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Dear Reader,

[↑]
Landon Nordeman, New York
Times.

[1]
Galloway, George. "We will not
be silenced," *The Guardian*,
20.10.2001.

In October of 2001, the *Guardian* claimed in an article that Vladimir Lenin once said: "There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen."^[1] While this quote is likely falsely attributed to the first head of government of Soviet Russia, it still stuck with me. When former Labour MP George Galloway wrote that article for the British newspaper, he was citing the ominous quote in the context of the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and, what turned out to be, the beginning of the 'War on terror'. Lenin or not, the quote has since been recycled in all kinds of (less dramatic) contexts. I came to think of it again in late summer of 2024.

The 2024 US Presidential election fell in politically unstable times. The 81-year-old Democratic candidate kept showing signs of mental decline and increasing inability to lead the world's largest economy for another four years. The 78-year-old Republican candidate became the first ever former President to be convicted of felony charges and survived two assassination attempts throughout the race. All the while, a cost-of-living crisis, unaffordability of healthcare, erosion of democratic institutions and geopolitical instability were all looming over the country.

What made me think of (Not-) Lenin's 'decades in weeks' however, was the all-encompassing force of political propaganda that accompanied the months leading up to the election. Communication seemed key in winning over America. The visual narratives simultaneously being spun from all sides of the political orbit kept pouring new fuel over the blazing flames of the Presidential race. Everything felt amplified, exorbitant, accelerated – like this election was going to determine America's fate forever. *There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen.*

I have been interested in US politics for years. Since around the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic I have been following what happens in Washington very closely. As a graphic designer from Germany studying in France, my personal political experience is predominantly one of western-European liberal democracies. I consume world news with a euro-centric bias. And, of course, I have political biases. I am not approaching this thesis from a neutral perspective. I strongly ideologically oppose the American Republican Party, American right-wing media, Donald Trump and the MAGA movement – the four entities that are largely subject of this work.

Despite my resentments, my goal is not to take apart 'Trumpism' as a concept or a structure, but to genuinely dissect its visual communication and propaganda strategies ahead of their eventual election success. This is best possible through a factual, analytic approach. I will however, along with my analysis, allow myself to share my own viewpoint from time to time. This work does not have the aspiration to cover the entirety of Republican visual warfare, its strategic backgrounds and power dynamics. It is merely a graphic designer's approach to get closer to it.

In the past, navigating through the dynamics of American politics, the nuances to American culture and the forces in American propaganda has often left me with more questions than answers. This thesis is my attempt at finding responses. Through the graphic design lens, understanding how and why the 2024 US Presidential election unfolded in the way it did, and more broadly, drawing conclusions about today's role of visual communication in political propaganda.

How to read (*between the lines*)

Throughout the read you will find *a few words and sentences in italics* here and there. Whenever you come across one of these, you're reading a small interjection into the main text flow. This can be a concise quantification or interpretation of whatever came just before, a train of thought adding onto the primary text, or simply a commentary pensée.

Thanks for reading.

“We were getting ready to win this election.”

“Frankly, we did win this election.”^[2]

[2][*]
BBC Reality Check Team. "US election 2020: Fact-checking Trump's speech on election night," 04.11.20.

It is 2:21 A.M. on November 4, 2020, the night of the US Presidential election. Donald J. Trump stands in the East Room of the White House in front of gathered media, as he says that sentence. These are the words of an outgoing President who just lost his battle for reelection. An outgoing President who does not accept that he is one. These are also the words that ended up setting the tone for the four years to come, between that night and the election of November 2024. The nonchalant disregard of the truth displayed in that sentence turned out to be a dangerous weapon of communication commonly utilised in the time leading up to Trump's eventual electoral redemption four years later. How did we get there?

[3]
Fung, Hilary; Bustillo, Ximena. "Trump is found guilty on 34 felony counts. Read the counts here," *NPR*, 30.05.24.

[4]
Cabral, Sam; Matza, Max. "Kamala Harris formally chosen as Democratic nominee," *BBC*, 02.08.24.

[5]
Ramírez, Isabella. "A look at the 28 chaotic days between Biden's disastrous debate and his dropout," *Politico*, 26.07.24.

[6]
Reuters. "Frame by frame: Trump survives assassination attempt," 16.07.24.

[7]
Ewe, Koh. "Why Republicans Are Patching Their Ears," *TIME*, 18.07.24.

[8]
Helmore, Edward. "Ryan Routh found guilty of 2024 attempted assassination of Trump in Florida," *The Guardian*, 23.09.25.

The 2024 US Presidential election, leading to Donald Trump's second term in office, was remarkable in many ways. Trump became the first former American President to be convicted of felony crimes as he was found guilty of all 34 charges in a scheme to illegally influence the 2016 election.^[3] The Democratic Party changed candidates three months before the election, after pressure had mounted on incumbent President and democratic nominee Joseph R. Biden with concerns growing about his physical and mental health.^[4] Following a catastrophic debate performance against Trump, Biden withdrew from the race. A week prior, Trump escaped an assassination attempt, with a sharpshooter's bullet grazing him during a rally, leaving only his ear wounded.^[6] This would further intensify the cult-like behaviour of his supporters, with Republicans starting to wear fake ear bandages in support of Trump.^[7] Two months before the election a second failed attempt on his life took place.^[8]

In the following six chapters I will be trying to answer a variety of questions I have been wondering about that made me want to dedicate my thesis to this topic. What exactly is the MAGA movement? What makes its visual communication so unique? How does the supporter base interact with the President, the campaign and the media? How do these four key Republican actors unite and amplify their propaganda forces? What impact do social media, artificial intelligence and fake news have on visual political communication? Are right-wing populists the sole beneficiaries of these developments? How are MAGA propaganda efforts prospering in times of 'post-truth' politics? Why did liberals and progressives seemingly not manage to match right-wing populism and imagery? Was this election just an anomaly or the start of a new era of propaganda? What is the danger, power and responsibility of communication design in modern political propaganda?

This investigation aims to retrace the Republican election campaign and analyse different conservative messaging strategies that paved their way to victory. To understand this unique political movement and its success, one must understand its visual communication and the force of its imagery and propaganda. This includes curating a visual archive of a variety of communication elements collecting physical objects, digital propaganda and theoretical discourse. Selected case studies within this work trace specific pieces of propaganda from their source to their complete dispersion into the mainstream discourse.

In the world of MAGA messaging, a tiny spark can quickly ignite a wild-fire. My goal is to follow its smoke to get to the source. From red hats and big flags, from fairy tales about dog-eating immigrants, from AI-generated heroes and villains, from dog whistles, ragebaiting and fearmongering – this is the Republican visual propaganda story of 2024.

Glossary

This glossary comprises definitions of technical terms, abbreviations and other notable words that feature in this work. The terminology is sorted by Political, Design and General.

Political terms

Aisle

In the US Congress seats are arranged in a semicircle with an aisle in the middle separating Democrats from Republicans. Thus, 'the other side of the aisle' means: the other party

Campaign

The structure within a political party organising a candidate's electoral run

Capitol

Or 'United States Capitol'. The seat of the US Congress

FEC

Short for 'Federal Election Commission'. An independent agency overseeing US elections

Flood the Zone with Shit

A right-wing populist communication strategy, saturating the news ecosystem with misinformation and overwhelm the media's ability to mediate, thus disrupting the democratic process. From a quote by former Trump advisor Steve Bannon: "The Democrats don't matter. The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit."

