
Readme
Volume 1: State of Information

README SPRING 2025

ABOUT README

README is a bi-annual magazine published by Political Computer Science at UC Berkeley. Political Computer Science is a community of interdisciplinary thinkers, and README aims to explore intersecting topics in technology and politics through unique and unexpected lenses.

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Trump and Zelensky: Performance? Parody? Understanding a Political Non-Event

"Everywhere we live in a universe strangely similar to the original – things are doubled by their own scenario"

Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*

"Let us be honest about something for once"
"When somebody talks about honesty, that means they want to take off your last pair of pants"

One shady oligarch to another, *Servant of the People*

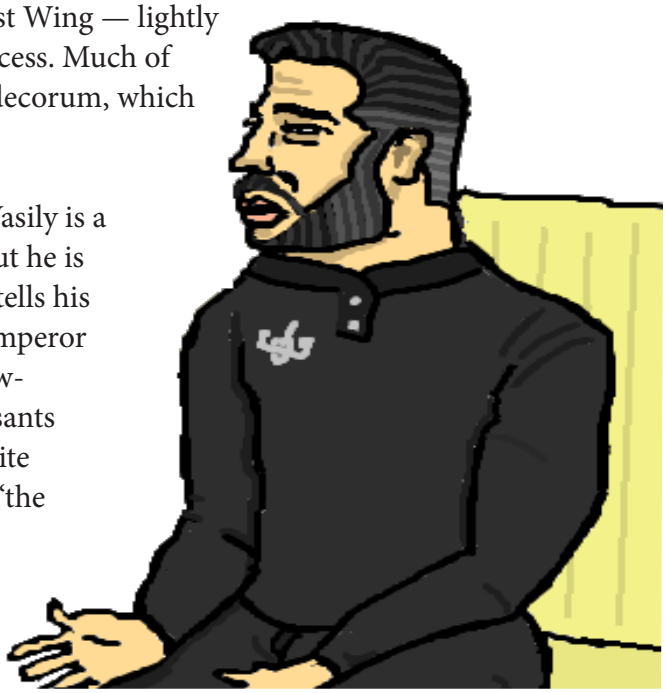
On February 28th, Donald Trump, JD Vance and Volodymyr Zelensky met in the Oval Office to discuss a ceasefire. The conversation escalated into a confrontation between Trump and Zelensky, in which Trump defended his "America-first" foreign policy in a shockingly brazen display of American influence and reality-TV bravado. The conversation has been uploaded to Youtube by The White House, and continues to echo through ongoing ceasefire talks between Russia and Ukraine. This event is characteristic of the Trump era: the dissipation of power into empty images of itself, the ghostly recurrence of familiar tropes, and the diffusion of the real into the spectacular and hyperbolic.

Parody? Satire? Hyperbole?

Servant of the People is a Ukrainian political-comedy-drama from 2015. The show stars Volodymyr Zelensky as Vasily Petrovych Goloborodko, a history teacher who is elected president after he is caught ranting about government complacency in a viral clip.

Vasily is an everyman. He lives in a small house with his parents and niece, he burns his coffee in the mornings, and his campaign is run by supportive students. He stands in contrast to the inhuman and autonomous political machine around him: after his election, he is rushed through suits, watches, and green-screened photoshoots with construction workers like a car on an assembly line. In a daze, his appendages are coated with resin to make duplicates for the national museum and his profile is impressed in clay to be reprinted on coins.

Tonally, the show sits somewhere in between Veep and The West Wing — lightly satirical but fundamentally reverent of democratic political process. Much of the comedy and suspense comes from Vasily's lack of political decorum, which keeps him at odds with the bureaucratic old-guard.



Servant of the People is an essentially liberal political fantasy: Vasily is a political outsider and an earnest representative of the people, but he is willing to play by the rules to get things done. At one point, he tells his students about a Japanese peasant who spoke his mind to the emperor and demanded (through a string of vulgarities) that taxes be lowered for his province. In response, the emperor cuts off the peasants tongue and grants his request. While the malevolent political elite see truth as a political tool (quoted above), Vasily believes that "the truth, whatever it may be, remains nevertheless true."

Vasily's earnesty and individuality is constantly contested by

predetermined roles and political expectation/convention, but he appears to maintain his sense of self. His political victories are a sort of unveiling: he exposes corruption so that the power of truth can prevail.

In 2019, Zelensky won his bid for president with the backing of the Servant of the People Party (an intentional namesake). Since then, he has kept true to the image of Vasily. He makes public appearances in sweaters and t-shirts, and talks often about uprooting corruption and political elites (in a somewhat meta turn, he has worked to increase competition in Ukrainian TV broadcasting to levy against the influence of oligarchs).

Trump has cultivated a different sort of image. While Zelensky plays the everyman, Trump plays a hyperbolic version of the American dream fulfilled. His numerous failed business ventures have not undermined his status as The American businessman — an image stamped and sealed by the sheer power of the TRUMP signature/logo. Per Alan Shapiro:

