Mania, Trigger-Chasing, and the Anxiety of Digital Repletion,” in *Lacan and the Nonhuman*, ed. Gautam Basu Thakur (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 228.

⁴⁸¹ Manon, “ASMR Mania,” 243.

⁴⁸² Lacan, *Anxiety*, 5–6.

themselves as subject to the desire of the Other, which may be experienced as a forfeiture of agency. This anecdote effectively conveys the neurotic character of anxiety. The subject of the story may be in peril due to a lack of knowledge about how they relate to others in the broader network of identities present at the social function.

TIs similarly imagine themselves as objects of the Other's concern, though they are distinguished by their certainty that they have been selected for organized harassment. Relative to the neurotic subject of anxiety, TIs are fully convinced of their identity and the threat that it implies in the presence of the Other. Interestingly, these features comport well with Soler's gloss on anxiety as requiring two conditions be met. First, "the enigma of the Other which takes the form of a lack of signification."⁴⁸³ TIs may experience certainty that they are of special significance and are being pursued. However, the range of possibilities concerning the means by which and by whom they are pursued is left open and unanswered. This allows for the continued repositioning and public expressions of discontent about how to situate themselves in relation to their pursuers. Second, for Soler, is that "the subject who is anguish-ridden, or rather can be made anguish-ridden, must feel he is targeted in his very being."⁴⁸⁴ Of course, this feature is inscribed into the very foundation of TI identity. The result is that TIs have invested heavily in and enjoy an identity that gains its distinctive character from the belief that there is a constant threat of intrusion and violence from a pervasive and all-knowing actor, even if others cannot see this. Moreover, as I discussed in Ch. 3, there is a perverse relation to the Other as both persecutor and representative of social authority that is personally focused on TIs. Anyone could be a representative of the conspiracy.

⁴⁸³ Soler, *Lacanian Affects*, 26.

⁴⁸⁴ Soler, *Lacanian Affects*, 26.

Lacan is uncharacteristically clear in deeming anxiety “an affect.”⁴⁸⁵ As Colette Soler notes, this is because the Lacanian conception of anxiety is one that straddles the boundary between the somatic and signifying effects of the signifier on the subject. As a signal of the Real, it “has no need for dialectic or proof.”⁴⁸⁶ This is what Lacan means when he describes the psychotic as having “language devoid of dialectic.”⁴⁸⁷ There is no castration or limitation pushing back against the subject, only the fullness of realized meaning. These conditions are what provide the psychotic subject with their characteristic certainty. Without limits or failures within one’s speech, the psychotic subject experiences the Symbolic order as a series of metonymic relations. This results in their Imaginary apprehension of the world as something to them as complete and unmediated. Introducing psychosis and anxiety into the conversation can help account for some consistent elements across TI media, as well as allow us to connect it to a wider class of media production that is sustained by foreclosure and uncertainty. In the next section, I examine some gangstalking videos that are representative of the genre.

5.6 Gangstalking videos

Video documentation of gangstalking typically takes on a few different forms. In this section, I will focus primarily on three varieties. While they all function similarly as video evidence of gangstalking, each has a different focal point. The first primarily consists of recording people

⁴⁸⁵ Lacan, *Anxiety*, 14.

⁴⁸⁶ Soler, *Lacanian Affects*, 19.

⁴⁸⁷ Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 231.

in public spaces, with the person operating the camera often walking on the streets or sitting in vehicles in parking lots. The next focuses exclusively on the presence of vehicles and their movement, whether on the road or in the air. The last variety is different from the other two insofar as it consists of recovered footage, often from local news media, that is regarded as proof of gangstalking. Oftentimes such videos do focus on real instances of stalking. In other cases, they will focus on a local person who would match the profile of someone who considers themselves to be gangstalked or even identifies as a TI. These categories are not rigid or exhaustive and are meant merely to attune the reader to the content of the different kinds of videos that I discuss in this section.

The videos that I have analyzed in this section were chosen according to a few criteria. First, I selected videos that were associated with accounts that seemed to be primarily focused on documenting gangstalking or other related phenomena. Focusing on such accounts was meant to ensure that whichever media I selected was closely related to the community. There is one exception to this and I outline the reasons for its inclusion in my discussion of the video. Next, I opted for videos that emerged early according to YouTube's "relevance" ranking. In privileging this metric, I hoped to select videos that would likely be found by users actively seeking this content. Indeed, much like my selection of Reddit threads, my aim was to approximate the options afforded to someone browsing the catalogue of videos and focus on those that the service promoted to the top of the queue. Since such curatorial algorithms are largely obscured from public view, this method of filtration is perhaps closer to how users commonly experience the search for such content. Other established methods for making inductive inferences about how such algorithms work, such as using a profile without any history, will not necessarily deliver results similar to

those of a user with a more diversified viewing history. After all, many use YouTube to explore numerous topics, not just one.

