'*We're All Mad As Hell Now*'
How *Network* (1976) Captures the Anti-Politics of Social Media

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'I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore!' is a phrase that has been raptured up into the popular English lexicon, cited, quoted, parodied, remixed, and dissolved into an ironic confirmation of the satire that produced it. It was the most iconic line from *Network* (1976), a now-classic film that told the dark tale of a fictional American network news anchor, Howard Beale (played by posthumous Academy Award-winner Peter Finch), whose blooming madness was exploited by his bosses for ratings bonanza. But in becoming a meme detached from its context, it rather proved the film's point: in the particle accelerator of mass media, even the most potent radicalism can be diffused into mere entertainment.

The line's endless citation[1], repeated without irony[2], obscures the fact that the line represented a grim low point in the movie. Shouting it into the camera, Beale commanded the American public to get out of their chairs and holler the memorable phrase out their windows, shouting to the heavens in pure outrage about 'the depression, and the inflation, and the Russians, and the crime in the street' (sound familiar?), leading to angry Americans shouting about their anger into the uncaring night.

It was not meant to be admired, much less imitated. It was a warning. And a particularly prescient one, at that. The film has many admirers--such as Aaron Sorkin, whose own smugly liberal style is but a dim echo of *Network* screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky's own preachy yet eloquently radical approach. Such fans suggested

that the movie predicted the rise of reality TV; in 2000, Roger Ebert, in a reflection on the film, asked if even in his darkest nightmares Chayefsky could have foreseen how his film anticipated the World Wrestling Federation and Jerry Springer, which is almost quaint to consider now.[3] In truth, none of those things were what *Network* anticipated. The film was about something more abstract than a single TV show, or even a genre. It was about how mass media perverted popular will and commodified it.

And nothing embodies the realisation of its warning quite like social media. Indeed, to look at a platform like Twitter is to see millions of people yelling endlessly about their rage into the endless night of the internet, a vastly more efficient and perpetually running version of people yelling out their apartment windows. What results is a medium that is, despite all evidence to the contrary, anathema to politics.

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The best satires are often the least effective as warnings; the very things that make them popular—memorable, engaging speeches like Howard Beale's—can outshine the subtler points that make them incisive. While writing this article, I looked up the most popular YouTube clip of the 'mad as hell' speech.

'47 years old and this speech is more relevant today than it was in 1976' – by 'A Pickle for the Knowing Ones' was one of the most liked comments, with the longest thread of replies. And those replies?

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1   '*Network* (1976 film)', *Wikipedia* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Network_(1976_film)#In_popular_culture> accessed 24 May 2022

2   Imran Rahman-Jones, "I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this any more!" (*Medium*, 17 February 2017) <https://medium.com/@IRahmanJones/im-as-mad-as-hell-and-i-m-not-going-to-take-this-any-more-18758ebbe55f> accessed 24 May 2022; Clyde Haberman, 'A Great Line, Taken Badly Out of Context' *The New York Times* (New York, 21 October 2010) <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/22/nyregion/22nyc.html> accessed 24 May 2022.

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3   The World Wrestling Federation staged colourful, theatrical wrestling matches on American cable television, while the Jerry Springer Show was a tabloid talk show that frequently hosted acrimonious arguments, sensationalist debates, and even physical violence between guests.

'Ain't that the damn truth, man'
'Amen to that 🙏'
'True so true'

On and on in that vein, with a few 'Let's Go Brandon's thrown in there to cement the comprehensive point-missing.[4] Beale's speech was not meant to be true. It was written as an example of omnidirectional outrage that felt vaguely plausible precisely because of how content-free it was. It wasn't meant to be taken seriously; it was a warning about the very behaviour Beale was embodying. The speech's generic, empty rage is applicable to many moments in modern history when we've all felt a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness at the world's myriad injustices, which we are all made ever more efficiently aware of courtesy of mass media.

The point was that this speech was paired with shots of the growing jubilation of network executive Diana Christensen who whooped – 'son of a bitch, we hit the motherlode!' – when she heard about the public reaction; she was looking for someone who could lead 'angry shows' that 'articulate the popular rage', and she found it in Beale and his speech. An inkblot test of a rant that all Americans could see themselves in. A notable line in the speech, rarely if ever quoted, is when Beale says 'I don't want you to protest, I don't want you to riot, I don't want you to write to your congressman because I don't know what to tell you to write…'. *That* is the point: the substitution of meaningful political action by the expression of incoherent, omnidirectional rage. Rage that'll make a network executive cheer about 'hitting the motherlode'.