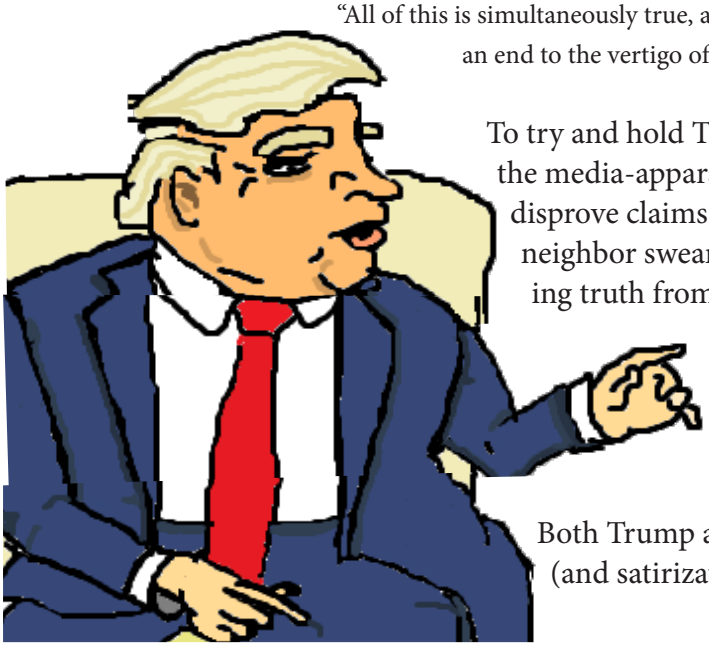
"The mythology of Trump was born during the New York City gilded 1980s, the era of Ivan Boesky and Gordon Gecko greed and Wall Street insider trading. Donald Trump plastered the name Donald Trump everywhere he could. He of the golden toilet, he the playboy ladies' man, the casino owner, the entrepreneur of the opulence of the billion-dollar Atlantic City Taj Majal gambling and Entertainment Paradise-complex.."

Like Zelensky, Trump evidently appeals to a sort of popular sentiment. But while Zelensky represents a sort of rational liberalism, Trump champions a politics of spectacle.

It is almost benign to call Trump the first postmodern president. From entertainer to politician, Trump's rise to power has solidified an American era of politics as entertainment (specifically, reality television). The sanctity and self-seriousness of political media has been exposed as an outdated aesthetic: from Stormy Daniels and the Access Hollywood tapes to January 6th and claims of election fraud, Trump has elevated the status of mainstream media to that of the tabloid — to much fanfare.

Does Trump believe the things that he is saying? Is he lying or misinformed? Is he a narcissist or an ideologue? Is he simply playing the same character that he did on The Apprentice? In the words of Baudrillard:

"All of this is simultaneously true, and the search for proof, indeed the objectivity of facts does not put an end to the vertigo of interpretation"



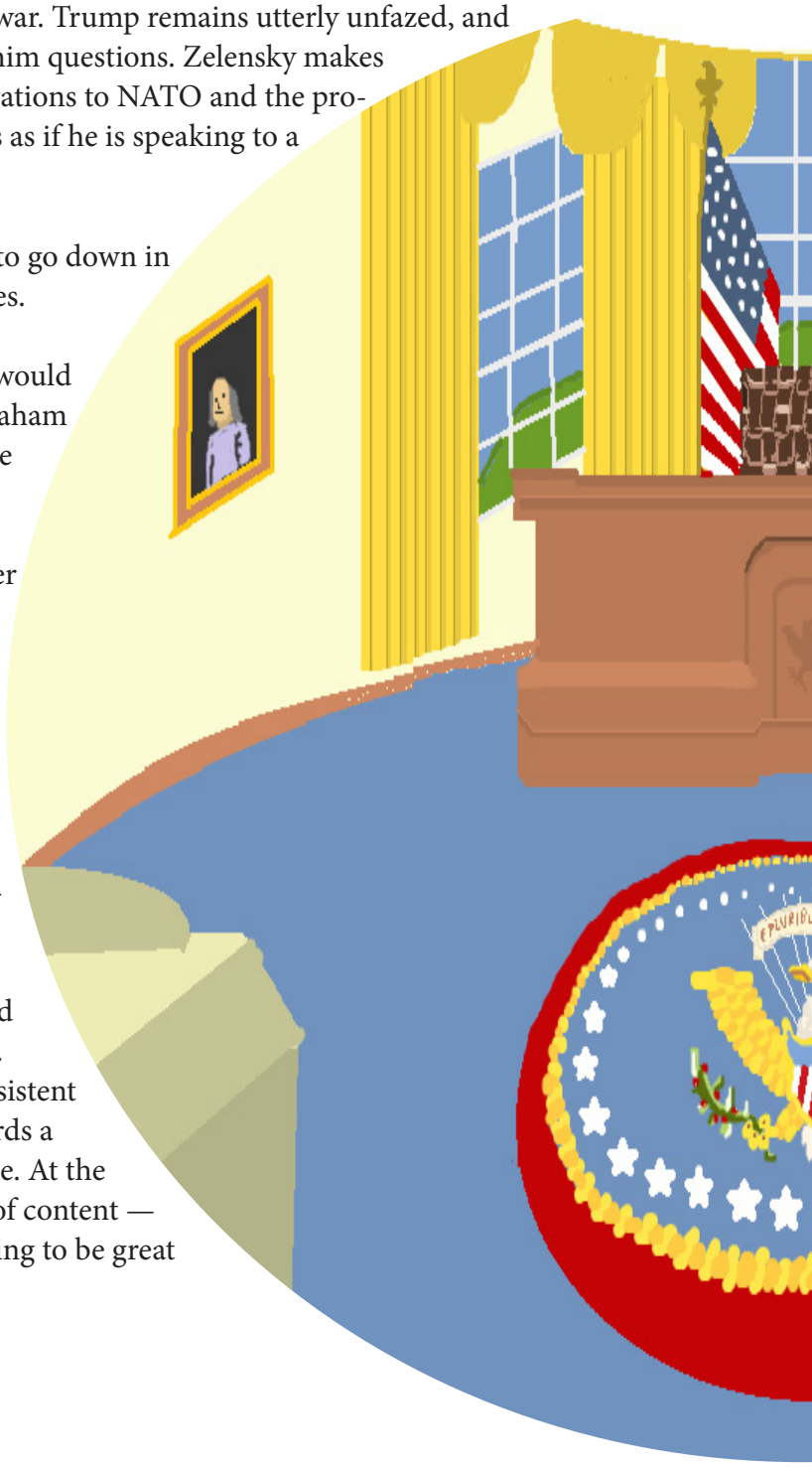
To try and hold Trump to objective standards of reality is to misunderstand the media-apparatus that surrounds him. While fact-checkers scramble to disprove claims about Haitian immigrants eating dogs, your next-door neighbor swears that he saw it happen last week. Past means for discerning truth from simulation are blown asunder. The doubt that Trump has cast on traditional institutionalized news media has proven its "truths" to be the product of social consensus, not unlike the shifting and spectacular realities of the tabloid.