GOP

Short for 'Grand Old Party'. Another term for the American Republican Party

Grassroots

A political movement driven by groups of ordinary citizens rather than politicians

MAGA

Short for 'Make America Great Again'. Donald Trump's signature slogan and name of his political movement

POTUS

Short for 'President of the United States'

Rally

A public meeting where politicians speak in front of a large group of supporters

Reactionism

A traditionalist conservative political perspective opposed to social and economic change

RNC

Short for 'Republican National Convention'. Where Republicans confirm their nominee for the following Presidential election

Ticket

A list of representatives for a particular political party in an election. E.g. the Harris/Walz ticket

United States Congress

The legislative branch of the federal government of the United States

V/P

Short for 'Vice-President'

WWG1WGA

Short for 'Where we go one we go all'. Slogan of the far-right American political conspiracy movement QAnon

Design terms

Below the Fold

The part of a webpage that is not visible to the user without scrolling down. Derives from print newspaper terminology.

CSS

Short for 'Cascading Style Sheets'. A coding language used to style documents written in HTML

CTA

Short for 'Call to action'. Often the primary button on a webpage, inciting an action by the user

Dark Patterns

User interface elements designed to trick users into doing things, e.g. buy something they did not want to buy

Footer

An area located at the very bottom of every page on a website

Header

The Counterpart of the footer

Marquee

An antiquated web design element, moving text in a confined horizontal space

UX/UI

Short for 'User Experience / User Interface'. Marketing terms for designing touchpoints between a product and its customer

General terms

The Big Apple

A loving nickname for New York City

Dog Whistle

A subtly aimed political message that is intended for, and can only be understood by, a particular demographic group

Fearmonger

The act of exploiting feelings of fear by using exaggerated rumors of impending danger, usually for personal or political gain

Floating Signifier

Words or images that can be interpreted in different ways and so do not have a clear, single referent

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Biblical figures whose arrival sets a divine end-time upon the world

Haitian Creole

Language spoken in Haiti

Manosphere

An online men's self-improvement community, promoting the idea that emotional control, material wealth, physical appearance and dominance over women are markers of male worth

Mimicry

The evolved resemblance of an organism to something else

Moving the Goalposts

Metaphor for changing the premise of an argument in progress to your advantage

Paraphernalia

A collection of items or equipment associated with a particular activity, hobby, or lifestyle

Post-Truth

Societal and political development in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief

Ragebait

The manipulative tactic of eliciting outrage with the goal of increasing online engagement

Strawman Argument

Distorting an opposing position into an extreme version of itself and then arguing against that extreme version

Slacktivism

Supporting a political or social cause only by means such as social media or online petitions. Basically, showing very little effort or commitment.

Visual Messaging in Post-Truth Politics

**How Democrats
and Republicans
Communicated
to Voters Ahead
of the Election**

"I bet in a few years we'll be doing what people always do when the economy goes south: blaming immigrants and poor people."

[*]
Mark Baum, investment banker,
after the 2008 financial crash,
in *The Big Short*, 2015.

The *Oxford Dictionary* named 'post-truth' as word of the year 2016.^[9] The term refers to a societal and political development in which appeals to emotion and personal belief are more influential in shaping public opinion than objective facts are.^[10] Fake news, lies and disinformation are being spread systematically, manipulating perceptions and shaping public opinion. In the 'post-truth' political playing field, catering to pre-existing convictions and feelings is key, facts are secondary.^[11] This continuous erosion of the existence of a common truth is heavily propelled by the arrival of novel technology and media. The meteoric rise of short form online content and the simultaneous fall of traditional nuanced quality journalism, filter bubbles on social media and the sheer unlimited powers of artificial intelligence are among the key factors aggravating the 'post-truth era' and its consequences.

In the reasoning for their 2016 choice, *Oxford Dictionary* cited the Brexit referendum in the UK and the 2016 US Presidential election as key political events propelling the spread of the term.^[12] Amidst the rise and election victory of Donald Trump, the term appeared in American political discourse most frequently as 'post-truth politics'. The Republican movement under Trump fully embraced 'post-truth'. They built on the perfect breeding ground of preexisting conditions in American society, culture and politics that make the United States particularly susceptible for new propaganda dynamics to emerge – catapulting the MAGA movement to power. In a political landscape where beliefs trump facts, visual communication is key.

Let us commence this thesis about Republican visual warfare by looking at the other side of the coin. It seems crucial to first lay out the Democrats' approach to communication strategy during this election, to better understand the 'Make America Great Again' movement's propaganda efforts afterwards.

[9] Oxford Languages. "Word of the Year 2016."

[10] Harsin, Jayson. "Post-Truth and Critical Communication Studies," *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, 20.12.18.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Op. cit. Oxford Languages.

1.1 How Harris' communication hit the ground running – and why it died down before the finish line

[13]
Faguy, Ana. "The internet is enthralled with Harris. Will that get her more votes?," *BBC*, 24.07.24.

[14]
Suffolk University Boston.
"Suffolk University/USA TODAY National Voter Poll: 54% Say Biden Should Be Replaced as Presidential Candidate," 01.07.24.

[15]
Greve, Joan E. "Doubts vanish as Democrats unite over Biden's 2024 bid: 'He will win'," *The Guardian*, 04.03.24.

[16]
Nawaz, Amna. "Biden allies defend his place as Democratic nominee as others suggest he should drop out," *PBS*, 01.07.24.

[17]
Montanaro, Domenico. "4 takeaways from the first presidential debate," *NPR*, 28.06.24.

The Democratic Party did not surrender media attention to Republicans without a fight. In late July of 2024, the Harris campaign saw a brief but important media momentum.^[13] The blue side of the aisle managed to gain significant traction through their visual messaging strategy, in an online space that was previously mainly dominated by MAGA and Trump. Let's start by taking a look at this promising start to the online presence of Harris' Presidential bid – and dissect why it eventually failed.

Until mid-July, sitting President Joe Biden was the Democratic candidate running for reelection. Many wanted to see the unpopular 81-year-old leave Washington at the end of his term and pass on the torch to a younger, more dynamic candidate better able to capture voters.^[14] Most Democratic politicians and voters agreed on that. But while the voters vehemently showed their discontent with Biden's unreasonableness out on the streets, in polls and on social media, most Democratic politicians did not. They fell into party line, trying to demonstrate unity behind their President.^[15] Biden was powerful and had influential allies in the party, no one dared to openly criticise his stubbornness.^[16] However, it was clear to everybody that the facade would eventually crack.

Ultimately, there weren't just cracks; the whole house came down. It was June 27th, the first Presidential debate between Biden and Trump. While Trump didn't have a great debate performance, Biden's was catastrophic. He was at times mumbling incomprehensibly, getting names and facts wrong, talking with a very quiet, weak voice throughout.^[17] He was not making much sense at any moment during the debate.

In front of millions of Americans watching live, he had his worst performance in a long line of bad performances in this election season. For almost a month after the debate, the Democratic Party tried cleaning up what was left of this house Biden tore down. Then, on July 21st, Biden decided to drop out of the race.