What was truly prophetic about the movie was the way it captured the then-dawning aestheticisation of politics, the trading of substance for affect and postures. Think of the suffusion of terms that dominate English-language political discourse but mean whatever the speaker needs them to mean: cancel culture, groomer, political correctness, woke, the elite, triggered, or gaslighting. It's all too similar to the way that Beale's speech was essentially an inkblot, easily interpreted as a rallying cry for ethnonationalists and socialists alike. 'Things are bad, so get angry' is not a political programme, but it can unite us in *watching* a programme. Or participating in one.

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The 'mad as hell' speech was Chayefsky's mockery of vacant, easily-commodified rage. But if there was ever a moment he ventriloquised Beale it was in a later speech where the anchor—now helming a parodic carnival of a 'Nightly News Hour' that featured a soothsayer and a fiercely applauding live audience—gave a speech condemning television as an enterprise. This is Chayefsky at his most contemptuous and it verges on insufferable in its smug lecturing to the public—lamenting that so few read books and newspapers, for instance, and charging that they 'think like the tube, dress like the tube, raise their children like the tube', using an American slang word for TV. But it manages to stay just on the right side of the line by nestling those jibes within a fundamental point about television:

'You're beginning to think that the tube is reality and that your own lives are unreal! …In God's name, *you people* are the real thing! *We* are the illusion!'

What social media has done is made us *all* 'the illusion' to each other, Beale's travelling circus of entertainers.

It's a bit simplistic to suggest that television is a purely passive medium that requires no participation from the viewer: the very act of watching something and making meaning from it implies activity. But there should be no question that the average user of social media is more clearly engaged in *constituting* the very thing that people are on the platform to consume. They are creating content. In the process, we all end up, to one degree or another, on a digital pedestal dehumanised and at least slightly alienated from ourselves as we strive to be legibly interesting before our ever-changing audience.[5]

So many interpreters of *Network* looked to television for the fulfilment of the film's prophecies about the vulgarisation of mass media and missed the forest for the tubes. While it is indeed fair to say that the film was prescient about the rise of partisan cable news—about the likes of the American Fox News, MSNBC, Australia's Sky News, or British GBN, with their volcanically outraged presenters[6]—even those networks never came to look quite as absurd as Beale's 'Network News Hour', with its eccentric set (a single stained-glass window over rotating daisies) which also hosted other tawdry segments. It remains notable that even the most blatantly propagandistic enterprises, from Fox News to Russia Today, still cling to the authoritative image of a traditional news studio, with immaculately coiffed and dressed presenters.

It was the internet that allowed for a true redefinition of the format of news-delivery; opinion-making could flourish in a medium that seemed resistive and anti-establishment by its very nature, the inherent populism of someone in their living room talking to a webcam has an intimacy and authenticity that old television networks couldn't hope to buy. Indeed, content creators are playing an increasing role in shaping the information environment—for good and for ill.

But democracy doesn't thrive as a result of thousands of content creators and influencers each pursuing their self-interest. Democracy is not additive. It is, at its best, a multiplicative enterprise that harnesses collective, co-ordinated action. *Network* told the tale of how, in one of its most underrated subplots, a group of communist revolutionaries could be domesticated into controlled opposition simply by being given a primetime television show. Social media does much the same thing, reducing political action to so many hashtags, avatars, and unceasing but ultimately pointless debates whose sole purpose is to generate the attention economy's currency of the realm, all by diffusing any potential for mass action into individually gestural acts.[7] Rare successes, like the Black Lives Matter movement, are, regrettably, the exception that proves the rule. In lieu of meaningful change, more often than not we simply get a million little rants through the window about being 'mad as hell'. Togetherness alone, at an undreamed-of scale.

4   Various authors, 'NETWORK, Sidney Lumet, 1976 - I'm Mad As Hell and I'm Not Gonna Take This Anymore!' (*YouTube*, 6 March 2018) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRuS3dxKK9U&lc=UgwZj4GfHK019bevi6Z4AaABAg> accessed 24 May 2022.

