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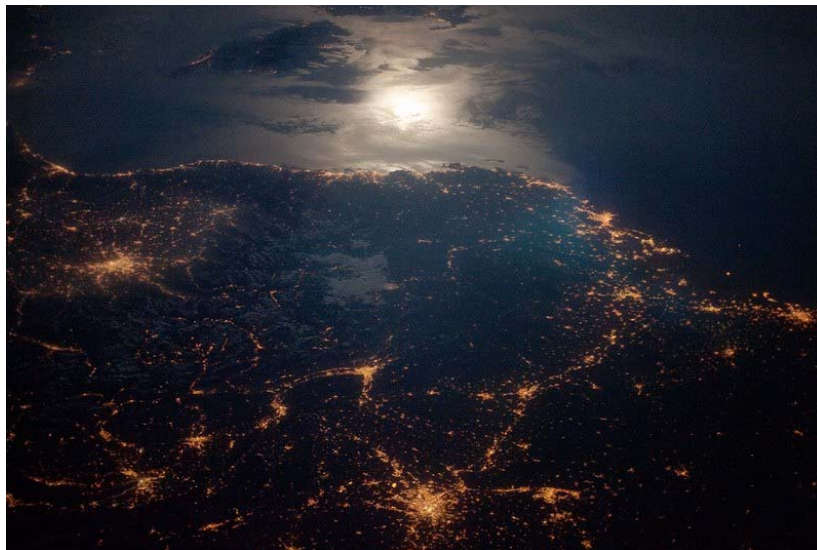*www.afgazad.com*   *afgazad@gmail.com*

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What is Digital Fascism?

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At least since the great Italian author Umberto Eco's description of the fourteen points that define classical fascism, many readers know what fascism is – at least in theory. New research describes Italo-German fascism (1920s–1940s) as classical fascism. It contrasts classical fascism with a new variant, digital fascism.

Compared to the classical type, digital fascism may well be furnished with the greatest propaganda machine the world has ever seen – the Internet. Unlike, classical fascism which used printed newspapers and radio, digital fascism transmits its hate messages through the Internet. These so-called social media are in fact anti-social media. They aren't socially organised. Instead, a few monopoly corporations run Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and all the rest.

What allows digital fascism to thrive is the space these electronic platforms grant to right-wing extremism. Online platform corporations like Facebook, for example, hold on to the delusional *idée fixe* that their platform is not – and, in fact, should not – be an independent empire judging what is to be posted. So too the other gigantic monopolies. Their platforms, according to their self-serving ideology, are simply technical instruments that allow people to connect.

So far the conflict lies between an open society with free speech at its core, on the one side, and a closed one where right-wing extremists to use the same online platforms to destroy it. These fanatics replace them with anti-democratic and above race-based media remains unsolved. But how this comes about remains an unsolved mystery. Perhaps, it is just as Hitler's Reich Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, once said, "It will always remain one of the best jokes of democracy, that it gave its deadly enemies the means by which it was destroyed." Today, it seems that democracy will give its deadly enemies (digital fascists) the means (e.g., Facebook) which these fascists will use to destroy democracy. Unfortunately, this is no joke.

With such equipment at their disposal, digital fascism has been able to create a substantial news and propaganda system with tremendous reach and power. Today, this power is endangering democracy. Following Marshall McLuhan's dictum that "*the medium is the message*," classical fascism had its media (newspapers and radio) and digital fascism has its media (online platforms). The availability of the Internet has changed fascism. As a consequence, fascism re-calibrated its propaganda to the means at its disposal but, now with the new media, fascism itself has to change. It transforms into digital fascism.

Yet digital fascism clings on to core elements of the classic ideology of Mussolini's Italy or Franco's Spain. This is found, for example, in the all-important fear of an external racial threat (white genocide), male chauvinism, ultra-nationalism, the eternal enemy, Even though the way fascism's propaganda was constructed meant that it could never remain locked in the epoch of European classical fascism (1920s-1940s), some overarching elements of its ideology remain pretty much the same because the minds and lives of most people in frustrating, disappointing times remain the same.

