Digital Anti-Rationalism: Understanding the Alignment of Vitalism, Social Media, and Right-Wing Messaging

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Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between social media and fascism. The main argument is that social media and fascism share anti-rational drives. For fascism, this is due to its roots in vitalism, and for social media, it is due to its position in a continuum of media concision. Through an interdisciplinary analysis including media studies, propaganda analysis, and scholarship on fascism, the paper will expand on the concept of concision in the media as elucidated by Noam Chomsky, applying it to social media to demonstrate how it limits evidence-based argumentation. This will be done by situating social media within a larger trajectory of concision, showcasing how social media platforms like X, TikTok, and more, are concise by design. The paper will then trace the anti-rationalist roots of fascism, focusing on the connections to vitalism and its dependence on intuition and emotion instead of evidence and rationality. By linking those elements to social media, the paper will ultimately articulate the ways in which the concision of social media and the anti-rationalism of fascism align, creating a media ecosphere that privileges fascist rhetoric due to its inherent irrationality. This examination will look at those pieces in conjunction with the "firehose of falsehood" propaganda model, which relies on rapid, high-volume media content. The ultimate argument of this paper is that social media, in their concision, limit discourse in a way that undermines rationality, presenting significant implications for politics around the world.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an observed decline in democratic governance around the world. International IDEA (2024), an official United Nations Observer, argues that with regard to democratic measures, "four in nine countries were worse off in 2023 than they had been in 2018" (p. 1). Many authors from diverse political perspectives have explored this decline as a return to authoritarianism including organizations as different as The Cato Institute and *The Nation*. Those discussions often broach a more challenging question to answer, which is whether these authoritarian and strongman resurgences should be considered fascism or not. To point, noted scholar of fascism, Robert O. Paxton, has been called on multiple times since the election of Donald Trump in the US to weigh in on if the Trump administration should be considered fascist, even as recently as the 2020 US election (Zerofsky, 2024). Though there is no consensus on what fascism is, fascism is a persistent part of contemporary discourse. This paper suggests that any discussion of fascism in current regimes should necessarily include social media.

Some research has been conducted on social media that can help to inform discussions of fascism. These range from analyses of the dissemination of false news (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral, 2018) to more complete discourse analyses of fascist rhetoric through digital means (Fuchs, 2022). Those studies demonstrate the ways that social media can interact with fascism and fascist rhetoric, but the argument of this paper takes a different approach. This paper contends that social media inherently privilege fascist ideologies.

This paper will demonstrate this claim first by exploring the ways in which social media have continued an historical trajectory of concision in media. Next, the paper will examine the ways in which fascist regimes have traditionally been driven by anti-rationalism. Lastly, the paper will look at how concision in social media aligns with anti-rationalism, an intersection which privileges right-wing ideologies. These elements will demonstrate an intersection of social media and fascism at the junction of anti-rationalism.

2. Concision and Social Media

Social media are well known to be brief in their structure. X, formerly Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram and more are all designed to let users quickly process a high volume of content. Following the work of Marshall McLuhan, who argued that the form of the media was more impactful than the content, this paper seeks to understand how that brevity shapes the user experience beyond the media themselves. For that reason, this paper will situate the brevity of current media as part of a larger continuum of concision in media.

Concision as an analytic term for media was explored in detail by Noam Chomsky in a film called *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (1992). Although the film shares the same name as the book Chomsky co-authored with Edward S. Herman, Chomsky and Herman use the book to explain a propaganda model that they argue was functioning in corporate media in the US at that time. The book does not explore concision in

great detail. In the film, however, Chomsky expands on the concept, observing that concision was a feature of nightly news programs in the US, where the news segments had to fit "between two commercials or in six hundred words" (*Manufacturing Consent*, 1992). In practice, this meant that no matter how large the scope a particular issue was, one had just a few minutes to express a position. Chomsky saw concision as a "structural constraint" that only permitted the perpetuation of already accepted positions because evidence is needed to support different or novel positions. While Chomsky places the focus on how media were "regurgitating conventional pieties," his ancillary point is the focus of this paper, which is that "you can't give evidence if you're stuck with concision" (*Manufacturing Consent*, 1992). In the decades since Chomsky made that statement, the rise of social media has seen a shift toward even more concise media. To understand the effects, it is useful to examine theories regarding the impact of volume on media.