5   Chris Rojek, *Presumed Intimacy: Parasocial Interaction in Media, Society and Celebrity Culture* (Polity Press 2015).

6   For but one example of the genre, here's a clip of an Australian pundit's reaction to the recent general election in Australia that saw the centre-left return to power in that country: Kevin Rudd, 'Clip of Sky News presenter criticising the 'left-wing' UK government' (*Twitter*, 22 May 2022) <https://twitter.com/MrKRudd/status/1528294370700455936> accessed 24 May 2022.

7   Ally Mintzer, 'Paying Attention: The Attention Economy' (*Berkeley Economic Review*, 31 March 2020) <https://econreview.berkeley.edu/paying-attention-the-attention-economy/> accessed 24 May 2022.

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If *Network* has anything to teach us today it is the fact that, contrary to popular belief, mass media is *not* hypnotic. One cannot simply put whatever message one wants into the medium and expect it to pass into the public consciousness with perfect fidelity and preservation of original intent. Even when watching media passively, viewers will embark on their own journey of interpretation and meaning-making that will take them in thousands of different directions. But more importantly, the medium itself favours certain messages over others, and will transmit *any* message in a particular way.[8]

The history of computer and information science is marked by many, ever more urgent efforts to engage with this reality. Taken together, they sound a warning about what the ultimate mass communication technology fundamentally constrains us from doing, regardless of our inputs. Alexander Galloway's 2004 *Protocol* marked a landmark effort to argue that the very code on which the internet operated predisposed it to control us rather than liberate us. Kate Crawford and Tarleton Gillespie observed that the act of 'flagging' online content to be reported to moderators is a communicative act that severely constrains engagement and speech—many types of objectionable content and possible harms are collapsed into a tiny number of predetermined checkbox categories, for instance.[9] Sociologist Jenny L. Davis, marshalling years of interdisciplinary research, argued that technology's affordances—the interface between the features of a piece of a tech and the outcomes it produces--reflect politics and power. 'Technologies', she writes, 'don't *make* people do things but instead, push, pull, enable, and constrain. Affordances are *how* objects shape action for socially situated subjects'.[10] There is, in short, a profound limit to what we can actually say and do with 'the most awesome goddamn propaganda force in the whole godless world', to borrow Beale's phrase.

This is one of many reasons why the oft heard refrain about the 'proliferation of speech' being an antidote to whatever one defines as 'bad speech' is painfully naive. Elon Musk's idea, for instance, that we can speak freely with no 'censorship' whatsoever on a social media platform is utterly ignorant of the fact that, with or without formal content moderators, these platforms will nevertheless automatically amplify some speech at the expense of others, and channel *all* speech to particular ends that the speakers won't approve of. The riddle Galloway was trying to solve in *Protocol* was the fact that the internet, though apparently free of centralised control and imposed hierarchy, nevertheless still seemed to manifest that control informally. Power had not gone away, in short.

This is why the last two decades are littered with the tombstones of failed hashtag-driven revolts and half-finished revolutions.[11] So

much of their power was shunted into the entertainment complex of social media, rendering their most powerful critiques, their most radical goals, simply unheard.

There's an especially bitter irony that *Network* itself seems to embody this, with Howard Beale forever caught in that Archie Bunker syndrome—of being seen as a role model despite having been authored as a cautionary tale. But also in that we've all come, to some degree, to enact the artistic tricks of the trade that made *Network* immortal as a film, and limp as satire. So much political discourse on social media is reduced to a language of performances, humour, memes, and other assorted theatrics. These are the first signs of virality. It can seem a simple update of the sloganeering of old, but it is, in truth, an entirely new language of activism that constrains its potential.

But what makes for a successful (political) TikTok does not necessarily equate to successful politics. The classic example of changing one's avatar, for instance, whether to a black circle or square, or to the Ukrainian flag, or to Je Suis Charlie, or to show that one is vaccinated against COVID-19, is almost definitionally empty—its sole function is to signal to the viewer that you may, or may not, share some of their political views. That is a precondition for organising, but it's too often treated as the endpoint.