Just as capitalism has changed from the days of Adam Smith and Karl Marx so has fascism. Eighteenth-century liberal capitalism became mass-consumerist capitalism after the Industrial Revolution. Keynesian capitalism (1940s to 1970s) became (1980s-20221) neoliberal capitalism because of the break-up of French, British and other Empires, the dominance of the USA after World War Two and the rise of the EU.

Eventually, given the digital revolution, classical fascism had to morph into digital fascism. Just like capitalism, fascism is not a once-and-for-all defined system. It changes over time. Neither capitalism nor fascism is a *fait accompli*. They are not closed cases. The rather nonsensically proclaimed end of history is nowhere in sight.

Just as classical fascism did a hundred years ago, digital fascism uses new technologies to its advantage. When moving pictures came along, Italian fascism used it, just as did German Nazism. Classical fascism relied on a brand new machine: radio. Today, its offspring relies on computers, tablets, iPads and mobile phones.

Yet the purpose of fascist propaganda always remains the same: mass manipulation of the hearts and minds of the population. Digital fascism uses these new technologies even more successful because these gadgets allow right-wing extremists transmit their hateful ideology in an inexpensive way – anyone can post anything on the net.

With this another significant change came along. Digital fascism presents itself in a horizontal format, whereas classical fascism required charismatic and ruthless leaders. Today every little and often rather tin-pot right-wing extremist can produce and transmit conspiracy fantasies, rumours, invented stories, alternative facts – in a word: propaganda – on social networks. Digital fascism no longer needs a central, hierarchical, and vertically structured apparatus. No need these days for Leni Riefenstahl.

Thirdly, digital fascism operates without third party control. There is no editor, no sub-editor, no newspaper or no radio host to go through. In other words, digital fascism is a self-promoting echo-chamber of lies and fake news and it is driven by a massive number of right-wing amateurs who make heavy use of YouTube's motto: *Broadcast yourself*.

Of course, without editing, fact-checking and – let's not beat around the bush, without journalism — digital fascism thrives on political half-truths, bull shit, accidental misinformation, deliberate disinformation, apocalyptic end-of-the-white-race delusions, rumours, innuendo, hate campaigns, falsehoods, crank palaver, and, of course, the infamous conspiracy theories which in reality have never been "theories" but are conspiracy fantasies. The **Q** in Qanon must stand for querulous.

All this noise aids digital fascism's infowars in which made up nonsense is positioned against facts in an attempt to create doubt, dizziness and confusion to win the rating war against digital fascism's ultimate enemy: mainstream media. Both classical and digital fascism cannot exist without "the" enemy. Enemy thinking hardens the borders of echo-chambers in which the only opinion that is permitted is the opinion that serves the ultimate goal of all fascism. In the echo-chambers of digital fascism, cognitive dissonance works very well. Old and new fascism do not rely on facts but on allegiance to fascism's ideology. Everything that does not fit into the ideology is defamed as "opinion dictatorship" run by some elusive but all-powerful liberal elite. The Deep State.

Just like right-wing populism, digital fascism positions the common man against this invisible elite who run what right-wing populism and digital fascism call "the" establishment media. They and their lizard leaders, a gang of pedophiles lurking in a pizza parlour basement somewhere in downtown Washington, DC, are ready to kidnap your children if you don't act now. Unlike the established media, digital fascism isn't run from the top. Instead, it presents

itself as a grassroots movement, so the ideology of mass mobilization under digital fascism goes underground. Drain the swamp

Lacking a more or less coherent party ideology like classical Mussolini's fascism, digital fascism's propaganda is largely defined through a loose patchwork of worldviews, un-thought-through opinions, croaking attitudes and vacuous right-wing ideas. The disadvantage of not having a coherent party ideology is more than compensated through the advantage of being able to entice a vast array of people into the ideological orbit of digital fascism. This works largely through three elements:

1. An immense array of right-wing websites;

2. Online trading websites offering semi-right-wing products, music, clothing, etc.; and

3. Online discussion boards.

Many of these media elements are designed to draw the non-political consumer into the orbit of right-wing ideologies and, almost self-evidently, away from the hated mainstream media. Sucked into the great black hole, the populace spins into violent oblivion. Most of these online networks function as radicalisation machines. These are designed to draw the unsuspecting person deeper and deeper into the maze of right-wing online chat-groups and fake news sites. Down into the maelstrom with nowhere else to go. No leader, no goal, nothing, while somewhere out there, someone is making a lot of money out of confusion.