In one video from the first category titled “Gang Stalking - Undeniable Footage Of Being Followed” and from an account titled, “Video Don’t Lie,” a man is walking around a neighborhood with his dog.⁴⁸⁸ Neither ever appear on camera. Instead, he focuses on what appears to be two Asian teenagers that he describes as speaking a “Mongolian language.” The narrator also places great significance on one of the teens’ headphones and backpack as a sign of their participation in a covert harassment campaign. He also intermittently taunts cars passing him on the sidewalk. At one point, he proclaims, “see, the difference between me and the campaigners is I don’t disguise shit.” As the video progresses, the two teenagers walk down the street and then cross the road and begin walking towards the documentarian. He claims it is a “no-touch policy campaign,” and proceeds to insult the two teenagers, who pay him no mind. Near the end of the video, he zooms in on an airplane in the sky and observes that that is how they keep people complacent. This is likely a reference to the “chemtrail” conspiracy theory, which posits “that governments or other parties are engaged in a secret program to add toxic chemicals to the atmosphere from aircraft in a way that forms visible plumes in the sky.”⁴⁸⁹ A comment beneath the video humorously reads “Sick a video from the view point of a stalker !!” Indeed, if anyone seems to be drawing attention to people who are otherwise minding their own business, it is the narrator of the video.

⁴⁸⁸ Video Doesn’t Lie, *Gang Stalking - Undeniable Footage Of Being Followed*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evIhyHbvg8M>.

⁴⁸⁹ “Chemtrails Conspiracy Theory,” accessed December 10, 2021, <https://keith.seas.harvard.edu/chemtrails-conspiracy-theory>.

This video exemplifies the certainty of the psychotic subject as discussed earlier. The narrator openly proclaims how obvious the presence of the conspiracy seems to him. The teen's headphone and backpack are regarded as a kind of "signification of signification," treated as a sure sign that the duo are focused on the narrator. The possibility of anyone simply minding their own business or otherwise being disinterested in the narrator is entirely excluded as a possibility, which accounts for their easily dismissed suggestion that multiple vehicles in the video are also a part of the conspiracy being waged against them. The narrator's conviction that there are agents of the conspiracy all around him and his willingness to proclaim such is probably what elicited the playful comment above. This person's suspicion and certainty have inadvertently lead them to spy on others who are minding their business.

The next video is representative of the genre focused on vehicles. It is also unusual due to its fairly polished production style relative to other TI videos and view count nearing a half a million as of the time of writing.⁴⁹⁰ The creator of the video, Richard Bruce, has been featured in journalistic portraiture meant to shine a light on the phenomenon of gangstalking to a wider audience.⁴⁹¹ He also maintains a website called FreeOurWorld.org, which details his theories concerning gangstalking, UFOs and the attacks on September 11, 2001 being "a fake terrorist attack."⁴⁹² Bruce begins the video with a segment approximately ten minutes in length in which he contextualizes the subsequent footage. In this introduction, Bruce states that he has been followed by helicopters for three years and that such helicopters appear in order to intimidate him

⁴⁹⁰ Richard Bruce, *Gang Stalking 4 Non-Human Evidence Caught on Video! (Log April 2016)*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXYCNb5RfLQ>.

⁴⁹¹ Vice, *The Nightmare World of Gang Stalking*.

⁴⁹² "FreeOurWorld.Org Home," accessed November 4, 2021, <http://freeourworld.org/>.

when tending to his affairs in public. He claims this harassment stems from his documentation of “reptilian” and “insectoid” beings that he alleges have infiltrated the highest levels of government and entertainment. Accordingly, the footage that he has assembled of helicopters is intercut with short and highly compressed clips from films like *They Live* and *Blade Runner*. Often these clips trace out a shape of an actor’s profile that, as a result of compression, assumes a visage that looks less like a human and more indeterminate and featureless. Bruce seems to be implying that video recording technology is capable of capturing the “true” appearance of these beings. He finishes his introduction by stating that this is an “online report for the record, for anyone who’s interested in this” and that he is “suing the City of Los Angeles but no one will take the case.”