What social media *is* might best be understood through political theorist Hanna Fenichel Pitkin's interpretation of Hannah Arendt's unique idea of 'the social': 'Arendt means a collectivity of people who--for whatever reason—conduct themselves in such a way that they cannot control or even intentionally influence the large-scale consequences of their activities'.[12] Arendt contrasts this to her equally unique view of politics, a domain of collective action that can change the world for the better. It is in this narrow, Arendtian sense, that I would call social media *anti-political*.

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The rare examples of successful social media activism are episodes of activism that *use* but are not necessarily *driven by* social media--the Black Lives Matter movement is the clearest instance of this, using social media as a connective tissue between individuals and on-the-ground activity in the form of protests and direct action. BLM did not stay in the realm of the gestural, it instead tries to use social media to inspire people to act in the physical world.[13] That included using it as a tool to monitor police activity[14] and help protests stay agile in the face of suppressive tactics by the police, as well as keeping tabs

8   Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Signet Books 1966).

9   Kate Crawford and Tarleton Gillespie, 'What is a flag for? Social media reporting tools and the vocabulary of complaint' (2016) 18(3) New Media & Society 410–428.

10 Jenny L. Davis, *How Artefacts Afford: The Power and Politics of Everyday Things* (MIT Press 2020) 6.

11 It is profitable to consider the way that social media-driven colour revolutions have met with only very limited success in countries like Egypt, for instance, or how the #MeToo movement has faded into a series of spectacles too easily co-opted by corporations and powerful institutions. It was notable, for instance, that Roberta Kaplan, the former chair of Times Up, an anti-sexual-harassment organisation founded off the back of the MeToo movement, was instrumental in helping former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo cover up his own abuses. Cf.

Michael Gold and Jodi Kantor, 'Roberta Kaplan, Who Aided Cuomo, Resigns from Time's Up' *The New York Times* (New York, 9 August 2021) <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/09/nyregion/roberta-kaplan-times-up-cuomo.html> accessed 16 June 2022.

12 Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (University of Chicago Press 1998) 16.

13 E Gilbert, 'The Role of Social Media in Protests: Mobilising or Polarising?' (*89 Initiative*, 6 April 2021) <https://89initiative.com/the-role-of-social-media-in-protests-mobilising-or-polarising/> accessed 24 May 2022; Booke Auxier, 'Social media continue to be important political outlets for Black Americans' (*Pew Research Centre*, 11 December 2020) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/12/11/social-media-continue-to-be-important-political-outlets-for-black-americans/> accessed 24 May 2022.

14 Farhad Manjoo and Mike Isaac, 'Phone Cameras and Apps Help Speed Calls for Police Reform' *The New York Times* (New York, 8 April 2015) <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/09/technology/phone-cameras-and-apps-help-speed-calls-for-police-reform.html> accessed 24 May 2022.

on far-right actors like the Proud Boys who often acted as a lawless paramilitary operating against radical protest. Groundedness in the physical world was key for using social media effectively.

Twitter, in particular, can shine a bright light on abuses by the state. Where once it would've been easier to cover up the crimes of the police against members of the public, now mobile phone video of police murders leaves little doubt about the facts of each case. Social media spreads them quickly, inspiring outrage, which can then inspire direct action.

But even here we see the dangers and limits of social media's protocols. We experience social media as amusement; it is designed to keep us scrolling, liking, sharing, subscribing, and commenting, to increase ad impressions among other things. We get a delightful little dopamine hit from it. We get a sense of control from it, even if we're not consciously enjoying it (see the phenomenon of 'doomscrolling'[15]). It becomes compulsive. And we thus experience everything on it as either pure entertainment or as something we must desensitise ourselves to in order to *enjoy* the more overtly pleasurable parts of the experience.