Feeling unburdened, the party abandoned the leftover rubble of his campaign and instead started building a new house. *Or at least, kinda.* Biden endorsed Kamala Harris, his Vice-President, to take over the Democratic ticket. Harris then announced her candidacy for the 2024 election on the same day that Biden withdrew from the race.^[18]

Harris' campaign had to catch up with their Republican counterpart in their organisation and messaging in a short span of time ahead of the November election. However, given that back when the race was still Biden v Trump Harris was the sitting Vice-President of the United States, she was already heavily implicated in Democratic public messaging. This unique predicament turned out to simultaneously be a blessing and a curse for her campaign. Politically, it turned out to pose problems. Throughout her 107 days as the Democratic candidate, she struggled to present herself as a true alternative to Biden.^[19] Having been a key part of the former administration herself, Harris didn't dare to sway too far from the Biden-line on key issues during the election. Thus, her takeover of the Democratic ticket was not viewed as a fresh start by many voters, but rather as more of the same.^[20] In terms of campaign messaging however, having been present in the news cycle before her eventual candidacy helped the former attorney in gaining momentum. Harris hit the ground running. Her campaign went all-in on visual communication through social media, opportunistically riding the online trends of the summer and fully embracing existing memes about Harris in their messaging (that were initially propelled by conservatives in order to attack her).^[21]

From the get-go, they leaned into 'brat summer'. This viral social media trend, originating from the release campaign of British pop singer CharliXCX's album 'brat' dominated the Gen Z online sphere in summer of 2024. The Harris campaign used the blunt, messy, volatile and flashy 'brat' aesthetic in their propaganda material, trying to make the Democrat appeal to a younger audience that her predecessor didn't manage to capture.^[22] And the short videos put out by the campaign, often featuring XCX's music to montages of Harris behind a neon-green filter, were successfully reaching the target audience.^[23] A day after Harris' takeover of the Democratic ticket, Charli herself got involved tweeting: "kamala IS brat".^[24] In a *Washington Post* interview a young first-time voter said: "I didn't really get into politics at all until I actually saw Charli's tweet when she started 'kamala IS brat,' and I was like, 'let me look into it' ... I didn't really know a lot about Harris' policies and stuff. I just knew I didn't want Trump in office. But then, I actually learned about her policies, and now I can justify why I want to vote for her."^[25] Liberal media celebrated the campaign's fresh take on political communication

[18] NPR Washington Desk. "It's official: Kamala Harris becomes Democrats' 2024 presidential nominee," 06.08.24.

[19] Thomas, Ken; Zitner, Aaron. "Harris Struggles to Distinguish Candidacy From Biden," *The Wall Street Journal*, 25.10.24.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Faguy, Ana. "The internet is enthralled with Harris. Will that get her more votes?," *BBC*, 24.07.24.

[22] Clarke-Billings, Lucy. "What is Kamala Harris's 'brat' rebrand all about?," *BBC*, 22.07.24.

[23] Op. Cit. Faguy.

[24] CharliXCX (@charli_xcx). "kamala IS brat," X, 22.07.24.

[25]
Kim, HyoJung; Wells, Dylan.
"Can Harris's embrace of the
'brat' aesthetic actually move
votes?," *Washington Post*,
18.09.24.

[26]
Lukpat, Alyssa. "Why Kamala
Harris Is Inspiring Coconut
Tree Memes," *The Wall Street
Journal*, 22.07.24.

[27]
Parks, Kristine. "CNN
commentator blasts Democrats
for having Bill Clinton at
DNC: 'Quit' him, 'finally
please!'," *Fox News*, 19.08.24.

(fresh, primarily compared to the Biden campaign), covering her online success extensively.

Further social media hits that the campaign managed to land revolved around memes about certain older quotes by the candidate, that were originally published to mock her. By aggressively leaning into these sometimes odd outings of Harris, the campaign managed to drive the narrative around them – and turn a weak point into a strength. Her "I don't know what's wrong with you young people. You think you just fell out of a coconut tree?" quote from 2023 being the prime example. Initially pushed by Republicans making fun of her phrasing and her following laugh, the Harris campaign managed to turn the narrative around and create a viral trend around the video.^[26]

At this point it has to be stated how remarkable this quote is as a choice for a line of attack against Harris. Republicans managed to spin a story around a slightly odd phrase followed by forced artificial laughter. There is not more to the short clip from 2023 that made the rounds. Harris doesn't say or do anything that would actually be reprehensible in the political context. This is where a stark imbalance between the levels of Republican and Democratic attacks against political opponents shows. Where Democrats like to brand themselves as the party of decency and thus often refrain from cheap personal attacks, Republicans frequently don't feel this moral obligation to separate professional and personal denunciations.^[27]

There is a certain irony to this kind of critique coming from the Trump Republican Party and their mouthpieces. If Democrats were to do the same – attack Trump (or other Republicans) on a level so low as questioning his fitness for office over nothing but an odd phrase and a laugh – they would find an infinity of content. Almost every day Trump provides mental blackouts, slip-ups, statements and actions ranging from weird to unacceptable and more. Had he been the one to mention 'coconut trees,' the scrutiny would be far less intense than it was for Harris, as it would have most likely not even been the oddest thing he'd done that day. Plus, given the sheer quantity of newsworthy little affairs and big scandals Trump produces, any personal attack on him gets drowned in the emergence of the next crazy thing he does the following day. Republicans however don't shy away from seizing every opportunity, however minuscule, to attack their political opponents, even on a personal and private level. *Democrats not doing the same is the GOP's blessing.*

Yes, *we tan* – The Republican involvement in the ‘Harris coconut-saga’ evokes memories of the Barack Obama ‘tan suit controversy’. In 2014, the former President received significant right-wing backlash after he wore a tan suit to a press conference.^[28] A Republican senator at the time described Obama’s outfit choice as “unpresidential”, further saying: “There’s no way, I don’t think, any of us can excuse what the President did today.”^[29] There was no substantial point of critique in the attacks against Obama, they solely revolved around the colour of his suit. In addition, the right-wing commentary wreaked hypocrisy, given that Republican Presidents before Obama had worn tanned suits as well.^[30]

And there are more elements connecting these isolated cases besides the mentioned apparent similarities. What further links the two is the race of both Democratic politicians. While Republicans wouldn’t shy away from launching similar personal attacks against white representatives either, Harris and Obama are suffering from even stronger targeting given their race. Then, in Harris’ case, there’s also sexism added onto the repertoire of lines of attack. Republican mockery of her ‘coconut’ speech and distinctive laugh, which baselessly questioned her fitness for office, stems from a sexist frame of mind and a focus on superficialities.^[31] While the Harris campaign successfully managed to avert these kinds of attacks, even virally using them in their favour, their media momentum eventually came to a halt.^[32] By mid-August, there was not much left of ‘brat’, ‘coconut tree’ and the ‘k hive’. Going all-in on social media trends means riding their rapid, extreme highs but also experiencing their eventual bust. Every online trend ends up dying off. So did, despite its immense success, the ‘brat summer’.^[33] *Google Trends* cites the week from 21-27 July 2024 as the period of peak interest in ‘kamala brat summer’. This is the week of her takeover of the Democratic candidacy – and also the birth of ‘kamala brat’ memes. From the week prior, where the search term was non-existent – to its instant breakthrough the next week – to its complete fall-off just a few weeks after.^[34]

[28] Kuchar, Savannah. “Barack Obama’s tan suit gate: What to know on the 10th anniversary,” *USA Today*, 28.08.24.

[29] Coscarelli, Joe. “Eternally Outraged Congressman Not Trying to Be ‘Trivial,’ But Doesn’t Think Obama’s Tan Suit Was Appropriate,” *New York Magazine*, 29.08.14.

[30] Crisp, Elizabeth. “Biden Wore a Tan Suit to a Press Conference; Twitter Remembers the Time Obama Did the Same,” *Newsweek*, 06.08.21.

[31] Smith, David. “Republican attacks on Kamala Harris to get ‘as ugly and bigoted as they can’,” *The Guardian*, 25.07.24.

[32] Bose, Nandita; Hunnicutt, Trevor; Kelly, Stephanie. “Kamala Harris made a historic dash for the White House. Here’s why she fell short.,” *Reuters*, 06.11.24.

[33] Google Trends. “kamala brat summer”.

[34] Ibid.

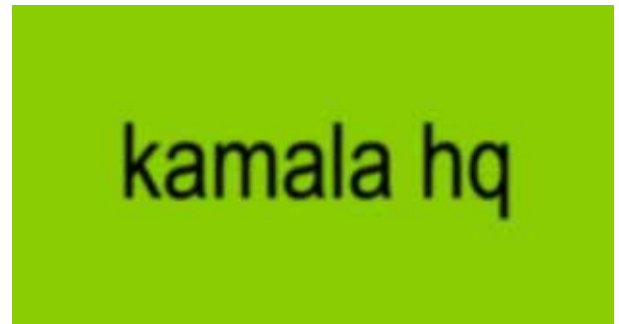
[→]
 Fox News. "Dems in panic mode over Biden's debate performance," 27.06.2025.