Crucial to understanding the difference between classical fascism and digital fascism is the fact that right-wing extremists of the age of digital fascism will never tell you where they are going. The apostles of digital fascism will come along to peddle innocent-looking new toys, suggestive websites with no clear message, ordinary conspiracy fantasies pumped up into grandiose blather. This formlessness divides digital fascism from classical fascism.

One of the greatest thinkers on fascism, the Italian Primo Levi writer of novels and short stories, a man who had been to the hell of a Nazi death camp and lived to come home, once noted, "Every age has its own Fascism." As a professional chemist, he set out the elements neatly. There are at least three key elements that remain virtually the same:

1) An obsession with The Decline of the West, the terminal dying of the white race, the exchange of populations from savage counties. This is framed as an existential, historical and national threat.

2) An organised lying or what might be called radical or cynical pragmatism which sees truth as something that can be bent and adjusted to serve the purpose of digital fascism.

3) By doing all this, digital fascism is still serving a mass-based political movement seeking to influence politics inside parliaments, e.g. Germany's AfD, UKIP in Britain, Fidesz in Hungary, Modi's BJP, Chrysi Avgi, and potentially some sections of the GOP in America.

For digital fascism, these work side by side. The internet side of digital fascism and its political action side as well as the parliamentarian side are linked. How bad it can become

when they all are perfectly aligned was shown on the 6th January 2021 inside Washington's Capitol.

Anti-democratic and semi-fascist ideas like storming the US Capitol have become acceptable not despite – but because of – the fact that digital fascism represents a patchwork of fascistic ideas, has next to no coherent ideology, no strategic leadership, an no fascist party base. Instead, digital fascism lives from technical platforms on which not just right-wing ideology is exchange but anti-democratic action can be coordinate.

In digital fascism, such action mirrors more the dominance of online platforms than a tough fascistic organisation constructed as a street fighting setup. Digital fascism has no need for Italian black and German brown shirts. It is not organised like the original *Fasci Italiani di Combattimento*. This shift from classical fascism towards digital fascism has not only altered the organisational core of today's movement but also its surrounding. Digital fascism thrives on supporters online, often favouring the ideal of leaderless resistance, a concept taken from one of fascism's arch enemies: anarchism.

More crucial than to classical fascism is the art of storytelling, an important part of digital fascism's ability to entice people onto right-wing platforms. These narratives give preference to emotional stories rather than hard facts and truthfulness. In short, the successful right-wing extremist has to be a good confabulator furnished with the ability to establish trust between the right-wing core and its targeted amorphous audience. The extremists know that a good right-wing story works best when it travels fast and far. This is the measure of success.

In that belief, reality takes a backseat as mythical imperatives move to the front seat, together with the fascist *idée fixe* of racial purity and national rebirth. Fascist storytelling works by selecting those things that fit into the right-wing ideology and de-selecting those which are not favourable to fascism. The system demands a creative interpretation of facts while purveying rumours and conspiracy fantasies. Initially, stories that are useful to digital fascism can come from local media as much as from Facebook. The essential thing is that these stories are transformed by the right-wing narrator to suite modern fascism.

The ability to pick up local stories and transform them into right-wing ideology that spread fast and far through online platforms has significantly become easier. Today, the Internet's journey into right-wing websites, newsgroups, and disgruntled individuals is indeed very short. With digital fascism, the use of established methods such as local newspapers, radio stations and television channels has been replaced or bypassed by a wide range of instantaneous social media.

Aiding the entire construct is the fact that people tend to read, post, tweet and re-tweet sensational and negative stories more often than other stories. Virtually the same applies to stories that dramatize facts and are based on emotions rather than facts. The tendency towards sensational and negative stories pushes right-wing stories, even more, when their content is constructed as fascinating. Digital fascism mirrors right-wing tabloids. With tabloids, digital

fascism often uses online platforms to reinforce prejudice, xenophobia and racism coming from right-wing tabloids and radio shows.