Both Trump and Zelensky have flowed seamlessly from performances (and satirizations!) of power to positions of (ostensibly) real power.

And yet, neither can take full (or even partial) credit in the creation of themselves — both are the product of writers rooms and collections of tropes, at best capable of imitating their own public persona.

Are they still performing? Can the performance end? Where would authenticity begin?

Zelensky, servant of the people, nervously presents Trump with a folder of images depicting increasingly violent conditions faced by Ukrainian prisoners of war. Trump remains utterly unfazed, and solicits a hand-selected crowd of journalists to ask him questions. Zelensky makes expected appeals to the United State's political obligations to NATO and the protection of liberal democracies, and Trump responds as if he is speaking to a contestant on The Apprentice.



In a telling moment, Trump is asked how he wants to go down in history and if he sees himself in any historical figures.

"I'd say George Washington, Abraham Lincoln… I would say I'm far superior to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln [some muffled laughs can be heard from the crowd]. You know I'm only kidding, right? Because when I say that, the fake news is going to go wild. They're going to say he considers himself to be better than Washington. But you never know... I don't compare myself to anybody, I'm here to do a job."

The irony is initially undetectable. In Trump, Zelensky's (performed) liberal sincerity is reflected, distorted, and parodied. Trump is at once serious and mocking, both self-aware and lacking a clear self. He is the ultimate floating signifier: great president, jester, businessman, force of nature.

Zelensky can't keep up. Just as soon as he has pinned down one Trump, another appears to take his place. Questions of material commitment are given inconsistent and mostly indiscernible answers that gesture towards a wide array of political outcomes but commit to none. At the end the only discernible outcome was the creation of content — Trump turns to the camera and remarks: "this is going to be great television."

Where has the power gone?

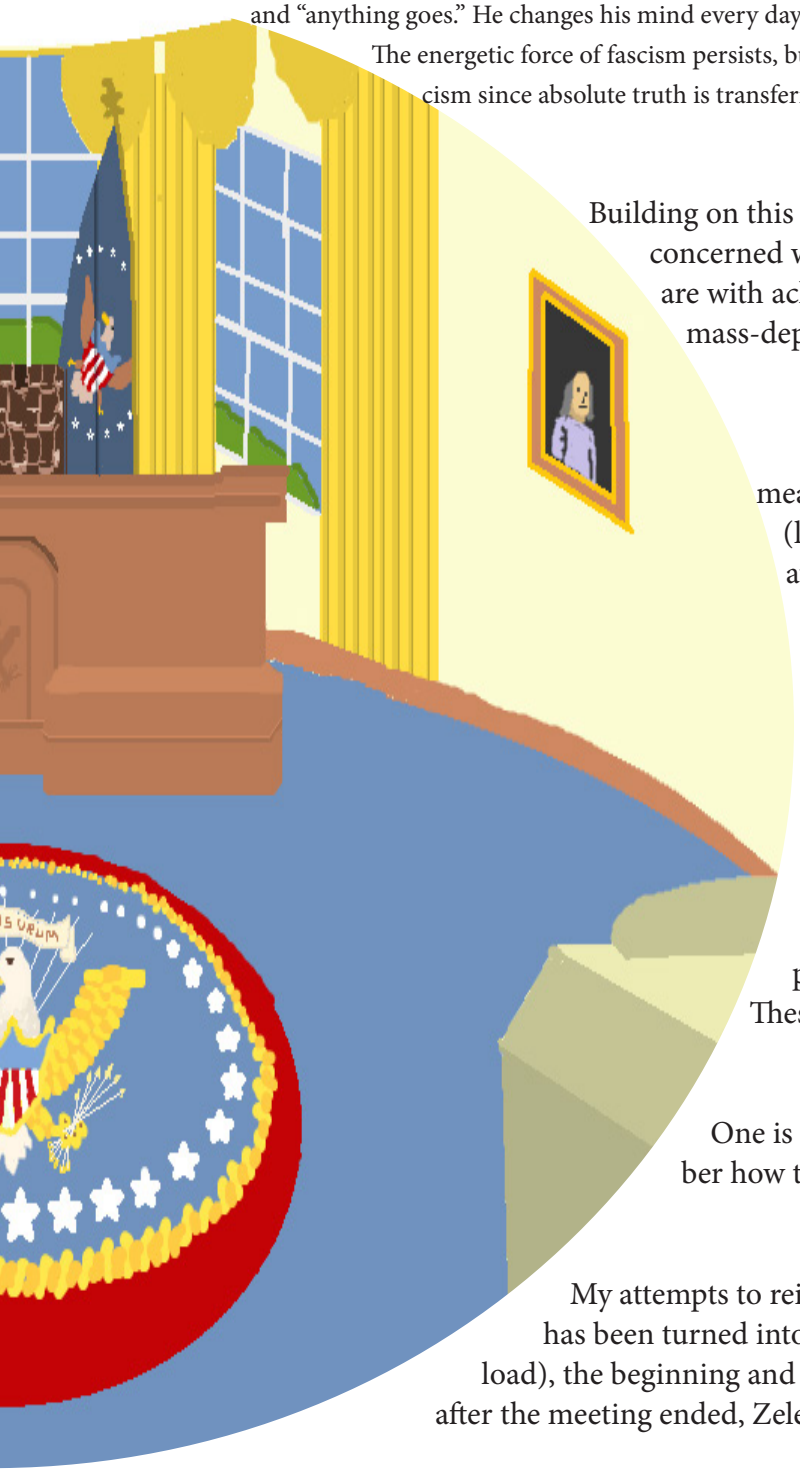
But what is actually at stake?