The clips of the helicopters that Bruce has assembled are fairly unremarkable on their own but do frequently depict LAPD helicopters. In one instance, Bruce is stuck in traffic and states that the helicopter overhead is present “just to keep the pressure on.” In another, Bruce places great emphasis on what appears to be an LAPD passenger glancing out of the windshield of the helicopter towards Bruce. A third clip out of the ten featured shows a helicopter flying directly overhead as Bruce exits a Starbucks, which he considers to be intentional. Much of Bruce’s videos are shot around Los Angeles in public spaces. Since the LAPD is “the world’s largest municipal police aviation department, with nearly 100 officers and 19 helicopters,” these sightings that are regarded as signs of harassment against Bruce might instead be considered merely coincidental or perhaps even a likely occurrence.⁴⁹³ Bruce’s conviction, however, that these helicopters are deliberately following him, similarly exemplifies a certainty in the “signification of signification.” The presence of helicopters is gleaned not only as meaningful but also as a threat. Rather than

⁴⁹³ David Correia and Tyler Wall, *Police: A Field Guide* (London: Verso Books, 2018), 55.

view the constant proximity of helicopters as a banal aspect of living in Los Angeles, Bruce instead posits a deeper principle explaining their presence as a punitive act against him personally for expressing his beliefs. While Bruce is slightly different in terms of what the specifics of what he believes is causing his gangstalking, he still exhibits much in common with the TI movement, especially when it comes to his practices of documentation.

Another kind of this gangstalking video again focuses on both people and vehicles, but specifically in locations where people tend to be coming and going with great frequency. One typical video features numerous shots of people in parking lots, often idling and then heading out. As they leave, the person shooting the video announces “watch them all run!”⁴⁹⁴ Another video features surveillance footage from a camera that appears to be monitoring a driveway, as well as the road directly in front of it.⁴⁹⁵ The narrator of the video claims, “This is the proof. 4 people, a whole family seeing the same thing.” He also says that seemingly whenever they come home, there is another car on the road that forces them to drive over a pothole as they pull into their driveway. The video depicts a group of people who are presumably the aforementioned family arriving home in a single vehicle. Not long after, a red pickup truck appears on the road in front of the house and begins idling. A woman then walks down the driveway to investigate, along with a man. The man then goes out onto the road and begins to seemingly record the license plate number of the red truck. After a moment, the truck takes off and the narrator of the video declares that it is always a “black or red” vehicle. One comment beneath the video reads:

⁴⁹⁴ GangstalkersonblastbyAlanMctague, *Watch What Happens When You Catch Gang Stalkers*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qivehPk6Wzo>.

⁴⁹⁵ The exposé, *Gang Stalking Caught on Camera Crystal Clear Proof*, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6hTUIJwetfs>.

it's mind blowing how obvious this is and that it's useless to ask anyone in authority to help because they're involved also. At least this man has his family, I can see someone not married with any children really losing their minds over it quickly with no one to share conversation about with. How can you get anyone to believe you otherwise?

Like the others, this video can be understood as an attempt to capture gangstalking and impute some sort of pattern organizing the activity that the creator observes.

As argued in the previous chapter, TIs' collective refusal to be "duped" by the Symbolic order results in an overinvestment in locating a particular meaning in the signs around them at the expense of meaningfulness. This means that they read otherwise unmeaningful activity as evidence of a broad conspiracy with them at the center. Some of these videos do depict unusual activity, while many others do not appear to depict much of note. Slavoj Žižek writes that, "the only subject for whom the big Other *does* exist is the psychotic, the one who attributes direct material efficacy to words."⁴⁹⁶ The non-duped "continue to believe their eyes" and miss the "efficiency of the symbolic fiction."⁴⁹⁷ In more technical terms, the non-dupe remains at the level of the Imaginary completeness rather than Symbolic displacement of meaning. In this instance, the overinvestment in what is present before them results in the production of a pragmatic consequence that is not implicit in the documentary evidence itself. In other words, TIs are too credulous when it comes to such footage and actually generate the interpretation of the footage that they hope to find there. This observation speaks to the fact that so many of these videos feature titles that purport the footage to irrefutably evidence the existence of gangstalking and other phenomena. While there

⁴⁹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 322.

⁴⁹⁷ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 323.

has been a widespread decline in symbolic authority or efficiency, TIs represent a particularly clear case of how such a shift affects discourse.