In the early 1970s, Herbert A. Simon put forth his notion of what has subsequently been termed the attention economy. In his formulation of it, he saw that an increase in media outlets would create competition for attention since attention is capped by hours in the day; attention, therefore, was the limited resource, not information. As he framed it, "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention" (Simon, 1971, p.40). The two major potentials for this situation are that consumers would either engage with fewer outlets in depth or consumers would engage with more outlets in less depth. Jean Baudrillard, writing in 1981, approached a similar idea and suggested that the choice users made was to engage with less depth.

In a discussion titled "The Implosion of Meaning in the Media," Baudrillard (1994, p. 79) declared that "we live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning." For him, the rise in the amount of information media process means that media function in different ways. The implosion he refers to is that "electronic mass media" no longer mediate "between one reality and another" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 82). While Baudrillard shapes this statement within his larger theory on simulation, he still connects his discussion to the larger theoretical landscape, specifically drawing on McLuhan, observing that "the medium is the message...is the key formula of the era of simulation" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 82). Indeed, it is useful to examine McLuhan in more detail at this point, as the "message" of social media is concision.

For McLuhan, all media and technology shape human experience. They function as extensions of humanity, permitting people to experience the world in different ways, and, importantly, defining how the world is experienced. For instance, before the written word, the preservation of knowledge relied on the oral tradition. The written word enabled humanity to engage with knowledge and memory in different ways, expanding the human experience. McLuhan concisely argues with his famous aphorism that the focal point of a medium is not the content, but the way it mediates content. As he terms it, "the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (McLuhan, 2003, p. 8). However, it is important to not understate the impact of those changes. As Neil Postman (1993, p. 18) notes in a similar discussion on technology, "A new medium does not add something; it changes everything. In the year 1500, after the printing press was invented, you did not have old Europe plus the printing press. You had a different Europe." It is easy to consider social media as simply an outgrowth of related technologies that use computer or device screens, or even a variation, but social media must be considered new media. Accordingly, when social media rose to prominence in the early 21st century, you did not have the old 21st century and social media, you had a new 21st century. To better understand that appropriation of Postman, it is necessary to look at code.

Writing both in the initial dot com boom and in its aftermath, Lawrence Lessig (2006) argued that "code is law" (p. 5). While he acknowledges the boldness of that claim and is clear that code and law are not actually the same, the thrust of his argument is that programs must be coded to function, and code is a collection of choices that control the user experience; users can only do what the code allows, whether that is intentional or unintentional. The larger point Lessig is making frames code as a form of regulation, ultimately asking who is regulating and what liberties are being coded away. However, Lessig, writing the second edition of his book in 2006, did not have the frame of social media to aid his argument. For social media, if code is law, then the law is concision. While a timeline of major social media platforms can be useful to appreciate the growth of the now-ubiquitous social media applications (Figure 1), the law of concision can be better understood by examining some of the defunct applications.

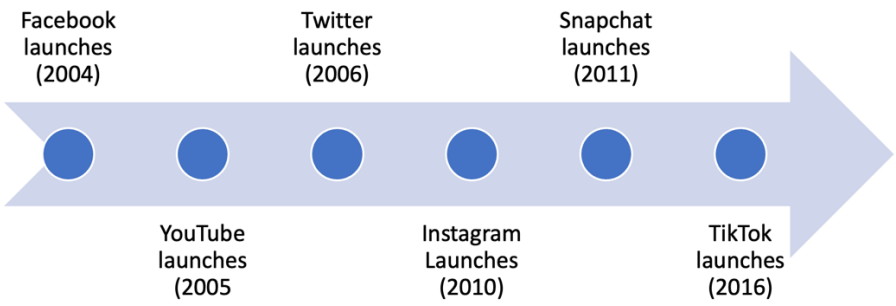

Figure 1

Launched in 2012, the now defunct Vine was a video app that sought to compete with sites like YouTube in the realm of Internet video. The difference with Vine was that videos could be a maximum of 6 seconds in length. As the existence of YouTube demonstrated, there was not a technological limitation that required 6 second videos. In fact, the developers of Vine have openly stated that the 6-second limit, while tested with users, was essentially arbitrary (NPR.org, n.d.). They wanted to create a medium that emphasized quick content, particularly for how quickly those videos could be shared; they traded length for the ability to rapidly disseminate content. Thus, at the level of code, the law of Vine was concision. However, Lessig also discusses social norms and market pressures. It seems likely that Vine was too concise, as it survived in the media ecosystem for only four years, being eclipsed by other media such as Twitter, the parent company of Vine. Other media filled the gap, most notably Douyin and its international version, TikTok, both of which debuted in 2016 with an expanded but still concise content limit of 60 seconds.