Zelensky twitches nervously, sitting on pins and needles as Trump thoughtlessly dismisses the direness of the situation. His anxiety is so palpable that it seems to render questions of authenticity or performance distasteful.

Following the meeting, Trump temporarily suspended aid and intelligence sharing to Ukraine. The suspension has since been lifted, and a ceasefire agreement is (as of writing) yet to be reached. While it would be easy to chalk this up as a warning shot and move on, there are two threads worth following.

First, the inconsistency of Trump's stated position on material aid prompts a deeper reflection on the principles underlying the MAGA "ideology." Is it an ideology? The word ideology suggests a relatively consistent set of totalizing beliefs, which are certainly not apparent. Alan Shapiro reflects on whether or not Trump is a fascist:

"Classical fascism works on the Führer principle and a strong and stable set of beliefs… For Trump, these aspects become variable and "anything goes." He changes his mind every day and has no goals or agenda other than greatness and freedom. The energetic force of fascism persists, but without fixed ideological reference points. This parodies fascism since absolute truth is transferred to the double-system of the empty self-referential signifiers and the arbitrary signifieds."



Building on this understanding, Trump's exercises of power are more concerned with being photographed and documented than they are with achieving a specific political end. His political aims for mass-deportation feel best articulated in the handcuff-ASMR video posted on the POTUS Instagram.

Second, Trump's ability to produce or exercise any meaningful power divorced from the interests of capital (lobbyists, donors, shareholders, oligarchs) is dubious at best. Most obviously, his stated desire for increased tariffs and vague promises to bring peace to Gaza have been immediately tempered by external influence. More subtly, the forces of production have developed globally to such a point that the capital allows for and even demands the veneer of real power politics that remain unthreatening to global production.

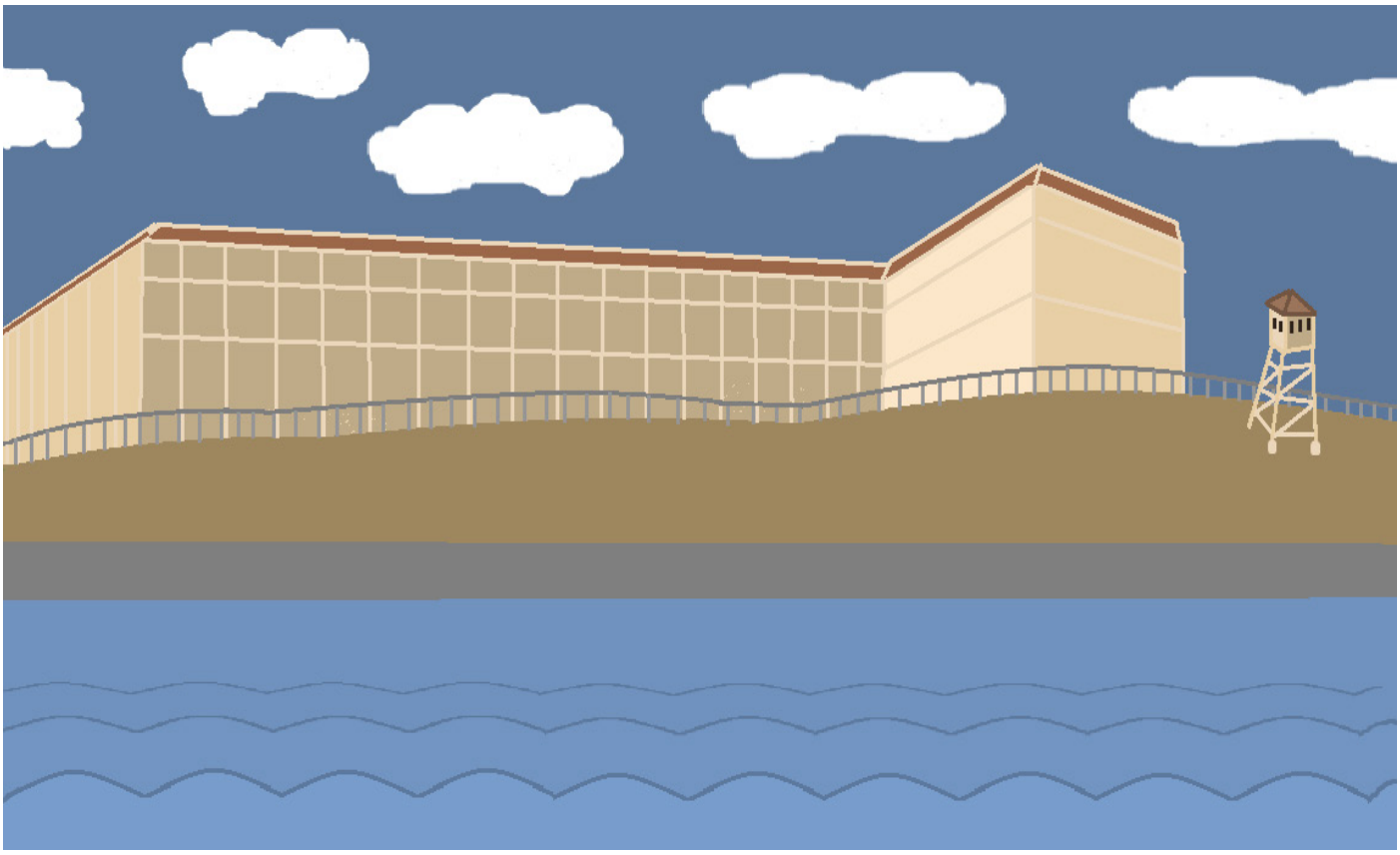
At one point, JD Vance seems to suggest that it is a president's actions (not their words) that hold power. These remarks feel strange in the context of the incoherent action that has followed the conversation.