The foreclosure enabled by anxiety can also account for an aspect of the online gangstalking archive that I have not discussed yet, which consists of clips from journalistic media that are treated as documentation of the phenomenon from more widely accepted sources. For example, one video is a local news profile of a mother in San Diego who has had people trespass into her home while she was out.⁴⁹⁸ In the clip, she describes discovering recording devices throughout her home and characterizes what is happening to her as “community stalking or gang stalking.” She notes that according to what she has read about the practice online, “it can go on for years.” Examining the comments beneath the video, her testimony is taken as proof that the kind of harassment that she has been subjected to is a widespread phenomenon. One comment reads, “Take it from me, it is designed to mess with your head and discredit you.” Another user writes:

One of the worst things about being a targeted individual is when you realize how many people are involved with this evil. It's not just the home invasions and gas lighting, one of the tell tale ways of knowing someone is involved with this is how a loved one or trusted friend/co-worker suddenly becomes hostile towards you for no reason

There are many other comments beneath the video that similarly posit that the issue the woman describes in this clip is evidence of a more expansive and organized campaign. Moreover, while the clip itself is hosted by the local ABC affiliate station’s official YouTube account, the clip itself appears as a recommended video if one searches “proof of gangstalking,” along with several other videos that describe gangstalking but are not promoted by a TI account.

⁴⁹⁸ ABC 10 News, *San Diego Mom Thinks She's the Victim of "Community Stalking,"* 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0mjwAPtcRY>.

In another video that is also culled from local news reporting, the focus is on a man in Salinas, CA who claims he is being gangstalked.⁴⁹⁹ Though he does not use the term TI, much of the phenomena he describes is closely connected to the experiences that TIs report having. At the end of the segment, they interview Lt. Larry Richard of the Santa Cruz Police Department, who agrees with the assertion that gang-stalking is a real occurrence and has been enhanced by the arrival of platforms like Facebook and Twitter. While it is unclear if the officer really does believe this, misunderstood the question, or some other possibility, the utterance of such could be taken as official admission of the existence of the program, since law enforcement officers are widely seen as agents of state authority.

These clips and others like them are taken as revelatory evidence about the nature of the phenomenon. Though they do not contain footage captured by TIs or victims of gangstalking, they still function as guarantors of the offline reality that so much of the online content describes. Their investment with significance is predicated upon the notion that video recording can capture an elusive phenomenon and depict it in an unambiguous manner. Much like the videos that depict activity that is not noteworthy, the intense attribution of meaning to the videos is a consequence of foreclosure. The possibility of the activity in parking lots and highways being spontaneous and unorganized is excluded from the well of possible meanings. Similarly, the clips that have been gathered from local news reporting cannot be regarded as isolated incidents but are instead proof of a far-ranging conspiracy. As emblems of communicative capitalism, these online publications are taken as highly significant and revelatory, when in reality they have a marginal viewership and many who watch them do not see them as such.

⁴⁹⁹ *Proof of Gangstalking News Report*, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkMBFWbtII4>.

5.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the production and circulation of gangstalking videos can be understood as attempts by TIs to maintain control of their ability to position themselves in relation to their persecutors. Perhaps unsurprisingly, gangstalkers are ubiquitous in the everyday lives of the TIs in these videos. Part of this appeal is the pretense that the scenes depicted in these videos require no additional context and depict the torment that TIs experience in a clear fashion. Like the posts in r/gangstalking, a condition of possibility for their production and circulation is a segment of their viewership taking them at face value. What is different, however, is that the videos document the social worlds of TIs, overwritten by their distinctive relation to the Symbolic.

Gold and Gold connect the Truman Show Delusion to “the loss of privacy and the new porousness of social life,” claiming that “the Truman Show delusion is a pathological fear about what those strangers might do with the new knowledge they have.”⁵⁰⁰ As the universal referent for signification, TIs also inhabit a world that they believe is inherently hostile towards them and will use that knowledge to ruin their lives or even harm them. Moreover, these actors are intensely interested in TIs’ every move. In the case of these videos, however, rather than just being followed by an all-seeing community, TIs push back and are now doing the following themselves. I have argued that this gesture is reflective of the cultural logic of communicative capitalism, wherein merely participating in online communities is felt as a politically charged and potent activity. TIs are not unique in this regard. Regardless of ideological orientation, many are seduced by the notion that participation in online political discourse is an effective form of political action or worse,

⁵⁰⁰ Gold and Gold, *Suspicious Minds*, 213.

substitute for the difficult work of organizing offline. TIs are, however, noteworthy for the utter disconnect between what they produce online and the symbolic significance they attribute to it.

That such a phenomenon is possible is evidence of not only how widespread recording technologies have become, but also the increasing distinction and isolation of segments of social media. Josh Gunn has argued that the increasing segmentation of social networks has made it so that perhaps North American culture writ large is becoming more psychotic and less symbolically mediated.⁵⁰¹ Gangstalking videos are a manifestation of this tendency, treating the videos as unmediated documentation of proof, much like how words are things with direct efficacy for the psychotic. Perhaps Pfister's and Woods's suggestion that in present times viewers assume that images have been manipulated or otherwise altered has a corollary with an opposite conclusion in the realm of video. While augmentation and alteration of such images is likely to persist and continue, perhaps video will continue to push in the direction of immediacy, in both the sense of seeming unaltered and providing instant gratification. There are a few signs of how a tendency toward immediacy will continue to shape online media. For instance, many platforms like Instagram and Twitter now include an option for viewers to go "live" and engage with one's followers in an interactive and immediate fashion. Gangstalking videos are indicative of the other aspect of immediacy, insofar as they purport to offer a naturalistic and indexical representation of an otherwise obscured phenomenon.