[→]
 CBS News. "How VP Kamala Harris became 'brat'," 24.07.2024.



[→]
 Logo 'kamala hq' as homage to the 'brat' album cover.



Authentically created online trends are often rapidly victim of corporate adaption by companies and brands – or political parties – wanting in on the hype. Normally, within the respective internet community, this marks the death of said trend. *It's not funny anymore if a brand says it.* The Harris campaign's success with their 'brat' content is remarkable in light of this. However, the social media reality was always eventually going to catch up with them.



Erin Schaff, New York Times

What also drove Harris' initial success in media presence was the general Democratic enthusiasm amidst her takeover of the ticket. After President Biden had shown time and time again that his mental capacities were declining, after his crushing debate performance against Trump in late June, after his unwillingness and inability to capture more voters through political advocacy, Kamala Harris stepping in was a sign of hope to many.^[35] This hopefulness helped catapult the campaign's online appearance to the forefront of the media discourse. Democrats felt more confident about Harris' capacity to defeat Trump than Biden's. This coincided with Harris' bolder visual communication strategy, resulting in people enthusiastically celebrating the campaign's social media work.^[36] The political momentum of the first weeks of Harris' candidacy flew by over time however. And with it the media momentum. As the 5th November got closer and closer, the discourse shifted more towards actual policy issues – away from neon-green dance montages. Harris, much like Biden before her, struggled to convince voters on the base of her political convictions and visions. While the campaign's communication strategy was orchestrated to increase Gen Z support, Harris fell way short of that goal. With 54% of the under-30 vote in the 2024 election, she was the first Democratic candidate not to reach above 60% among young voters in 20 years.^[37]

[35] Lesnes, Corine. "Kamala-mania brings enthusiasm back to Democratic camp," *Le Monde*, 25.07.24.

[36] Santhanam, Laura. "Poll: Harris boosts confidence that Democrats could win the 2024 election," *PBS*, 06.08.24.

[37] Moore, Elena. "Biden won big with young voters. This year, they swung toward Trump in a big way," *NPR*, 08.11.24.

While the Harris campaign's messaging efforts to capture voters successfully created traction and momentum in the beginning, it didn't have a lasting effect. This is also due to one primary difference between them and their MAGA opposition. In the 'Magaverse' content cycle, the loyal base has a role that is much more important and central. Online Liberals did pick up on Harris' communication, especially on the meme-heavy content, but they never reached the level of implication the Republican base did (see also chapter 3.5). The MAGA movement was a key actor in the Republican messaging strategy ahead of this election. They were the ones digging up dirt on Biden, Harris and other Democrats, regurgitating and reproducing a thousandfold whatever Trump or his entourage were saying, coming up with memes, shouting 'FAKE NEWS' at anything emanating from mainstream media, printing shirts, flags and hats, etc... The 'coconut' story for example didn't originate from a representative of the party, but from online MAGA folk. Online right-wingers identifying as MAGA acted as a hivemind – independent from the official Trump campaign, but still blindly and unshakeably loyal. Two characteristics that online Liberals didn't show during this election period. They needed to be activated from outside, either by input from Democratic politicians and the campaign, or by their opposition. It was the Harris

campaign that initiated the 'kamala brat' momentum. Their followership responded strongly, creating 'brat'-kamala' crossover content as well, but only after the initial launch by the campaign. Besides that, the Democratic constituency is very regularly critical of their politicians – holding the party accountable when it doesn't act to their liking. The MAGA side on the other hand can in large parts be viewed as a cult of personality, with its members stopping any form of internal criticism of Trump in its tracks. This makes Republican infighting a rarer occasion and instead helps streamlining their propaganda. While they attack Democrats with their online visual messaging, those very same Democrats are often *also* in the process of attacking *other* Democrats.

The list of blame in democratic circles following the defeat of Kamala Harris was long. There was a lot of finger-pointing in different directions. Depending on where you looked, which wing of the party you asked, the list featured drastically different explanations for the crushing loss.

Generally, the more conservative wing of the Democrats said the campaign had been leaning too much to the left,^[38] while the progressive wing said Harris had catered too much to the right.^[39] Part of the problem was exactly this division within the party. What everyone could seem to agree on in the weeks following the 5th November however, was that the Harris/Walz campaign had lost the battle of the media.^[40] The Democrats' attempts to combat Republican visual propaganda were not successful. They didn't come close to matching the opposition's reach throughout all forms of media in the post-truth age. The times of linear TV-, radio- and newspaper-based political advertising were long over – even Democrats understood that. But their efforts to activate the new means of communication could be described as inauthentic and complacent at best, falling short of those of the MAGA movement.

[38]
Bacon Jr., Perry. "Centrist Democrats should stop blaming progressives for Harris's loss," *Washington Post*, 05.12.24.

[39]
Lillis, Mike. "Democrats' election reckoning pits liberals against centrists," *The Hill*, 09.11.24.

[40]
Dovere, Edward-Isaac. "Where Harris' campaign went wrong," *CNN*, 06.11.24.

"Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute."

[*]
Hannah Arendt, *Truth and Politics*, 1961, p. 234.

The political propaganda that came out of the 2024 US Presidential election was in many ways unparalleled. In this subchapter we're going to start scratching the surface of the intricate shenanigans of MAGA communication. Then, throughout the following chapters, we'll outline it in all its unique, bizarre and violent force. To understand the novelty of the dynamics of right-wing visual communication during this election cycle, in a first step, it is critical to discuss the concept of propaganda more generally. Let's dissect what the propaganda term implies today, and situate it within the current political zeitgeist.

Once upon a time... According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, the term 'propaganda' appeared first in 1623.^[41] At that time, the Roman Catholic church had installed the 'Congregatio de propaganda fide' (congregation for propagating the faith) in order to combat Protestant reformatations and reestablish Catholicism in certain protestant-leaning churches.^[42] Barbara Diggs-Brown writes in *Strategic Public Relations: An Audience-Focused Approach* that it was in the late 18th century that the term started to be used outside of the religious context. Then, in the following century the term started taking on a negative political connotation, especially in anglophone society. Elsewhere, in China for example, the propaganda term retained a neutral to positive meaning.

[41]
Oxford English Dictionary.
"Propaganda etymology."

[42]
Diggs-Brown, Barbara.
Strategic Public Relations: An Audience-Focused Approach.
Cengage Learning, 2012, p 48.

In his PhD thesis *Propaganda Art* visual artist Jonas Staal, defines propaganda as "a performance of power with the aim to construct reality for its interests."^[43] Staal states that in western society today, we consider propaganda as an instrument of authoritarian regimes and dictatorships – as an inherently anti-democratic practice. According to

[43]
Staal, Jonas. "Propaganda (Art) Struggle," *e-flux Journal* No. 94, 10.18.

Staal, we also often evoke it as something old-fashioned and mainly with a negative connotation. *In our western eyes, it's the Russians, North-Koreans and Iranians of the world that do propaganda. Them, not us.*

However, in reality, political propaganda is of course very much a ubiquitous concept that is present in any power structure around the world, no matter the nature of the regime. There's a variety of different means of propaganda that have a long-standing history and tradition of being applied in western democracies, including in the United States. The systematics of propaganda are well studied and documented. Today's media environment is very much aware of them – and, besides, is itself responsible for a significant part of contemporary propaganda. However, during this election season propaganda had a new face. MAGA's visual warfare entered uncharted territory. The media's response was ambivalent. Liberal media pointed at it, trying to sensitise voters to novel right-wing messaging strategies; but was itself not fully able to grasp it in its entirety either. Right-wing media on the other hand full embraced the combination of Trumpism, social media, AI and the post-truth dogma.