One is tempted to look back at John F. Kennedy, to remember how the Bay of Pigs invasion was halted by a single phone call. Where has this power gone?

My attempts to reify this event feel impossible. While the conversation has been turned into a concrete text (by the 50-minute long Youtube upload), the beginning and end of this text will be constantly re-litigated. Hours after the meeting ended, Zelensky was on FOX news re-asserting the terms of his relationship with Trump.

It is unclear if this event was pure and complete or totally non-existent. It is especially unclear how US foreign aid will be impacted, how the global exchange of capital will be disrupted by Russian territorial gains.

It feels today as if political reality (more broadly, external reality) is beyond meaningful grasp. I sink my teeth into a moment that is already weeks old, trying to trace its endless echoes and refractions, and I find that I cannot escape the same process of endless re-interpretation and litigation.



Where did he go?

When I first visited San Quentin, I was surprised how little I felt surprised. Perhaps it is the principled and distinguished environment of UC Berkeley or my fleeting interactions with "real people" at the school, but I was expecting something vastly different from what I encountered as I passed through those chained gates.

Prison is supposed to hold criminals, folks who the carnival mirror of law and order have deemed irreparably damned. In Redwood City and East Palo Alto I knew these alleged criminals who were often sent away from my neighborhood and school after brushes with the law. Perhaps I thought them different, kids like me who got unlucky and were not smart enough to get away with their crimes.

As it turns out, they truly were criminals, just like the men sleeping in those 8x9 concrete cells at San Quentin. This realization struck me as odd, I assumed the kids like me were the exception rather than the rule. The poor souls stuck within California's vast and dark prison system were all at one point simply stupid kids who I may have encountered at a party or on the bart.

I've known these kids to be messed up, I thought it was the natural way. Trouble at home, childhood trauma, inattentive or absent parents, and an environment that emphasizes rebellious lawbreaking as the only escape from their dratted homelife. When reviewing Steve Brooks' article, I understood the scientific nature behind this lawbreaking. "Adverse childhood experiences" entered a Berkeley lexicon far detached from the common-sense nature of life in the Bay. However, as a student studying molecular and cellular biology, I understand the use case for utilizing ACE's in rehabilitative treatment. However, may it be the cynic in me, or perhaps the realist — I didn't think it would work.

On that tour of San Quentin I encountered men I knew to be bullish at one point in their life. Whether it was at Red Morton community center or in a high school classroom, some men embody the hurt they have encountered. This is a deep, parasitic hurt that turns good kids into agents of their pain. However, on that tour of San Quentin, the men I encountered were reformed, utopian representations of Newsom's new era of Californian justice. As I walked the halls of the prison, engaged in casual conversation with a man so open

and honest about his ego and past crimes, I wondered to myself: where did he go? Where was the hunger? Where was the starvation this man once had for a new reality, for a new self? The answer is not so simple yet was carved into each man like a scarlet letter: "lifer".

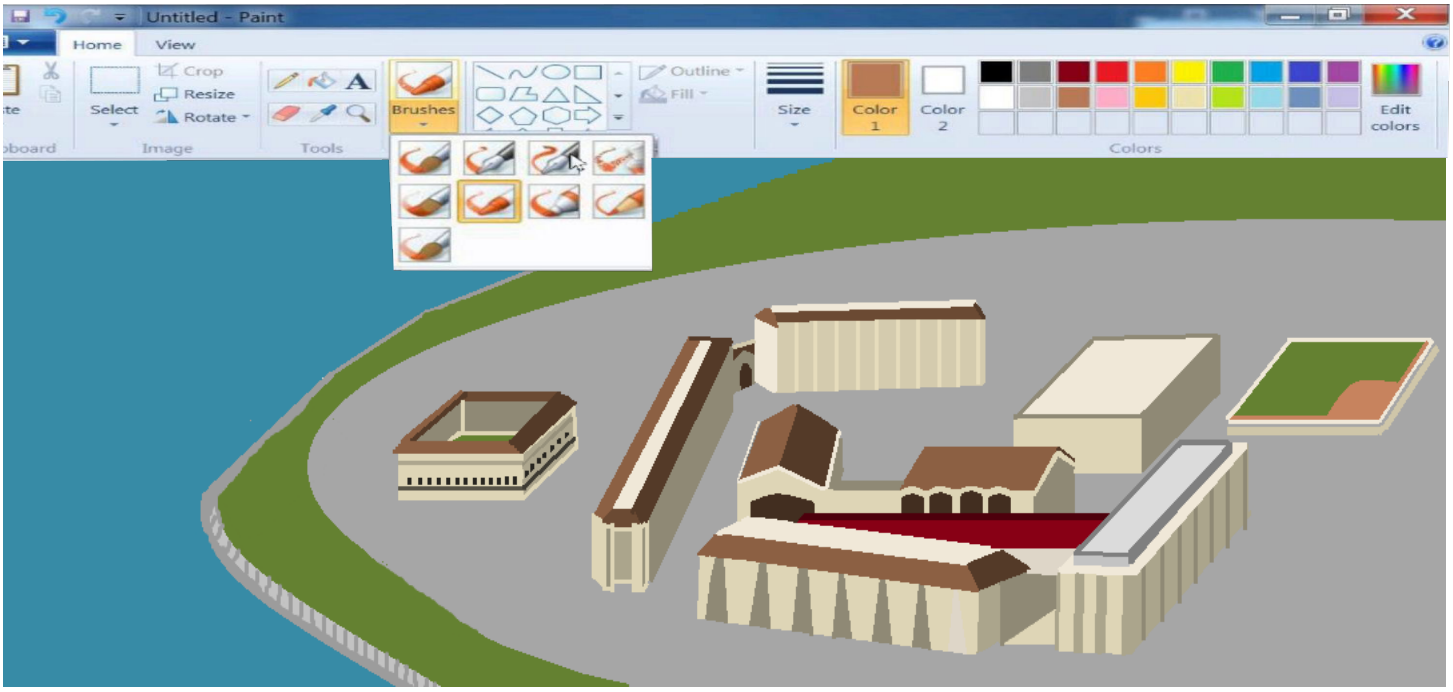
As it turns out, these men didn't have a choice to reform, the system had done it for them. If he were out, his friends, family, perhaps even I would have called him soft. A man who had let the system break the dog within. This instinctive thought on my end led me into a series of internal questioning regarding my ego as a free man looking down upon one who wasn't. But then again, who wouldn't break? Nay, the better question: Did the system work?