This tendency is not necessarily, however, limited solely to the TI community. Another area in which we might observe a similar shift is allegations of election fraud in the 2020 presidential election. During the days following voting on November 9th, numerous videos posted

⁵⁰¹ Gunn, *Political Perversion*. 70.

online were thought to be capturing vote tampering in the aftermath of the election. One video publicized by conservative news outlet *Gateway Pundit* featured a truck pulling into the TCF Center in Michigan in the early hours of the morning on November 4th.⁵⁰² The footage depicts the truck entering a facility and then having several boxes unloaded from its rear door. The truck then again returns an hour later and more boxes are unloaded. The *Gateway Pundit* notes that earlier in the evening, President Donald Trump was ahead of his opponent “by over 100,000 votes.” They claim that this footage is proof that votes were fraudulently allocated to Joe Biden in an attempt to swing the election in his favor. Coverage in other outlets emphasized that those votes were likely legitimate, on the basis of a sworn affidavit from a former Michigan Director of Elections Christopher Thomas, who worked the TCF Center that night. Thomas testified that the ballots delivered to the TCF Center and subsequently processed were received prior to 8 p.m., in compliance with electoral law.⁵⁰³ Another video depicts election workers in Georgia “packing ballots into containers, which” in the reporting on the incident in right-wing media “were

⁵⁰² Jim Hoft, “Exclusive: The TCF Center Election Fraud - Newly Discovered Video Shows Late Night Deliveries of Tens of Thousands of Illegal Ballots 8 Hours After Deadline,” *The Gateway Pundit* (blog), February 5, 2021, <https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2021/02/exclusive-tcf-center-election-fraud-newly-recovered-video-shows-late-night-deliveries-tens-thousands-illegal-ballots-michigan-arena/>.

⁵⁰³ Clara Hendrickson, “Video Does Not Provide Evidence of Election Fraud in Detroit,” Politifact, February 5, 2021, <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2021/feb/05/gateway-pundit/video-does-not-provide-evidence-election-fraud-det/>.

inaccurately dubbed “suitcases.”⁵⁰⁴ Trump argued that this video was “proof” that poll workers were illegally inflating Biden’s vote count in order to deny the incumbent president reelection.

I am not suggesting that any of the individual people involved in these incidents are psychotic but rather that the direction in which our media systems have developed encourages a psychotic mode of relation to such artifacts. Both of the videos discussed above lack anything resembling significant action but instead depict uneventful action. Yet, in accordance with my earlier arguments about the foreclosure of certain signifiers in both anxiety and psychosis, the unclear activity depicted in such videos make them perfect objects to invest with an intense meaning. This case reflects a need for research into right-wing movements and media to further investigate how foreclosure and the speed afforded by social media platforms have shaped the character and identity of such movements. There has been a widespread decline in the perceived power of social authority. Indeed, some reading this section may take issue with some of the sources I have cited as proof of my position that allegations of fraud in the 2020 election are unsubstantiated. This tendency is not unique to conservatism’s particular ideological orientation but does seem to have proven extremely consequential for the movement, given that the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6th was in part motivated by allegations of widespread voter fraud. Such an event was aided by the kinds of appeals I have discussed briefly in this section.

I have argued in this chapter that the production of gangstalking videos is an identity-forming activity on the part of TIs that both marks a decline in symbolic efficiency and the

⁵⁰⁴ Matthew Brown, “Fact Check: Georgia ‘suitcase’ Video Is Missing Context,” USA TODAY, December 14, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/12/14/fact-check-georgia-suitcase-video-missing-context/3892640001/>.

ingraining of communicative capitalism in the cultural logic of the internet. As with the testimonials addressed in Ch. 3, this form of media production is merely a hyperbolic form of a more widespread tendency with respect to how people relate to each other and their media production online. Both concern the creation of an online archive that can be referenced as proof when TIs or people who believe they are being gangstalked make their case in a public setting. While puzzling at times, I maintain that examining the situation by way of psychoanalytic theory resolves the otherwise enigmatic nature of the videos. Their enigmatic qualities are precisely what make them the perfect vehicles for asserting that what they depict is in fact inarguable proof. I now turn to the conclusion of this dissertation.