Most suitable to all this is crime, brutality and violence found on local media. These stories can be picked up and used to construct a parallel universe in which the audience finds plausible and simple explanations constructed for their uneducated minds. Yet this material lures not so much young people into the orbit of digital fascism but rather captures an older and mostly male audience.

Large sections of those people grew up before the advent of online media. They are less "streetwise" when it comes to Facebook, for example. They are more likely to believe what they read and see online. They used to believe their local newspaper, now they believe what they see on Facebook. The arts of discriminating reading and critical thinking have been lost.

In short, online platforms are the engine room of digital fascism. Without them digital fascism could not exist. For even more sophisticated right-wingers, online platforms can be constructed using what B. J. Fogg calls "persuasion technology", a method to create successful click-baits bordering on psychological addiction.

Running in the background shadows are the algorithms of online platforms. These are weapons of math destruction. They push the most sensational fringe content. The monster pushes the most outrageous foul lies, the most hatful content, the most obscene picture, and the most sensational story.

In world dominated by information overload and attention grabbing headlines, these are the items digital fascism prefers. The most outrageous content is able to split society into believers and nonbelievers. It serves the interest of digital fascism to polarise society – setting one group against the other.

As in classical fascism, digital fascism also lives by mass manipulation. Since the enlightened media of democratic society work against the goals of fascism, they are quickly declared to be the "enemy of the people". Once real journalism is bypassed, digital fascism's post-factual era begins. Against the persistent delusion of many old-fashioned liberals who believe that in a democratic society the truth will eventually succeed, there squats the ugly fact that classical fascism used the virtues of a free press and radio to annihilate democratic society.

Digital fascism now readies itself to do the same thing, despite the failure of its opening gambit on 6th January 2021. In other societies, such as Hungary, Poland and Myanmar, the process of a slow *fascistification*, an ugly word for the protracted replacement of democracy by authoritarian institutions, has already begun to take shape.

The power of fascism, from classical to digital has always been the fact that it can create its own pseudo-reality. In 1920, Italian-fascism destroyed the working class as a threat to capitalism; in the 1930s and early 1940s, German Nazism exterminated Jews based on the conspiratorial fantasy of Jewish world domination; in 2016, it created Pizzagate; and in

January 2021, it stormed the Capitol of the USA. All of these are carried out because of a self-assigned national and racial mission.

While these are highly targeted violent missions, digital fascism also uses what is known as gaslighting. Gaslighting refers to targeted manipulation to disorient people and make them believe themselves mad. Originally, the term came from Patrick Hamilton's 1938 play Gas Light and subsequent 1944 movie film of the same name. The plot has a manipulative husband tricking his gullible wife into believing she is going mad, so that he can gain control over her wealth.

This American psychological thriller was directed by George Cukor and starred Ingrid Bergman. Because of the play and the film's popularity, the term has come to designate a psychological phenomenon in which a leader, a government or a secret enemy seeks to confuse people so that they become highly insecure on what to and what not to believe. The perception of what reality is, is weakened. The complete loss of trust in reality then opens up avenues for right-wing falsehoods, fake news, conspiracy fantasies and eventually fascist propaganda.

Of course, once trust in reality is devalued and debilitated, faith in quality media can also easily be undermined, so that the victims of "gaslighting" that is, those people fooled into thinking that it is their own weakness that is causing the readers or listeners to experience cognitive dissonance and epistemological confusion. It is then an easy slide to discover a calming and consoling welcome in right-wing platforms who sell easy solutions and plausible fantasies.

The digi-fascists zoom in once the victim has been enticed to believe that "those up there" (the secret, deep state) have betrayed them and that the official line of government and the media is a lie, or as former President Donald Trump trumpeted, "fake news.". Once this is achieved, digital fascism's info-war has almost been won, writes Maik Fielitz in digital fascism. What happened at the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 was no more than a first success of digital fascism. More is sure to come.

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