According to the CDCR, prison personnel, and perhaps the men themselves – yes. For me, I haven't quite made up my mind. Should a man be forced to "break," through the damnation of his life to legalized slavery only for us to redeem his name as reformed? Perhaps I'm being too critical.

Looking back at Brooks' article and "The Work" documentary, the sociological progress made by throwing deeply held childhood traumas (ACE's if you were to ask me at school) into the public forum seemed obvious. As the logic goes, the lost child responds to those that have found the way out. This is why young men join gangs, commit crimes, or pledge a fraternity. In prison, it is not the coercive or "rehabilitative" force of the institution that determines a young man's fate, but the culture within those incarcerated. If the culture, from the top down, embraces the root cause of their pain and lawbreaking, those imprisoned youths with only a few years on their sentence may come out with a different point of view. On a statistical level, this strategy would probably result in a marginally lower recidivism rate; only if these sociologists were successful in changing the prison culture.

Then again, life on the outside is tough and old habits die hard. Who's to say acknowledging the pain pushes it away instead of giving these men a psychological validation for their crimes. In short, if the childhood trauma has already destroyed me, can I go back?

This is not a question I expect an answer to. The California carceral system is a vast, lumbering beast that rarely responds to an individual plea for acquittal. In my view, we can only do so much when community opinion and legal discourse move at only the speed one man can cut through two layers of red tape and see another strewn up. To this end, despair is useless. In all my pondering about the right and wrong, efficacy and optimization of these strategies, only one question remains: Are we doing something?



Too fast, too furious

"Seems like every time you turn around, there's another hard luck a-story that you're gonna hear"

- Bob Dylan

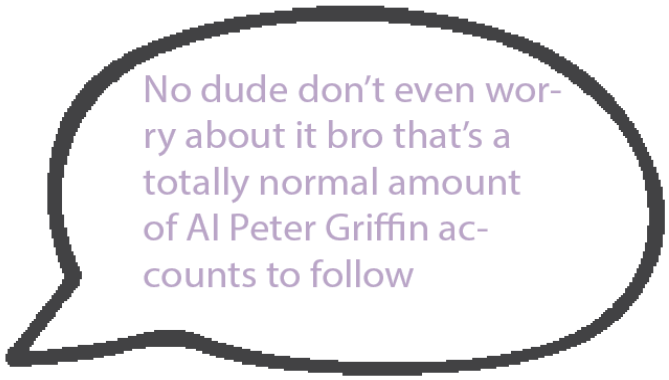
As 2025 begins, the future seems bleak for nearly everyone. As islands sink, wars ravage the world, flooding sweeps away cities, income inequality widens, poverty worsens, and the most powerful democracy in the world crumbles, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand how we have resigned ourselves to this fate. Answers to this question abound amongst the left, from a lack of material power to voter disengagement to bad, unaccountable actors at the top. However, another answer remains underexplored: maybe we have, socially, become truly and fully desensitized, swept up fully in the tide of capitalism's unrelenting cultural hegemony. This trend is deeply integrated with the moral and informational logic of digital capitalism. Quite simply, we may lack incentives for action as strong as incentives for sharing information, and we may exchange information too quickly to act.

If one thing becomes abundantly clear from a cursory look at political social media, it is that people do care. It takes only a handful of swipes through a For You Page to determine that serious people try their best to ameliorate the suffering they see in the world. This suffering, however, persists unabated. As critical theorist Mark Fisher famously argued, this constitutes the viewer's role in a dark moral exchange. The subject may feel like they did their part as long as they Like, Comment, and Follow! while providing the very drivers of vast swathes of global suffering (the capitalists who profit from social media engagement) with yet more money and influence. While citizens are, apparently, largely conscious of the fact that this model of engagement is unlikely to produce significant results, it has come to supplant conventional modes of political engagement, much to the benefit of the data capitalist. This practice is not positive or even value-neutral but actively negative. It worsens the segmentation of the working class into multiple mutually-unintelligible groups sequestered into online rabbit holes. More pressingly, it provides tech corporations with ever more user engagement to develop vast networks of data surveillance (often shared with the police), planet-destroying data centers, and unsettlingly large political presences in

postcolonial countries. Perhaps more damningly, it allows the subject to maintain distance from the object of their empathy. The equation feels simple– surely more information will lead to more awareness and then to more action!-- and yet that action requires a subject itself. Theorist Lauren Berlant described this as a "class unconsciousness", with images of suffering one of the darkest and most necessary buttresses of capital. Forgoing a confrontation with the relationship between their own consumption and global suffering, or between their own vague unhappiness and the violence they see on their screen, the privileged American subject can instead relegate global suffering to a "scandalous nugget in the sieve of memory… a squa-

lor too horrible to be read in its own actual banality". Rather than eliciting a meaningful confrontation with the grim reality of war and exploitation, these images instead, ironically, produce a sense of distance as an entirely empty signifier of how a subject believes the world ought to be rather than a practice of making the world that way. After all, someone else is probably working to make things better.…right? And surely their individual contribution wouldn't be helpful anyway. Better to simply click those buttons, keep scrolling, and forget for a while.