6.0 Conclusion: A Living Conspiracy

This dissertation has examined the rhetorical practices of the TI community by way of psychoanalytic theory, focusing primarily on their media production on digital platforms. I argue that Lacan's theory of psychosis offers a generative view of their online activity. I have held that Lacan's theory can bring into focus aspects of the movement's communicative practices that might otherwise remain puzzling. To achieve this, I assembled several case studies that focused on representative examples of the community's habits of media production. In examining how subreddits, comments sections, and YouTube videos become public objects, I have shown how the investments that sustain the movement are staged online as part of an effort to shape and affirm identity. During my research, I also discovered some parallels between the TI movement's online behavior and other users of such platforms. These parallels have revealed how a widespread decline in symbolic efficiency across society has altered how users identify themselves online and relate to one another.

YouTube and Reddit have served as the main sources of the case studies I have assembled, though there easily could be different versions of this project that focus on user-produced content from other platforms. As I indicated in the introduction, there are many more enclaves of TI media that scholars could tend to in researching the movement. Examining how the movement interacts on platforms like Twitter, Twitch, TikTok and others could prove fruitful, since each platform has its own distinct logic of production. Additionally, services such as Discord or Telegram, or livestreamed call-in events similar to the Targeted Massachusetts stream I identified in Ch.1, could prove important modes of interaction to explore as well. In particular, that last grouping includes more personalized contact between users than the platforms I examined in my dissertation and

may prove especially revealing. The cases that I chose for analysis were those that I felt best exemplified the psychotic structure of the TI movement after spending considerable time looking at such media.

6.1 Practiced theory

My emphasis on the TI movement's participatory media production is in response to the need for scholars of conspiracy theory to tend to the role of online interaction in maintaining the belief system of the adherents. Conspiracy theory needs to be understood as a "creative endeavour in which fact and fiction are blurred."⁵⁰⁵ As Matthew Hayes observes, academic literature has primarily attempted to understand conspiracy theories as either cultural motifs or schools of thought, which has come at the expense of properly understanding how such theories are practiced.⁵⁰⁶ In other words, scholars should look more closely at the way such ideas are spread, reproduced, and circulated. In this case, by focusing on media that exemplify the logic of their platform, I have hoped to show how platforms inflect the TI movement's user-generated content. I've also tended to the rhetorical processes that are the basis for this movement becoming meaningful.

The TI movement's online activity is illustrative of wider patterns of online activity by users of such platforms. Commenting on connectivity in the wake of Web 2.0, Greg Singh writes:

We might say that our first problem of connectivity ethics is political in character...because in contemporary media forms of communication and

⁵⁰⁵ Lafferty, "A Literary-Biographical Approach to the Study of Conspiracy Theory," 805.

⁵⁰⁶ Hayes, "Then the Saucers Do Exist?," 667.

expression, we are dealing with power relations that assume the character of an empowering, seductive form of democratic agency for the individual, and, importantly, for the potential formation of autonomous communities of influence.⁵⁰⁷

For those who make them, each post about gangstalking or targeting presumably has direct efficacy in spreading the message and converting non-believers. As argued in Ch. 4, I believe that such a dynamic is representative of the relationship between users' political speech and platforms more generally, per Jodi Dean's account of communicative capitalism. It is, however, particularly evident in TI media. Fleshing out an account of how the active theorization of conspiracy intersects with cultural logics of production on digital platforms should be extended further as a line of inquiry. A broader assembly of case studies will help refine our understanding of how changes in media use have affected the substance and spread of conspiracy theories. In the case of QAnon, for example, followers were at one time uploading videos of themselves reciting a generic oath of office.⁵⁰⁸ The practice has been significant for the movement. Former National Security Advisor General Michael Flynn and his family uploaded a video of themselves reciting the oath, leading many invested in the QAnon movement to treat his engagement as a sign that the movement has an official status.

Viewing conspiracy theory as something practiced and actively maintained will require scholarship to pay close attention to how these ideas become elevated to place of central importance in its adherents' lives. On this point, ethnographic work could shed great light on the influence that online activities have on TIs' offline behaviors and organization. In this study, I

⁵⁰⁷ Singh, *The Death of Web 2.0*, 161.