Despite the concision that was evident in the architectural choices of many social media at their launches, most of those media have since either advanced to accommodate longer content or relaxed their limits to allow for longer content. X launched with a 140-character limit to accommodate SMS limitations. Since then, it has raised its limit to 280 characters for most users, up to 4,000 characters for Blue subscribers, and up to 25,000 characters for Premium users. Similarly, TikTok, which, as noted above, launched with 1 minute video limits, now permits videos of up to 10 minutes if created within the platform, and 1-hour if uploaded to the platform. While there are certainly users who make use of the longer lengths, some research suggests that content still skews toward concision (Gligorić, Anderson and West, 2018). However, any study of social media datasets must come with caveats.

The first caveat is that social media are huge. In a single day, there are hundreds of millions of tweets posted; there are hundreds of thousands of hours of videos uploaded to YouTube; there are tens of millions of TikToks uploaded each day. While the userbase is worldwide, the percentage of adults in the United States alone using various platforms in 2024 is suggests the enormous scope of social media (Table 1). In short, the amount of content that must be analyzed is beyond the means of most researchers.

Table 1 (Gottfried, 2024)

Percentage of U.S. adults who say they ever use …							
YouTube	Facebook	Instagram	Pinterest	TikTok	LinkedIn	SnapChat	X
85%	70%	50%	36%	33%	32%	27%	21%

The second caveat is that social media are produced by profit-seeking companies. It is not in their business interest to make their data publicly and freely available. Even if one had the necessary analytical tools, access is a separate issue. For those reasons, much of the analysis of social media platforms is either done with the support of the companies, which could potentially introduce a bias, or it is done without the support of the companies, which could suggest reliability and validity issues possibly due to a restricted sample size. With those caveats in mind, the research that is available can still be utilized to understand the normative concision of social media.

Much research on social media focuses on content. Typical research includes studies on user engagement with fake news (Sui, Hawkins and Wang, 2023), studies on the rate of false news spreading (Tandoc et al., 2022), and the relationship between length and various engagement metrics such as fact checking (Tandoc et al., 2022). This is of course only a small fraction of the full scope of research. However, those citations are presented here

as a sample of content-based research. Again, the focus of this paper is concision in social media, as it is through concision that a link to right-wing ideology can be found. To understand that link, it is necessary to look at fascism in more detail, particularly its ties to vitalism.

3. Fascism & Vitalism

Vitalism is generally a belief that there are parts of humanity that cannot be rationally explained. While this has been a line of thinking through much of human history, it started to take more specific shape in the 17th and 18th centuries as scientific inquiry began to take a more mechanistic approach toward analyzing and quantifying humanity, the work of Charles Darwin being an important example here. As a result, there was an increasing counter-push to maintain the inscrutability of that which is essential to humanity. Eventually, this push manifested itself in the vitalism movement, which posited that there is a unique quality of human life that no other life has. A key proponent of ideas connected with vitalism was Henri Bergson (1998), who argued in favor of the *élan vital,* which described an unquantifiable life force that guided human development and evolution. One argument he built is that knowing something required duration, and that intuition, not intellect, was required to understand duration; evidence was not necessarily required to know something. While the work of Bergson can be widely interpreted, it helped to drive the vitalism movement, which generally rejected scientific inquiry and modernism in favor of arguments about humanity that eschewed evidence. It is that anti-rational element that aligns with historical fascist regimes.

There is no single accepted definition of fascism. This is due to the very different implementations by various regimes, most notably the Italian Fascists and the Nazis. As a result, the most functional definitions are those that attempt to define conceptual elements that might loosely apply to different manifestations of fascism. Both Paxton and Eco define parameters that seem to be common among different regimes, and both include elements of anti-rationalism. Eco defines 14 features of fascism that fascist regimes will draw upon, and he specifically calls out irrationalism (Table 2). For him, this stems from a strong sense of traditionalism that is syncretistic. Eco (1995, n.p.) notes that fascism "must tolerate contradictions" as the opposing traditions are seen to be "alluding, allegorically, to the same primeval truth." While not directly connected with vitalism, Eco places a similar prioritization on intuitive knowledge over reason. Paxton highlights similar points.