In the *New York Times* Philosopher and Professor Jason Stanley argued in the aftermath of Trump's first victory in 2016 that: "On a certain level, the media lacked the vocabulary to describe what was happening. Trump was denounced repeatedly for "lying" and at times the apparently more egregious "bald faced lying." But that is not a sufficient description. Neither was the charge by the philosopher Harry Frankfurt that Trump was in fact a master of "bullshit," which is distinct from lying in that the speaker is not just communicating information he knows to be false, but is unconstrained by any consideration of what may or may not be true. While this description is technically true, it is at best terribly misleading. This presidential campaign has revealed that our academic and media class has insufficiently grappled with the problem of mass communication."^[44] Stanley further arguments: "Denouncing Trump as a liar, or describing him as merely entertaining, misses the point of authoritarian propaganda altogether. Authoritarian propagandists are attempting to convey power by defining reality. The reality they offer is very simple. It is offered with the goal of switching voters' value systems to the authoritarian value system of the leader. [...] Describing what Trump has done requires us to talk not just about the importance of honesty and accuracy, but also about power, value systems and in-groups v out-groups. It also requires us to confront the failures of elite policy that have led to an erosion of democratic norms, primarily public trust, that make anti-democratic alternatives suddenly acceptable."^[45]

[44]
Stanley, Jason. "Beyond Lying:
Donald Trump's Authoritarian
Reality," *New York Times*,
04.11.16.

[45]
Ibid.

The visual propaganda techniques utilised by the Trump campaign perfectly displayed what Hannah Arendt laid out in her magnum opus more than 70 years ago. What she describes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is a societal and political development known today as the 'post-truth era.'^[46] Political discourse is getting more and more toxic, society is getting more and more polarised. People turn within, seeking affirmation for their convictions and demonisation of anything outside of the scope of their world view. This increased polarisation is also a testament to the problems of the American two-party system model. A system in which one is automatically labelled, in which one is either liberal or conservative, D or R, blue or red, us or them, right or wrong.

[46]
Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Schocken Books, 1951.

People's trust in established politicians and media is so eroded, their commitment to their own belief system so strong, that they spin themselves into a cocoon of self-validation and radicalisation with unshakable loyalty for their side, outcasting any form of consideration, critical thought and dialogue. In this environment, facts become secondary. They almost became tertiary. There are efforts to present "alternative facts"; lies that stand up to the truth. What matters most however, is the perceived reality. A perception that is deeply rooted in preexisting beliefs – not facts. As Arendt puts it: "What convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part."^[47]

[47]
Ibid., p. 351.

This dynamic is also the perfect breeding ground for political dog whistles, where vague pieces of propaganda intentionally leave room for interpretation. Room, that gets filled with widely different opinions and world views, where each feels understood and vindicated. Trump has perfected catering to this rhetoric. The age of filter bubbles and tailored news and ad feeds makes it easier than ever to present different sets of target audiences with different messaging. The rich suburban Republican thinks Trump's agenda is laid out for them, the poor rural conspiracy theorist thinks the same. The post-truth-style erosion of a common truth helps amplify this dynamic even more. As Arendt says in the chapter *Totalitarianism* "The chief disability of totalitarian propaganda is that it cannot fulfil this longing of the masses for a completely consistent, comprehensible, and predictable world without seriously conflicting with common sense."^[48]

[48]
Ibid., p. 352.

The opposing side perfected what Democrats didn't seem to manage to achieve – captivating a diverse audience and initiating a genuine push that went beyond the online realms of social media, resulting in real votes

going from blue to red. Trumpists played out their visual communication on all platforms at their disposal, they exhausted every possible line of attack demonising Democrats, immigrants and marginalised people. And, simultaneously, deifying Trump, his associates and mouthpieces. Their visual propaganda captivated, agitated and divided.

The Trump campaign fully embraced the 'post-truth'-dogma. This is reflected in the visual material they put out, but also more globally in propaganda elements from the MAGA media, the official campaign, Trump himself and his supporters. In the following chapters this work will treat a large selection of said elements, dissecting exactly how they intricately interacted and what extensive effects they had on American politics and society ahead of the 2024 US Presidential election.

Hats, Flags, Signs and Fake Ear Bandages

The MAGA Paraphernalia

"My slogan is going to be 'Make
American Great Again' - And watch,
everybody's going to love it."

[←]
Donald Trump to former campaign
aide Sam Nunberg at Trump Tower,
New York City, 2012

American politics have always produced infamous visuals and slogans. Trump's first predecessor Barack Obama is the prime example of this. The iconic 'HOPE' 2008 Presidential campaign poster and his 'Yes, we can' election victory speech are both pieces of political communication that transcended conventional propaganda and managed to permanently disperse into the cultural mainstream. Countless times has the campaign poster's art style been copied, countless times has 'Yes, we can' been reused in new contexts.^[49] President Trump is no less successful in that regard – on the contrary. His 'Make America Great Again'-movement has perfected the cross of political symbolism and deified consumption, covering American landscapes in sheer endless masses of devotional articles.



[↑]
Obama 2008 election campaign poster, Shepard Fairey, 2008.

What makes MAGA-merch so unique? To what degree did the movement's visual presence influence the election? What effects does partisan apparel have on members of the own political side, and those of the opposition? What is the fascination around the MAGA hat about?

To fully grasp the scope of their success, in this chapter we will shine a light on how Trump and his movement communicated beyond social media and AI-memes; at rallies, in homes, on the streets. This is the MAGA aesthetic – offline.

[49]
Terrel-Curtis, Kara Beth. "Representative Form and the Visual Ideograph: The Obama "Hope" Poster." Master's diss., Indiana University, 2012.

There are many reasons as to why American politics are particularly prone to be played out in extreme, public and populist fashion. Presidential campaigns in the United States tend to take up a certain melodrama-like character, always geared towards the media. The sometimes hollywoodesque ways in which candidates, campaigns and parties (have to) navigate the political sphere are deeply rooted in American culture. There is a long list of eccentric, mainly male, media figures that managed to have a second successful career in US politics. Best-known are the actors Ronald Reagan (40th US President) in the 1980s or Arnold Schwarzenegger (38th governor of California) in the 2000s, and of course former reality TV host Donald Trump as the 45th and 47th US President today. Long before the internet, social media and artificial intelligence, expressive populist means of visual communication have always been at the forefront of political propaganda in the US, the notorious World War I recruitment poster by James Montgomery Flagg arguably being the most famous example.^[50] Trump and the MAGA movement are only the latest in a long list of political movements in the US that produced memorable propaganda imagery. Let's analyse the analogue part of their visual communication, starting with MAGA's absolute signature piece.



[50][↑]
National Museum of American History. "Collection object: Uncle Sam," James Montgomery Flagg, 1917.

Since the first Trump campaign took off in 2015, the red MAGA hat has arguably risen to the top of most famous political merchandise articles in modern history. The ways in which Trump managed to garner support and create a movement were unique. The red hat was there pretty much from the beginning, it lived through and grew with (in metaphorical and literal sense) the evolution of the movement. While being a Trump supporter equals being MAGA – and being MAGA equals being a Trump supporter, the movement is likely to live on even after Trump isn't President anymore. Intertwined with the success of the ever-growing MAGA movement, there are ever-more red hats to be found in his supporters' wardrobes.

The hat's design is plain and simple – the backstory behind its rise to fame, however, isn't. It was neither the President himself nor any marketing mastermind that came up with the idea. It came from someone outside of Trump's circle who sent the original hat to the campaign's office, according to former campaign manager Corey Lewandowski: "I think somebody actually sent us a sample, they brought that sample to Donald Trump and he said, 'I like it, let's tweak this, let's do it differently.'"^[51] After a few changes to the proposed design, Trump wore the hat for the first time on a visit to the US/Mexico border in July 2015.^[52] The start of a unique success story.