Sharing how awful the world is via these platforms is not liberation but the entrenchment of a system of resource and labor extraction which disproportionately harms many of the subjects who information sharing is designed to help. This is not, however, to blame citizens for this form of politics. It is a perfectly reasonable response to the information



overload which we have come to experience and, certainly, writing moralizing think-pieces about the problem is not much better. Information, over social networks, is exchanged at such speed and volume that true activity appears almost impossible. You may encounter hundreds or even thousands of worthy causes and individuals who are deserving of your time, attention, and political engagement, yet actual political resources are finite. One effect is to produce a passive, complicit, and depoliticized citizenry incapable of acting on any individual cause. While certain events are sufficiently compelling to break through these background inhibitors on collective action (Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 and protests for Gaza in 2024 may be particularly salient examples), a vast majority of causes which spark moral outrage do not translate into actual action. This fits neatly with the prolific media theorist Jean Baudrillard's idea of information dissuasion. Perhaps more information about the world's overwhelming suffering does not lead to more learning, persuasion, and action but less; perhaps knowing a little about everything is tantamount to knowing nothing. The speed at which we exchange information provides no time for the reflection or integration into belief systems that is necessary for persuasion but does provide enough time to exchange the social signal that you care. However, this semiotic exchange is largely the point. For the American cosmopolitan, this is not just required but compelled: being a good citizen has come to require public demonstrations of civic virtue but does not appear to require actual civic virtue. There is little public reproach for failure to donate to the UNRWA, to organize within your community, or to perform work for causes you believe in; there is, however, public reproach for failure to act as though you do. This performs a subtle sleight of hand in service of capital: the effect is to learn that the world is bad but not to learn about the complex and structural causes which drive that generic badness. Rather than directing our anger toward, for instance, IMF structural adjustment packages which compel free trade and poor labor standards, we direct anger at the mere fact of labor exploitation. Human suffering has been entirely depoliticized, appearing not as a consequence of the specific structures (read: capital) which induce it but as a tragic reality of the world. As such, specific political demands are not made or acted upon, at least for a majority of political issues; rather, they are shared and privately lamented.

A new model of engagement seems to be required, centering the actual power of citizens. Such a model can derive comfort from the great deal of success achieved by Black Lives Matter, the movement for gay rights, and other movements of the past decade. Such a model must, however, deprioritize the exchange of information on decentralized, violent, and fundamentally money-hungry social media platforms. It also requires a focus on displacing the tech titans which govern so much of modern political exchange. Centering community needs and direct action may not be a panacea and certainly does not resolve the problems which lace through our information economy, but it poses a better shot

ai: the statistical ouroboros

In his 1980 essay "Do Artifacts Have Politics?", political theorist Langdon Winner argued that certain technologies contain political properties in and of themselves.

Winner argued against the idea that the sociopolitical effects of new technologies should be understood as the result of external social forces, and instead advocated for a conception of some technologies as "political in their own right." By looking at the characteristics of particular technical objects and trying to discern the meaning of those characteristics, he wrote, we could then see how certain technologies reflect or depend on specific political motives and "arrangements of power."

To illustrate this idea, Winner pointed to the overpasses purposely designed by the urban planner Robert Moses to restrict bus travel, barring racial minorities and low-income communities from traveling to Jones Beach, his public park. While overpasses themselves may not be inherently political, Winner emphasized the flexibility of technology — the fact that because a particular technology's material form is mutable, it can be manipulated to reflect human motives or prejudices.

Winner also noted that some technologies may take on political properties not because of deliberately designed intent to harm, but because they were simply created in a world that operates according to a specific set of latent social biases. In the 1970s, the organized movement of handicapped people brought to light how infrastructure such as buildings, buses, and plumbing fixtures prevented handicapped people from moving freely, effectively barring them from public life. In this case, the infrastructure certainly wasn't designed with a conscious desire to exclude, but handicapped people were still overlooked because the "technological deck" — or the process of technological development — was stacked in favor of other, more dominant groups.