Table 2 (Eco, 1995)

14 Features of Ur-Fascism	
• Cult of tradition	• Enemies too strong and too weak
• Irrationalism / Rejection of Modernism	• Life is permanent warfare
• Cult of action for action's sake	• Contempt for the weak
• Disagreement is treason	• Cult of death
• Fear of difference	• Machismo
• Appeal to a frustrated middle class	• Selective populism
• Obsession with a plot	• Newspeak

Drawing on foundational work by authors such as Franz Neumann, Paxton makes similar claims of contradiction in fascist regimes noting that central ideologies of fascist movements are "simultaneously proclaimed as central, yet amended or violated as expedient" (2004, p. 219). As an example, he observes that fascism holds a great disdain for technology, yet fascist leaders still "adored their fast cars" (Paxton, 2004, p. 12). A more sobering example is his observation that the Holocaust was only made possible through the embracing of technology, with speed being an important quality (2004, p. 13). The contradictory elements of fascism reinforce an anti-rational view where consistency and evidence are not important. This is underscored by Paxton in his observation that fascist regimes are driven by "the superiority of the leader's instincts over abstract and universal reason" (Paxton, 2004, p.219). Both authors point toward the principles of vitalism, but do not fully address it by name.

A more direct connection with vitalism is made by Stanley G. Payne, who elucidates the connection between fascism and vitalism in much more detail, arguing that the rejection of modernity for fascists saw the movement embrace "philosophical vitalism and idealism and the metaphysics of the will" (1996, p. 8). Throughout these definitions, which are quite diverse, anti-rationalism is a commonality. As the research shows, the claim that fascism is irrational is not a novel claim. It is restated here in such detail because the connection to concision in social media relies on a clear understanding of how intertwined those concepts are with fascism.

4. Anti-Rationalism in Social Media

As outlined previously, social media are concise. Following the definitions from Chomsky on concise media, social media operate within structural constraints that limit discourse. While his argument is that concision is part of a larger propaganda model that disallows evidence, the propaganda model is a theoretical framework used to describe a possible driver of concision, and concision exists independently of that model. Similarly for social media, the propaganda model does not factor into the demonstrable facts that social media are concise at the level of code. The effects of concision in social media are important to analyze, since, as Chomsky (1992) observed with nightly news, "you can't give evidence if you're stuck with concision."

Like US nightly news, social media exist without the expectation of evidence. While there are relaxed limits and longer form content, even most of those relaxed limits are themselves concise—280 characters do not offer much more space than 140 characters. As noted previously, research has shown that shorter content is still common despite those longer limits (Gligorić, Anderson and West, 2018). To better understand the effects of concision, it is useful to consider how they have been mobilized in contemporary propaganda strategies.

The firehose of falsehood is a propaganda strategy formally identified by the RAND Corporation in 2016, although it had been in use around the world for many years at that point. It describes a propaganda model primarily used to overwhelm information networks, making it challenging for users to discern what information is real and what is false, often by mixing real and fake news. In their report, Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews (2016) describe the strategy as focusing on four main qualities, which are that it is high-volume and multichannel, rapid, continuous, and repetitive, lacks commitment to objective reality, and lacks commitment to consistency (Table 3). Even in that description, the connections to social media should be clear, as their concise nature situates them to process high volumes of content continuously with great speed.

Table 3 (Paul and Matthews, 2016)

Distinctive Features of the Contemporary Model for Russian Propaganda	
• High-volume and multichannel • Rapid, continuous, and repetitive	• Lacks commitment to objective reality • Lacks commitment to consistency

Expanding on the point of rapidity, Paul and Matthews observe that due to the lack of any critical requirement in the messaging, those spreading the propaganda "do not need to wait to check facts or verify claims; they just disseminate an interpretation of emergent events that appears to best favor their themes and objectives" (2016, p.4). This aligns with the argument Baudrillard makes regarding the "implosion of meaning in the media," as the strategy is to have such a high volume of content, that it is not possible to fully research or verify any of it. In fact, it is for this reason that the firehose of falsehood draws comparisons to the "Gish Gallop," which is a strategy in debating wherein one participant tries to overwhelm the opposition with a volume of claims and no evidence. The respondent then is not able to refute all claims in the given time, suggesting that the unrefuted claims are valid. Social media accomplish this same strategy in volume.