⁵⁰⁸ Marshall Cohen, "Michael Flynn Posts Video Featuring QAnon Slogans," CNN, July 7, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/07/politics/michael-flynn-qanon-video/index.html>.

have focused primarily on the media of the TI movement, tending to the role that such artifacts have played as public objects of cathexis. Such an approach allowed me to examine how TI identity is shaped through production and engagement with such media, as well as offer some insight into aspects of the belief system and its relation to identity. What I could not do, however, is make claims about how people are animated these beliefs in their everyday lives. Future research into the TI and gangstalking phenomenon could utilize interviews and other forms of direct engagement with the community to accomplish this. While there is already some online basis for studying offline meetups in the form of videos and photos, attending such meetups would provide a much better portrait of these events. Fieldwork of this kind would provide a more textured view of how these ideas affect those who believe in them than is presently available. Another approach could focus on some enclave of TIs and develop more textured accounts of group practices and identity-formation. While there are a number of factors to consider before responsibly undertaking such a project and interviewing participants, it could ultimately prove valuable in trying to ascertain adherents' motivation for joining the movement.

In my account of the TI community, I have displayed some of the insights that psychoanalytic theory can provide when it comes to understanding the interplay of identity and online community. The TI community's online presence is sustained through user-production that justifies the actuality of the phenomenon and its traces in everyday life. The ubiquity of new media and its push to engage with others collide with the foreclosure and intense investment indicative of psychosis. Joshua Gunn writes that "technological acceleration and an addiction to speed have militated against the acceptance of a shared symbolic by eroding the possibilities for reflection."⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁹ Gunn, *Political Perversion*, 68.

We can understand the TI movement's rise to prominence as symptomatic of these mutually reinforcing tendencies of speed and psychosis on a wider, societal scale. There is simply such a large and regularly updated body of TI media online that it is easy for one's attention to be fully subsumed by it. Moreover, as I have outlined in all three chapters, user-generated media plays a significant role here in grounding investment in the discourse. Examining an instance of TI media without understanding the role that participatory and interactive media play will fail to understand how it becomes a kind of public discourse or vocabulary for psychosis. The emergence of platforms and subsequent linking of people together did not create the problem of delusion but make it easier for a standard vocabulary to be adopted without regard for social authority. These are conditions that have contributed towards the rise of the TI community online. In the next section, I discuss what we can learn from understanding the TI movement as a response to an excess of information.

6.2 Duped by the glut

As discussed in Ch. 2, refusal to be “duped” is a common strategy for cutting through the seemingly endless supply of information and updates in the contemporary world. Such a maneuver is readily on display in TI media. As I have suggested at points throughout this dissertation, scholars could likely find parallels between TIs and those involved in questioning the 2020 election or anti-vaxxers. Indeed, some of these platforms have chosen to begin regulating some of the most insidious online content, like QAnon or anti-vaccine speech. For the most part, companies have reluctantly and unevenly implemented these changes in content policy. Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner write that “in network culture... demands for free speech acquiesce to a

libertarian ethos of ‘freedom’ - of speech, of content, of circulation.”⁵¹⁰ Platforms have struggled to balance calls for content moderation with their preference to avoid making judgements about the propriety of certain kinds of speech on their platforms. For example, Facebook has banned COVID-19 misinformation generally but has struggled to stop the spread on the platform.⁵¹¹ In another recent case, Spotify has removed several episodes of podcast host Joe Rogan’s program for his usage of racial slurs, following increased public scrutiny around loose discourse about the COVID-19 vaccine on his show.⁵¹² Tarleton Gillespie observes that the “concerns around political discourse and manipulation” that arise in discussion about content moderation on such platforms are ultimately about power and accountability in the modern world.⁵¹³ The Data & Society Research Institute has proposed “trust and verification/fact-checking; demonetization; de-prioritization,” and government regulation as strategies for dealing with “fake news” and the rise

⁵¹⁰ Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner, *Make America Meme Again: The Rhetoric for the Alt-Right* (New York: Peter Lang, 2019), 150.

⁵¹¹ Rebecca Heilweil, “Facebook Is Finally Banning Vaccine Misinformation,” Vox, February 8, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/recode/2021/2/8/22272798/facebook-vaccine-misinformation-covid-19-conspiracy-theories>.

⁵¹² “Spotify Says Joe Rogan Removed Podcast Episodes amid Controversy over Racial Slur,” *Washington Post*, accessed February 16, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2022/02/06/spotify-joe-rogan-podcast-removed/>.

⁵¹³ Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 205, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.12987/9780300235029/html>.

of misinformation in mass media.⁵¹⁴ While these are helpful proposals, their potential impact on the TI community is unclear.