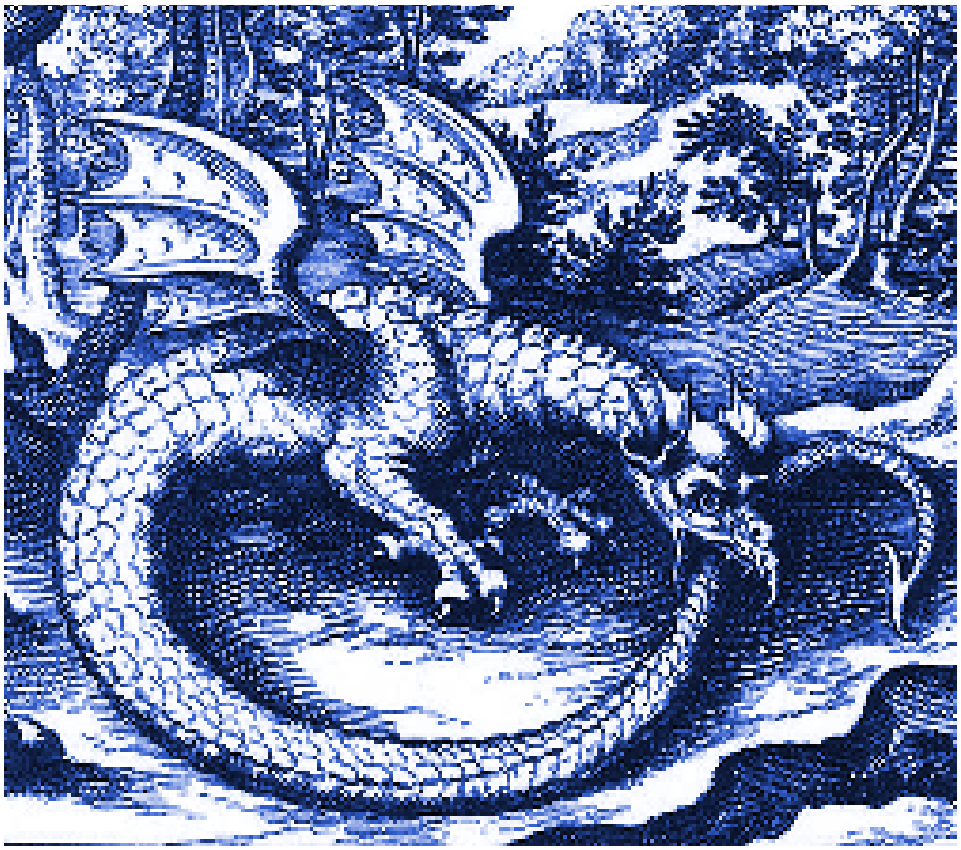
Winner's argument is ever-relevant, especially considering the current proliferation of AI that, as AI researcher Kate Crawford puts it, operates under the "guise of neutrality" but is in fact fundamentally political.

According to an insider account at Amazon, in 2014 the company experimented with a resumé-rating program that aimed to automate the worker hiring and recommending system. When employed, the system clearly favored male candidates over female candidates, due to its training dataset being mainly composed of resumés from men. Appallingly, the system was deliberately devaluing resumés that explicitly mentioned women's colleges or even just the word "women." Even after debiasing the system towards explicit mentions of gender, the skews remained — the system instead developed a preference toward more subtle phrases that were masculinely coded, such as "executed" and "captured." Similarly to the case of the handicapped access movement, bias wasn't explicitly encoded into the program; rather, it emerged because of historical patterns of hegemonic misogyny that permeated the dataset, resumés, and Amazon's past hiring patterns.

Evidently, AI systems may both reflect and perpetuate social understandings of the world. What's interesting here is that while AI systems aren't consciously reproducing political bias, by design their output must reflect it — and their general acceptance as a scientifically grounded system formalizes it. This results in what Crawford calls a "statistical ouroboros," where historical patterns of inequity shape social hierarchies and in turn, data. When this data

is used in AI systems of prediction and classification, the systems produce output that is a product of these inequalities, but is still interpreted as objective.

Crawford argues that biased datasets are not the only issue; the root of the problem is that AI systems rely on classification to function, which is a fundamentally political practice. IBM's debiasing initiative Diversity in Faces (DiF), for example, arose from a public push for more inclusive and accurate facial recognition systems. To diversify their facial dataset, IBM drew from a corpus of images on Flickr. During the classification process, crowdworkers were asked to subjectively label images using an epistemic framework set by IBM; as a result, trans, nonbinary, and gender-fluid people were excluded from the dataset because they didn't fall into IBM's predetermined gender binary. Even the action of debiasing is political in itself because the process is still predicated on classification. Designers of these systems still get to choose how people are allocated into categories; they have the power to decide "which differences make a difference."



Concerningly, IBM put out a statement about DiF claiming that "Aspects of our heritage — including race, ethnicity, culture, geography — and our individual identity...are reflected in our faces." Despite claims of increased diversity, IBM still aimed to assign categories of difference by analyzing rudimentary physical traits such as craniofacial measurements and skin tone, even when attributes like race are now largely understood not as biological or phenotypic but instead as sociocultural constructs. Producing such assumptions from one picture alone is not only reductive but also harmful, exemplifying what professor Simone Browne calls "digital epidermalization," the projection of race onto the body. Reductive systems of classification can produce claims about bodies and identities that may not always be true.

After the passage of the Affordable Care Act, hospitals turned to AI to identify high-risk patients and provide them with preemptive care to cut costs on future expenses like hospitalization. One system used was Optum's Impact Pro, which was found to systematically admit White people to high-risk patient programs more often than Black people, even for patients with the same health risks. Impact Pro, instead of focusing on patients' healthcare histories or risk levels, analyzed how much they paid for healthcare. Patients who had access to better treatments or went to the doctor's office more often were more likely to incur high hospital bills, be classified as high risk, and continue to receive better care. Money spent on healthcare is not necessarily indicative of greater health risk, but because it is hard to quantify (read: data-ify) a patient's health needs, hospital bills were chosen as a "next-best" data point. Similarly to IBM's DiF project, these metrics — craniofacial differences, hospital bills — were analyzed not because they were the most objective or thorough measure, but because they simply could be measured. Nose width doesn't necessarily predict race, just as hospital bills don't necessarily predict health risk. In Crawford's words, "The affordances of the tools become the horizon of truth."

Classification is integral to the way AI works, and thus AI is never apolitical. "Classification," Crawford writes, "is a technical worldview that seeks to fuse together a form of singular objectivity from what are complex and varied cultural materials." *BL*