[51]
Spodak, Cassie. "How the Trump hat became an icon," *CNN*, 17.02.17.

[52]
Ibid.

Design professor Lindsey Ballant of the *Maryland College of Art* said, talking about the MAGA hat: "It was un-designed, it didn't represent what one thinks of when you think of traditional politics in terms of visual messaging, and that's essentially what Trump was as well."^[53]

[53]
Ibid.

The role the hat plays in the movements' (self-) perception is immense. It is the MAGA uniform, a piece of clothing that provides identification, community and belonging to the people wearing it. It represents unity, commitment, pride and patriotism to insiders, and division, provocation, hostility and hate to outsiders. Seeing the hat out in the wild, it encapsulates the very different emotions people feel towards MAGA, depending on which side of the political divide they are on. Its unprecedented success goes so far that now, for many people, any bright red hat will raise the pulse, no matter whether it actually is a MAGA hat or not.^[54]

Just the sight of one agitates – no matter whether it's a sea of heads in red garments at a rally or a single little hat casually being worn on the street. All the polarisation and division MAGA creates is perfectly condensed in the red hat.



Landon Nordeman, New York Times

Donald Trump likes to claim ‘Make America Great Again’ as his invention.^[55] While the 47th President will undoubtedly be the historic figure that is going to be remembered for coining the term, he wasn’t the first American President to use it. Ronald Reagan with his 1980 campaign slogan ‘Let’s make America great again’ and even Bill Clinton in his 1991 Presidential announcement speech (“I believe that together we can make America great again”) are two prominent examples of previous Presidents who featured this phrase in their political communication before Trump did.^[56] Still, he filed for a trademark of the slogan back in 2012, barely a week after his Republican nominee predecessor Mitt Romney lost to Barack Obama in the election prior to his candidacy. He eventually got his behest approved three years later, just before showing off the MAGA hat for the first time that 23rd of July in Texas.^[57]

“If the MAGA movement had a dress code, the red hat would be the first must-have on the list. Nowadays, it’s impossible to wear a bright red baseball cap without getting stared at. Passing eyes lock eyes with the hat, trying to decipher if the wearer is a Trump supporter or perhaps sporting some sort of ironic variation of the political merchandise.”

Taking a more in-depth look at the first 2015 edition of the hat compared to the 2020 one (that has since been pretty much unchanged), there are a few interesting things to take note of. The first notable difference is the difference in shape. The original one was conceived as a golf hat, for only the President himself to wear while out on the court. Only after the initial attention and interest by the media and the public did the campaign start selling it.^[58] The newer version of the cap is much less malleable and instead solidified, tall and bold. The same goes for the type on the hat’s crown. It’s way more prominent than on the 2015 one, covering the entire front of the hat. It also rectified the typographic error of the first edition – which accidentally featured two different ‘G’s. The ‘G’ in ‘AGAIN’ came with a downwards spur, while the one in ‘GREAT’ didn’t. The latter was the Times New Roman ‘G’, the type that the rest of the slogan was also set in, while the one with a spur was a completely different typeface. A testament to the lack of thought, care and strategy that was originally put into the cap. On the back above the hat’s closure, we find the President’s name. The current versions also come with adorned side panels, there’s the American flag embroidered on the left and ‘45’ (or ‘45-47’ on the most recent ones) on the right.

[54][†]
Baio, Ariana. “Trump made MAGA hats a staple of his campaign. More than 2 million are now on the streets,” *The Independent*, 06.11.24.

[55]
Tumulty, Karen. “How Donald Trump came up with ‘Make America Great Again’,” *Washington Post*, 18.01.17.

[56]
Margolin, Emma. “‘Make America Great Again’— Who Said It First?,” *NBC News*, 09.10.16.

[57]
Spodak, Cassie. “How the Trump hat became an icon,” *CNN*, 17.02.17.

[←]
Op. cit. Baio.

[58]
Op. cit. Spodak.

Some people argue that the '-' in '45-47' is supposed to suggest a continuity, that in reality Trump was still President in the four years between his two terms.^[59] Large parts of Republicans and especially MAGA do not recognise the 2020 election results that made Joe Biden the 46th US President. Whether all these additions to the hat justify the extreme bump-up in price is up for debate. The official MAGA hat more than doubled in price, while the original 2015 one cost 25\$,^[60] the current one is available on Trump's website for 55\$.^[61]

[59]
Bidgood, Jess. "The Trump Rallying Cry That's Also a Math Problem," *New York Times*, 17.06.24.

[60]
Kurtz, Judy. "Trump campaign store hawks 'Make America Great Again' caps," *The Hill*, 06.08.15.

[61]
Trump Store. "Product page: 45-47 MAGA Hat."

[→]
MAGA hat 2025, Front and back.



[→]
MAGA hat 2025, Left and right.



[→]
MAGA hat 2016, Front.



In the aftermath of the 2016 US Presidential election that brought Trump to power for the first time, we saw the brief rise of the *Pussyhat Project*. This movement, initiated by Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman ahead of the Women's March in Washington, stood up for women's rights and reproductive rights and clearly positioned itself anti-government amidst the freshly elected Trump.^[62] Out in the streets, participants of the movement's marches were easily identifiable by their pink knitted hats. The organisers distributed a pattern for people to make the head garments at home. The project saw a large success with over 100,000 people downloading the knitting pattern in a short span of time.^[63] During the simultaneous rise of the MAGA hat, the 'Pussyhats' were seen as the liberal equivalent. Eventually, solely the former managed to really stick – the latter enjoyed only a short lifespan in the political public.

[62]
Pussyhat Project. "Our Story."

[63]
Garfield, Leanna. "Thousands of women will wear pink 'pussy hats' the day after Trump's inauguration," *Business Insider*, 18.01.17.

Until the 1960s, the article of clothing that played the most important role in indicating social distinctions among men was the hat.

[64]
Crane, Diana. *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing*, University of Chicago Press, 2000, p.82.

The red MAGA hat and the pink Pussyhat weren't the first headwear items closely tied to a political movement. There are multiple cases of revolutionary groups throughout history whose members used hats to identify and affiliate themselves. A notable example is the Phrygian cap which featured as a sign of an emancipatory cause for liberty towards the end of Republican Rome, during the American Revolution and then the French Revolution.^[64] Another politically famous headgear is the white sidecap first introduced by Mahatma Gandhi during the Indian independence movement in the early 1920's. The 'Gandhi cap' then saw a renaissance during India's 2011 anti-corruption protests.^[65] While MAGA is in no way comparable to these historic political movements, its red hat plays a similarly important role in the movement's self-perception.

[64]
Britannica. "Phrygian cap."

[65]
Whitehead, Andrew. "How India's iconic Gandhi cap has changed sides," *BBC*, 28.04.14.

There was no Republican crowd to be found ahead of the November 5th election that was not filled with red-hatted attendees. But still, the MAGA cap is only one of the many items of Trump-paraphernalia that Conservatives flaunted out in public. The following subchapter lays out the whole palette.

[→]
Protesters wearing 'Pussyhats'
at the Women's March on
Washington. Meg Kelly, *NPR*,
21.01.2017.



[→]
The Phrygian Cap during the
french revolution in:
Doré, Gustave, *The
marseillaise*, 1870.



[→]
Supporters of the anti-
corruption movement in India
wearing 'Gandhi' caps.
Sajjad Hussain, *Getty Images*,
2011.



2.3 One snapshot – dissected. The MAGA crowd in Rochester, PA

Let's take a close look at a scene depicting a group of MAGA supporters during the 2024 campaign. This photo was taken by Julia Demaree Nikhinson on August 18, 2024 in Rochester, Pennsylvania. What makes this scene very interesting and delicate is the fact that these people are not out in the streets for a Trump rally, but rather to 'greet' his opponent Kamala Harris after she had held a campaign event in the town. The Democratic nominee drove by just as Nikhinson took the picture, leaving a trace of agitated facial expressions of some MAGA supporters. Dissecting the vast selection of Trump paraphernalia present at this protest, we can better understand the dynamics of the (not so) diverse MAGA landscape.