Some have argued that we should understand TI media or so-called “mind control” sites as a source of potential harm for some vulnerable populations.⁵¹⁵ Christine Sarteschi has focused on a few cases of violence committed by TIs that have garnered attention from national news media.⁵¹⁶ Both of these issues might serve as some sort of justification for moderating TI media in a manner similar to other forms of misinformation. However, while it seems probable that a few incidents will continue to occur occasionally, TIs do not seem particularly prone to committing violent crimes relative to other extreme communities. Moreover, psychoanalysis has conventionally rejected the notion that simply providing people with the appropriate information is sufficient to effect change. In his essay “Wild Analysis,” Freud observes that the root of a patient’s ignorance is “his ‘inner resistances’” that prevent them from fully coming to grips with the reality of something. In other words, from the perspective of psychoanalysis, the problem is not epistemic, for if “knowledge about the unconscious were as important for the patient as people inexperienced in psychoanalysis imagines, listening to lectures or reading books would be enough to cure him.”⁵¹⁷ On this point, Stephen Frosh connects “political” and “psychoanalytic forms of

⁵¹⁴ Robyn Caplan, Lauren Hanson, and Joan Donovan, “Dead Reckoning: Navigating Content Moderation after ‘Fake News,’” Report (Data & Society Research Institute, February 16, 2018), 16, <https://apo.org.au/node/134521>.

⁵¹⁵ Elizabeth Dietrich, “Gang Stalking : Internet Connectivity as an Emerging Mental Health Concern” (Master’s thesis, Northampton, MA, Smith College, 2015), <https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/702>.

⁵¹⁶ Sarteschi, “Mass Murder, Targeted Individuals, and Gang-Stalking.”

⁵¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, “Wild Analysis,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Work of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. XI (London: Hogarth Press Limited, 1953), 225.

resistance” as key sites to tend to in understanding “the problem of indifference to various forms of injustice.”⁵¹⁸

The resistance to change upon receiving information stems from a desire for preservation of one’s self-representation and worldview. For example, one study of adherents to COVID-19 conspiracies found that “support for Donald Trump is strongly related to the belief that the COVID-19 threat has been exaggerated, even when accounting for partisanship and ideology.”⁵¹⁹ The study found that many felt the danger posed by the virus was being exaggerated in an effort to weaken President Trump’s efficacy while in office. All of this is to say that moderating access to information seems unlikely to alter the basic problem posed by TI media, which is fundamentally about how people relate to a symbolic authority. We should also understand the purchase that such media has on the minds of its adherents as indication of how desensitized non-TIs have become the proliferation of surveillance. Without necessarily presuming that TI content is harmful or ought to be subject to moderation online, more sensitivity to the challenges that such media creates for those who are highly suggestible would likely be wise.

Rhetoric, psychosis, & freedom

⁵¹⁸ Stephen Frosh, “Neurotic and Paranoid Citizens,” in *Narcissism, Melancholia and the Subject of Community*, ed. Barry Sheils and Julie Walsh (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 238.

⁵¹⁹ Joseph E. Uscinski et al., “Why Do People Believe COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories?,” *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1, no. 3 (April 28, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-015>.

6.3 Rhetoric, psychosis, and freedom

Lacan's theory of psychosis has been a clarifying tool throughout my study of TI behavior and could benefit from wider application within rhetorical studies. Psychosis is defined by "foreclosure by the powerful imaginary relation of fantasy."⁵²⁰ As I argued in Ch. 2, through uptake of the TI narrative as a delusional metaphor, TIs can develop a representation of the world as regulated by a rotten and personalized legal authority, in which the possibility of the law not focusing on them personally is excluded. This relationship to law is present in an especially visible and exaggerated form in TI media, but as Todd McGowan argues, this paranoia is "The specific form of psychosis that modernity produces."⁵²¹ For McGowan, the paranoid subject sees "some hidden force...always pulling the chains of the law in order to manipulate the subject and deprive it of its freedom." There is an obvious resonance between the paranoid subject's protests of deprivation and TIs' claims of being invisibly manipulated from without or never being able to trust those around you. The same dynamic of conceiving of law as scheme to control a populace and deprive it of freedom are also present in anti-vaccine and election skeptic discourse. They may serve as further illustrative case studies for understanding how the twin forces of speed and psychosis that Gunn emphasizes in his study have inflected contemporary public discourses about rights and freedom.

In conclusion, I have offered an account of the TI movement that I believe lends clarity to aspects of the movement that would otherwise remain unexplained in existing research. In doing

⁵²⁰ Matheson, "Psychotic Discourse," 203.

⁵²¹ McGowan, "The Psychosis of Freedom," 70.

so, I have hoped to demonstrate some of the distinct advantages that a critical approach rooted in rhetorical theory and psychoanalysis can afford scholars for evaluating user-produced content on platforms. As the TI movement continues to evolve and adapt with the twists and turns of public discourse, scholars would do well to focus on how it continues to serve as an explanatory resource for some who stumble upon it.

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