Thus, many BLM activists began to rail against *how* videos of police murdering Black citizens were being deployed on social media. They'd become clickbait, for both the platform and for news outlets that linked their articles on Twitter or Facebook. Suddenly, people were sharing tips on how to prevent videos from autoplaying on Twitter[16], and Black users were advising each other to take care when another round of police shooting videos were going viral, as well as telling their friends *not* to share the videos if they came across their feeds.[17] What Black social media users experienced as a traumatic reminder of deadly oppression was increasingly being experienced by many others as must-see-TV.[18]

That was when the fear began to blossom—especially after many of these videos failed to lead to police accountability, charges, or convictions for the murderous officers—that the proliferation of video could even be counterproductive to the cause. Aside from being unable to shame the shameless institution of American policing, they ran the risk of further desensitising non-Black internet users to violent episodes of Black death and trauma.[19]

We can also consider the Russian invasion of Ukraine which, as of this writing, enters its 89th day. Much has been made of Ukraine winning the 'information war',[20] at least thus far.[21] This is true, so far as it goes—it has largely outflanked Russian propaganda, particularly in the West where a narrative of potential Ukrainian victory has taken hold. This has proven vital: Western public support translates into political and material support, which remains a lifeline for the besieged democracy. That conditional information war victory has entailed heroic images of Ukrainian military victories, brash speeches from soldiers, and an unending parade of harrowing images of Russian atrocities—from the desolation left by their artillery shells and Iskander missiles, to the bodies of civilians left to rot in the streets of the cities and towns once occupied by the Russians.[22]

Less discussed is the long-term cost of all this, however. As with so many other desperate tactics that such an existential war might occasion, these online ploys are not without their cost. They, too, promote a degree of dehumanisation. In a 1995 BBC documentary, the American writer and Second World War veteran, Paul Fusell observed that soldiery involved learning to 'enjoy murder, enjoy depriving other people of their limbs and their lives'.[23] All war propaganda does this, and mythology about the gloriousness of war has infected even children since antiquity. But social media inundates us with images of a reality that might have shocked even our most jingoistic ancestors and compels us to deal with it by loving it, by cheering it on. With the greatest of ease one can find footage from Ukrainian Bayraktar drones setting Russian tanks alight, cooking three men alive at a time in each tank. Jokes and memes quickly follow.

Social media makes true solemnity impossible and uncool—and I am no exception to this; I've found some pro-Ukrainian memes, deflating Russia's imperialist and autocratic pretensions, quite funny. But it is very easy to lose sight of the humanity that this war obliterates every hour, of every day, and easier still to lose sight of how social media's mass, unexpurgated broadcasts of its slaughter risk desensitising us to those horrors. Or worse, making us enjoy them.

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As with so much else online, good intentions and emancipatory dreams struggled to break free of the paths carved out by the very code of social media. Its logics do not preclude genuinely impactful radical politics, but they do make it significantly harder and introduce countless painful externalities.

15 'Doomscrolling', *Wikipedia* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doomscrolling> accessed 24 May 2022.

16 Chaseedaw Giles, 'Op-Ed: I'm a Black social media manager in the age of George Floyd. Each day is a new trauma' (*LA Times* 23 June 2020) <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-06-23/social-media-trauma-black-killings> accessed 24 May 2022; Rachel Charlene Lewis, 'Very Online: Inside the Endless Post-Police Brutality Loop' (*Bitch Media*, 11 September 2020) <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/very-online/social-media-after-george-floyd> accessed 24 May 2022.

17 Sara Morrison, 'Questions to ask yourself before sharing images of police brutality' (*Vox Recode*, 11 June 2020) <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/6/11/21281028/before-sharing-images-police-brutality-protest-george-floyd-ahmaud-arbery-facebook-instagram-twitter> accessed 24 May 2022.

18 Dede Akolo, 'Abstract Pain: George Floyd and the Viral Spectacle of Black Death' (*Bitch Media*, 17 June 2020) <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/black-death-george-floyd-viral-spectacle> accessed 24 May 2022; Rebecca Pierce, 'Criticism of Black death being described as 'cinema/art' in an article' (*Twitter*, 10 June 2020) <https://mobile.twitter.com/aptly_engineerd/status/1270493547691560960> accessed 24 May 2022.

19 Caelan Reeves, 'Front of house: Social media's repackaging of Black death' (*The Student Life*, 29 April 2021) <https://tsl.news/black-death-social-media/> accessed 24 May 2022.

20 Michael Butler, 'Ukraine's information war is winning hearts and minds in the West' (*The Conversation*, 12 May 2022) <https://theconversation.com/ukraines-information-war-is-winning-hearts-and-minds-in-the-west-181892> accessed 17 June 2022.