Starting in the centre of the photo, we see a bearded man wearing the infamous red MAGA hat, holding a Trump flag and filming the cars passing by on his phone. While we can't tell what is written on his T-shirt, there seems to be a greyscale version of the American flag on his right sleeve. His hat looks like the most recent version of the official one sold by the Trump campaign.^[A] He is holding a flag in his right hand, that is not an official Trump merch item, showing an antique train carrying an American flag behind it. The illustration is subtitled with 'TRUMP TRAIN 2024 – ALL ABOARD!'. It looks similar, though not identical, to the one on the next page^[B] that is purchasable at the American supermarket chain Walmart. Swaying our gaze two people to the right, we see a woman with a Superman T-shirt holding a Trump MAGA sign.^[C] She's wearing a navy-blue Trump 2024 hat,^[D] she seems agitated and is showing a 'thumbs down' towards the oncoming Harris caravan. The print on her T-shirt has an old *Superman* motto written on it: 'Truth and Justice and the American Way'. The end of the line ('[...] and the American Way') was added to the superhero's original motto 'Truth and Justice' during World War II to make him appear more patriotic at the time. That part was since removed and only reappeared sporadically in the official comics and films. Besides the old slogan, the 'S' in the

Superman logo on the shirt is replaced by a 'T', seemingly for 'Trump'. Later, the official campaign would also play on this cultural reference, notably in this^[E] meme they published on their socials. To the lady's right we see a man and a woman with grey T-shirts, both holding small American flags and Trump signs. One mentions Trump's running mate JD Vance^[F] while the other one calls on people to "DO YOUR



PART" and "VOLUNTEER TODAY" followed by the URL of a supporters website. Up towards the right there are three children, two boys and one girl. The two boys are holding up a large black flag saying 'TRUMP 2024 – TAKE AMERICA BACK',^[G] the design imitating that of the official rally signs and the words 'TRUMP 2024' in the colours of the American flag. One of the children is wearing a USA T-shirt, the other is showing

his middle finger towards the camera. The girl in between the two is turning away from the scene but still showing a 'thumbs down' gesture. The man behind the three seems to be wearing the first edition red MAGA hat.^[H] At the very front of their row there's a woman wearing a red hat with 'MAGA' written on it^[I] in blue and a printed T-shirt with Donald Trump showing a 'thumbs up' in front of a stylised American flag.^[≈J] The cap



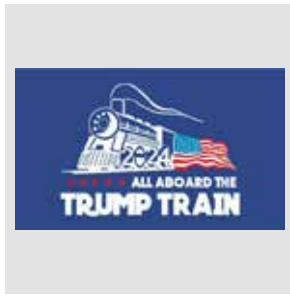
seems to be an official one, the T-shirt isn't. Continuing towards the left, in the middle of the picture we see a lady with a pink T-shirt saying 'VOTE TRUMP' holding a 'TRUMP VANCE' sign. In the very back of the scene there's a man wearing the blue version of the same shirt. To the pink T-shirt's left stands a woman with an unofficial 'All aboard the Trump train 2024' shirt^[≈K] and an alternate version of the MAGA hat. She

seems to be shouting at Harris' bus, just like the woman in pink next to her. She is also holding up a Trump MAGA campaign sign.^[L] What is interesting about this particular sign is the black tape that covers the line beneath 'TRUMP' as well as a zone at the very bottom of the sign. It covers the name of Trump's former Vice-President and running mate Mike Pence and the year of either of the previous two elections. Given that Pence was on Trump's ticket in both 2016 and 2020 and the fact that this specific campaign sign was also used during both election cycles, we don't know if it is four or eight years old. Since their very public and ugly falling out following the defeat v Biden/Harris in 2020, Pence has been appearing as a critic of Trump, whose supporters thus banished all trace of Pence's former affiliation to the MAGA movement on their devotional articles. There is another woman on the left of the photo with similar black tape on her campaign sign. This one can be dated back to 2020 given the slogan underneath the covered 'Pence' is 'KEEP AMERICA GREAT!' (KAG). The campaign switched slogan from 'MAGA' to 'KAG' ahead of Trump's 2020 reelection campaign, but later went back to the original after 'KAG' didn't connect with voters nearly as well. There are more shirts that aren't directly MAGA- or Trump-related, but can loosely be tied to right-wing ideology. Behind the woman there's a girl wearing a black T-shirt with a 'AMERICAN DREAM NIGHTMARE' print.^[M] There's the 'JESUS is my saviour' T-shirt with the American flag underneath. It most likely says 'JESUS is my saviour TRUMP is my President'.^[≈N] Then there's the one showing a skeleton's hand's middle finger subtitled with 'FUCK YOUR FEELINGS'.^[≈O] A slogan close to 'Facts don't care about your feelings', a term coined by right-wing political commentator Ben Shapiro intended to offend Liberals. Behind the woman wearing the 'Jesus' shirt, we see the seemingly only non-white attendee of the gathering, also wearing a red MAGA hat. The scene is rounded off by the house in front of which the crowd is standing. On the ground floor there's a typical American Barbecue Smokehouse, in a window on the first floor we see a 1970s poster celebrating the US Marines, a special military unit.^[P]

References [A-P] on the following pages.



[A]



[B]



[C]



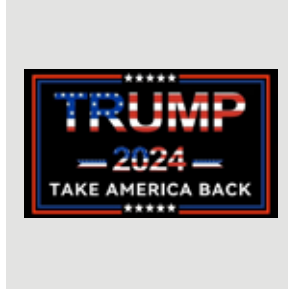
[D]



[E]



[F]



[G]



[H]



[I]



[J]



[K]



[L]



[M]



[N]



[O]



[P]

There are a few key takeaways regarding MAGA's visual communication from this in-depth look at the crowd that photographer Nikhinson captured in Pennsylvania. What we notice right away is a stark focus on the three colours of the American flag in all campaign paraphernalia and merch items present here. This is however not unique to Trump and MAGA and not even to the Republican audience in general. Campaigns and voters on both sides of the aisle have always resorted to red, blue and white in their visual messaging. Both Democrats and Republicans usually are very patriotic. And while the policies in which their patriotism manifests differ, they agree on their general pride in the flag and the use of its colours in their graphic design.

The most recent example of a US Presidential campaign that did not follow this classic colour code was actually the Republican duo McCain/Palin in 2008. Their logo and general visual identity featured a navy blue tone and white, but no red, which is especially remarkable given that red is also the colour of the Republican Party. Instead, the campaign that ended up losing to the Obama/Biden ticket, used a yellow/gold tone to complete their visual communication.^[66] Aside from the rare colour choice their visual identity was quite traditional however. In local and state races it is more common to find both bolder colour and design choices. A recent famous example of this is the 2025 campaign of Democratic candidate for mayor of New York City, Zohran Mamdani.^[67] His campaign's visual identity does feature red and blue, though in very bright, contemporary, expressive tones. There's no real white to be found anywhere but instead a bright shade of beige. The design also very prominently features a saturated yellow as the primary colour of Mamdani's visuals.^[68] [*]



[†]
McCain/Palin 2008 campaign logo.

[66]
National Museum of American History. "Collection object: McCain/Palin Poster."

[67]
Zohran for NYC. "The Work Starts Now."

[68]
Culmen, Zoha. "Studying the Website of Zohran Mamdani – The Campaign That Took the Internet by Storm," *Medium*, 25.06.25.

[*]
Since writing this paragraph, Mamdani has won the election and is the Mayor of New York City from January 1, 2026 on.