Paul and Matthews observe of the firehose of falsehood method that "repeated exposure to a statement has been shown to increase its acceptance as true" (2016, p.4), a statement that is also suggested by the social media research mentioned earlier regarding the spread false news stories, but a statement which also points toward intuitive responses rather than research or evidence-based responses. One reason this might function in that way is that true and valid information look the same as fake and invalid information. On X, for instance, no statements exceed 280 characters. For social media, concision renders all arguments and positions equal; there is no evidence, and without evidence, intuition can become a larger factor than critical thinking. Indeed, Paul and Matthews also note that the firehose of falsehood also focuses on "information that connects with group identities or familiar narratives—or that arouses emotion" (2016, p.6). With regard to emotional appeal, one might also consider research on the phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out, often called FoMO. Research in that area suggests that FoMO drives rapid and high-volume engagement with social media (Fioravanti et al., 2021; Gupta and Sharma, 2021). After all, if one stops to evaluate content, one potentially misses even more content.

While the authors do note that a variety of media outlets are used to accomplish the firehose of falsehood strategy, given the volume of content, as well as the necessity for speed and repetition, social media are clearly drivers of this model. To point, the authors observe that although this strategy likely originated in 2008, it was showcased in the 2014 Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula (Paul and Matthews, 2016), a timeline that does closely align with the growth of social media platforms, as illustrated in Table 4, which shows the two largest platforms at that time, Facebook and YouTube (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019).

Table 4 (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019)

Social Media Growth from 2008 to 2014		
Year	2008	2014
Facebook	200 million users	1.4 billion users
YouTube	100 million users	1.3 billion users

The point being made here with the firehose of falsehood is simply that in their concision, social media separate evidence from arguments and position in ways that render engagement wide, but not deep. This is illustrated through the success of strategies like repetition and the presence of phenomena like FoMO. The result of these points is that social media are structured in ways, and used in ways, that do not align with rational thinking. Social media, thus, become key elements in the so-called post-truth world, as they devalue evidence in favor of intuition. However, "post-truth" does not mean no truth.

Social media can indeed be used to promote democratic causes. This is perhaps most well known in the success of the #MeToo movement, and there are numerous other cases where social media helped to signal boost issues that helped to advance equity (Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles, 2020). Those successes point toward the fact that the lack of evidence in social media does not mean that users are without critical thinking tools, a point suggested by some research (Ejue and Etim, 2024). Nevertheless, concision in social media ultimately puts the onus on the user to conduct valid research, and there enough instances of fake news stories dominating the media cycles to suggest that users are not always vigilant in verifying information, and fascist rhetoric, in its anti-rationality, fares much better in anti-rational spaces than does democratic rhetoric.

5. Conclusion

The concision of social media, coupled with the sheer volume of content, aligns with fascist principles. This is not to say that they are inherently fascist, as there are certainly democratic principles and ideas that come out of social media content. However, social media operate at volumes and speeds that preclude reliable use of evidence. In so doing, rational, logical arguments appear to be the same as anti-rational, illogical arguments, often resulting in intuitive rather than evidence-based reactions. In the space of an academic paper, the complexity of an argument can be explored, the research to support that argument can be discussed, and the readers can pursue their own lines of academic inquiry through citations. In the space of social media, an argument like the one being made in this paper might appear as the following tweet

> *Social media are concise and therefore antirational because they are too short to contain evidence. Anti-rationality is a key element of fascist regimes. The concision of social media makes social media align with fascism.*
> (221 characters)

Whereas a counter-tweet might look like this

> *Social media are neither concise nor antirational. They contain ample evidence, and fascism is not antirational. There is no alignment between fascism and social media.*
> (170 characters)

The aim of this paper has been to present evidence to demonstrate the first and to refute the second. In the domain of social media, they exist on their own with no evidence to support the claims. The argument presented in this paper is that regardless of the content in social media, normalizing anti-rational media ecosystems privileges anti-rational systems, and fascism is a system that thrives on anti-rationalism.

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