21 It is important to note that the information war looks different outside of Western nations, with a more mixed picture. Cf. Carl Miller, 'Who's Behind #IStandWithPutin?' (*The Atlantic*, 5 April 2022) <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/04/russian-propaganda-zelensky-information-war/629475/> accessed 24 May 2022.

22 Paul Baines, 'Ukrainian propaganda: how Zelensky is winning the information war against Russia' (*The Conversation*, 11 May 2022) <https://theconversation.com/ukrainian-propaganda-how-zelensky-is-winning-the-information-war-against-russia-182061> accessed 24 May 2022

23 Adam Curtis, 'The Desperate Edge of Now' [Part 1 of The Living Dead: Three Films About the Power of the Past] (BBC Two, 30 May 1995).

'The founding principle of the internet is control', Galloway writes, 'not freedom—control has existed since the beginning'.[24] He drew this conclusion in part from analysing TCI/IP (transmission control protocol/internet protocol) and the DNS (domain name system) for how they facilitated the exercise of power over the internet, amplifying some voices and stifling others, all while enabling the surveillance of all that information that, we were once told, wanted to be free. This was all before the dawn of Web 2.0, the age of social media whose data-harvesting logics would build on these protocols and lead to what philosopher Shoshana Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism.[25]

You can think of these technological developments—the advent of algorithms, the targeted-ad economy, the coalescing of online communities into an ever smaller number of websites—as channels that constrain political ferment, especially progressive or left-wing politics, with their aspirations towards *collective* change and freedom from capital, redirecting it to ends that are less threatening to the existing power structure. The carnival of lifestyles, affects, and postures afforded by social media is a better fit with a more reactionary, pro-capitalist politics, particularly that aimed at inspiring individual action.

The recent surge of anti-trans and anti-queer legislation in the United States[26] is a prime example, urged on by a politics of screaming rage about 'groomers' in American classrooms (who all just so happen to be LGBT people), it inspires some consequential legislation but it also, primarily, sires hate crimes and bullying. Social media may not give the far-right its dream of Gilead, but it can enable them to crowdsource a decentralised police force to attack people for being gay or trans.

There are precious few similar, easily crowdsourced individual actions that afford the left a similar short-term gain for their political programme. Just as in *Network,* whose communist revolutionaries were turned into TV stars who committed terrorism for ratings but changed nothing about the coming neoliberal ascendancy, social media does not allow us to use its awesome power any way we please.[27]

Howard Beale seemed to command the masses from his primetime broadcast. But the one order he gave that they simply ignored? To turn *off* their TV sets. Some messages will simply go unheard. The medium cannot be bent against its own best interests. Online, this often means watching radical messages be bent and distorted into forms that can be easily co-opted by capital.[28]

Having a voice is powerful, as is technological access that allows us to amplify our voices. But the way our voices are transformed and translated is powerfully, even decisively consequential. And rarely in our favour.

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Network is, in some real ways, a relic. Faye Dunaway's performance as Diana Christensen is transcendent, but cannot completely disguise the anti-feminism at the core of the 'heartless career woman' archetype[29] Paddy Chayefsky wrote for her, for instance. Yet, the film endures because it may have hit on a truth about technology that even Chayefsky might not have been fully aware of. He certainly meant to damn television, but he also, inadvertently, condemned something larger. Something that could have been said of newspapers, the telegraph, telephones, and all the *successors* to television: mass media, steeped in the illusion of user-focused and individual communicative content, shapes us as much as we shape it—and it can constrain our politics as much as emancipate it.

In our profoundly individualistic society, it is all too easy to believe that our intent makes us little monarchs, wandering the world realising our wills in perfect accordance with our actions. But the unintended consequences always catch up to us, and communications and information technologies exponentially accelerate that process, scaling it infinitely. *Network* is a tragedy precisely because it explores this fundamental fact about our most powerful tools. We are constrained by the politics that helped create them, and the enduring politics that governs their use.

Network none-too-subtly suggested that Beale's ability to 'articulate the popular rage' didn't matter because television itself 'destroyed' him and made him its creature, in no small measure because the capitalist context of his network would never have admitted a *true* threat to the system that built its wealth. That remains equally true of social media. Despite the seeming vast proliferation of red roses and hammer-and-sickle emojis on Twitter, there is no revolution waiting in its digital wings, just another social circle for the platform to sort you into.[30]

None of this is to indulge in a reflexive, crotchety attack on the very idea of social media. Its benefits are myriad and obvious; these platforms *have* brought us closer together and materially improved our lives in many ways. But it is worth stepping back to understand that the ways social media can be most helpful—forming connections across international boundaries, quickly fundraising

24 Alexander Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralisation* (MIT Press 2004) xv.

25 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (Public Affairs Books 2018). In essence, Zuboff argues that the current phase of capitalism relies on surveillance and the dissolution of privacy in order to generate products and profit.

26 Jules Gill-Peterson, 'Anti-Trans Laws Aren't Symbolic. They Seek to Erase Us From Public Life' (*Them*, 18 April 2022) <https://www.them.us/story/anti-trans-laws-public-erasure-dont-say-gay> accessed 24 May 2022.

27 Edward Nik-Khah and Robert Van Horn, 'The ascendancy of Chicago neoliberalism' in Kean Birch, Julie MacLeavy, and Simon Springer (eds) *Handbook of Neoliberalism* (Routledge 2016) 55–66.

28 Owen Jones. 'Woke-washing: how brands are cashing in on the culture wars' *The Guardian* (London, 23 May 2019) <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/may/23/woke-washing-brands-cashing-in-on-culture-wars-owen-jones> accessed 24 May 2022;
Amanda Maryanna, 'the instagram infographic industrial complex'

(*YouTube*, 24 March 2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1Op3aPGrrU> accessed 24 May 2022; Lewis (n 16) 6. Each of these works engages with the phenomenon of gestural or 'performative' activism, activism that focuses on empty rhetoric rather than meaningful action, often with the aim of increasing one's social capital through 'making a statement' or appearing to be on the right side of an issue. That genre of activism is easily exploited by corporations precisely because it changes nothing.

29 For more on this archetype's role in mass media, cf. Susan Faludi. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (Crown Publishing Group 1991).

30 Across multiple languages on Twitter, the red rose emoji—long associated with socialist movements—has re-emerged with much the same meaning. In some countries, like the US, it has specifically come to be associated with newer democratic socialist organisations like the Democratic Socialists of America. The hammer-and-sickle emoji, meanwhile, is used by many communists on the platform. While Marxist-Leninists (or MLs) are among the most vocal, the symbol is used by adherents of many different communist philosophies on Twitter.

money through crowdsourcing, networking with like minded people all over the world—are 1) weak attempts to make up for the deficiencies of late capitalism (consider how online fundraising for medical emergencies has emerged as a stopgap against the continued slashing of public health funding worldwide[31]), and 2) easily used by awful people for perverse ends that were once beyond their reach.

The same social media that has allowed the micro-minority of transgender people around the world to talk to each other, form a transnational web of support and even build a movement, has also allowed white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and their assorted ilk to do something similar. But because transgender dreams reach towards structural issues like healthcare and material support, it's harder for our social media activism to achieve them. Meanwhile, for the far-right, hurting individuals from despised minority groups is an immediate goal that social media makes incredibly easy.

This is the dilemma that faces us, and the key to using social media successfully—the key to breaking free of the hideous co-optation that *Network* satirised nearly 50 years ago, freeing ourselves of social media's anti-politics—is to recognise that engagement with and connection to the physical world matters. Social media can be a bridge, but it cannot truly be the public square we were promised, especially not for the purposes of changing the world; it simply wasn't designed to accommodate the expansiveness of such aspirations. *Network* showed that Gil Scott Heron was quite right: the revolution will *not* be televised[32]. The last two decades have shown us it won't be tweeted either.

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31 The Lancet Gastroenterology & Hepatology, Editorial, 'Public health funding in England: death by a thousand cuts' (2021) 6(12) The Lancet; John Burn-Murdoch. 'Woke-washing: how brands are cashing in on the culture wars' *Financial Times* (London, 28 April 2022) <https://www.ft.com/content/dbf166ce-1ebb-4a67-980e-9860fd170ba2> accessed 24 May 2022.

32 Ace Records Ltd., 'Gil Scott-Heron - Revolution Will Not Be Televised (Official Version)' (*YouTube*, 7 October 2013) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwSRqaZGsPw> accessed 24 May 2022.