Back to the crowd in Rochester, we can observe a strong presence of official campaign rally signs, some of them dating back years. Given that this protest was not an actual Trump campaign event where signs would get distributed, we can assume that many of the attendees have been to MAGA rallies before and have kept the devotional articles from those events for future usage (like here at Harris' rally). Roughly a third of all attendees visible in the photo are wearing hats, most of them being official red 'Make America Great Again' hats. This ratio is over-proportionate compared to the ones of similar Harris/Walz crowds for example and a testament to the large popularity and defining and uniting element that the headwear is within Trump's supporter circles. While the hats and signs are mostly official merchandise items sold or distributed by the Trump/Vance campaign, most shirts and flags present here are not. The diverse origins of MAGA paraphernalia reflect the size of the movement's apparatus creating devotional articles. It is not unusual to see supporters of political candidates wear merchandise, though rarely in this quantity and diversity.

[→]
Rally event, Mamdani campaign,
2025.



[→]
Campaign logo, Mamdani
campaign, 2025.



It is remarkable that across all forms of visual communication the crowd is brandishing, there is no form of tangible advocacy for concrete political issues to be found. Reading through the signs, hats, flags and shirts, we again and again find general slogans like 'Make America Great Again', 'Keep America Great', 'All Aboard The Trump Train', 'Vote Trump', or just plain and simple 'USA, USA'. There's nothing demanding actual policy changes, nothing directed towards Harris and the Democrats that are passing by in the very moment, no political convictions overtly to be seen – other than a never-ceasing show of loyalty to the crowd's very-own movement and candidate. Everything is centred around Donald Trump and his catchphrase, actual policies and beliefs aren't needed on their merch.

Liking right-wing social media posts, wearing the red hat and waving the Stars and Stripes? Yes. Demonstrating, organising and genuinely getting involved in the politics? No. The hat is the perfect representation of this easy sentiment among Trump's devotees.

There are certain traits of political 'slacktivism' within the MAGA universe. Many Trump supporters show their support for the movement without actually getting politically active. This is what slacktivism describes, manifesting your affiliation to a group solely in superficial ways. However, MAGA's activities are far from being exclusively that. While they don't act and engage like a typical political group, they are ardent worshippers of Trump and the bigger movement. They sometimes go to extreme lengths to manifest and prove that. MAGA is fully committed to the cause, and, even though not in the traditional sense, very much an active political movement.

This is critical to what makes the MAGA hat and other items so popular and successful. It is easy for Republicans to agree on and rally around. The red cap is a floating signifier. No matter the differences in opinion they might have internally, a red hat saying 'Make America Great Again' is always going to be towards the centre of the Venn diagram of all their convictions. The deeper people get into the MAGA cult, the more they are going to deck out their cars, lawns, homes and heads in Trump paraphernalia – the supply of MAGA merch is endless for those who can not get enough of it.

And MAGA can go even crazier on their political attire. The following story shows how the movement's followers can sometimes be spontaneous and creative in coming up with new ways to visually represent their cult-like Trump-affiliation. This specific case is also a testament to how uniquely central their paraphernalia is to them – even, and especially, in coping with one of the movement's darkest moments.



[→]
MAGA rally in New York City,
Eduardo Munoz, Reuters.

As Donald Trump took the stage on the first day of the Republican National Convention (RNC) on July 15th 2024 in Milwaukee, all eyes were on his ears. His right ear to be specific. It was adorned by a large white rectangular bandage. All the cameras pointed at it, all the channels' live coverage programmes were talking about it; and when the former President finally took to the microphone, it was the first story he talked about. He told the story of what happened on July 13th, two days prior to the RNC opening.

That day, Trump had held a campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania. He starts speaking to the gathered crowd there at 6:05 p.m. Suddenly, about six minutes later, gunshots ring out. A shooter, positioned on a rooftop about 140 metres from the stage, tries to assassinate him.^[69] The first bullets miss Trump, then one bullet grazes his ear, further shots kill one rally attendee and seriously injure two others. Secret service agents rush Trump to the floor, their sharpshooters spot and take out the shooter. While the crowd breaks out in panic, the agents try to shield and move Trump off the stage into a bystanding limousine. In that moment, he resists their shouts to stay down, he gets back up, blood streaming over his face, he pumps his fist, faces the crowd and shouts "Fight, fight, fight!"^[70]

In that moment, one of the most high-profile assassination attempts in US American history is averted. At the same time the arguably most iconic photograph of the 2024 election cycle is produced. The attempt on their leader's life is a unique moment for MAGA, unifying the movement even more. As was to be expected, two days later at the RNC, this is the talk of the town. The Republican National Convention is a political event held every four years, with the formal purpose of officially nominating and confirming the Republican nominee for the following Presidential election.^[71] Beyond that it is a moment for the highest party officials and voters to get together, to organise and unite ahead of the

[69] Baker, Graeme. "Inches from death: An hour that shook US election," *BBC*, 21.07.24.

[70] Ibid.

[71] City of Milwaukee. "FAQ: Republican National Convention."

election cycle. Since Donald Trump is at the head of the Republican Party it is very much also a large rally event. And with Trump wearing a protective plaster over his ear, MAGA followers at the RNC quickly felt the need to imitate their leader. Talking about the ear patches present in Wisconsin, the *New York Times* political image-making specialist Vanessa Friedman writes: “The bandage appeared on Day 1 of the convention, and by Day 2, a few attendees were sporting makeshift white rectangles of their own. By Day 3, free ear patches were being handed out outside the convention site, and faux bandages had become a trend – a sign of “love”, one attendee said. By Day 4, wearing a bandage had become a meme [...].”^[72]

[72]
Friedman, Vanessa. “Trump’s Protective Coverings: A Bandage, Melania Trump and Patriotism,” *New York Times*, 19.07.24.

The MAGA industrial complex for devotional articles had a field day during the convention. People were enchanted and adrenalised by what had happened two days prior, by Trump’s miraculous survival. The ear bandages lifted them onto the next level of their deification of Trump. For those four days, Trump was their Jesus, the ear patch their cross.

[→]
Trump seconds after the assassination attempt in Butler, PA, Evan Vucci.



[→]
T-shirts with the iconic photo for sale at the RNC two days after the incident, Addy Bink.



Wearing fake ear bandages in support of a political figure is a strong, *and frankly bizarre*, show of commitment to the person, the movement and the cause. There are also apparent parallels to be drawn between the ear patch and the MAGA hat. Both are unique identifiers for supporters of the movement, they give a sense of community and affiliation. They create a boundary, an 'inside' and an 'outside' of the circle. They both visually unite. In regards to the bandage, they unite the people present at the RNC, and Trump supporters more broadly, in regards to the hat. This unity is visible to both people that are part of the movement as well as those opposed to it. It transmits very different, but very deliberate emotions to those respective groups. Republicans saw the attack on Trump as an attack on themselves. *Where we go one, we go all.*^[73]

And the MAGA merch machinery went beyond ear patches. There were also T-shirts on sale at the RNC showing the iconic photo of Trump raising his fist seconds after he had been shot. Some shirts even featured his "Fight, fight fight!" shout. On the 13th of July the assassination attempt takes place, on the 15th there's a whole palette of different merch items ready to buy.

After the shooting Trump said "it was God alone who prevented the unthinkable from happening."^[74] Multiple other high-ranking Republicans also painted the events of July 13th as 'divine intervention'.^[75] These were widely considered to be very questionable statements given that, while the bullets spared the life of the President, they did kill one and seriously injure two rally goers.

The MAGA movement's modus operandi is perfectly reflected by its paraphernalia. Its followers are loud, aggressive, patriotic and proud, over-the-top, relentless, reactionary and opportunist. At the same time they are devoid of a consistent compass of convictions, theirs is completely calibrated on following Trump and his mouthpieces. And, above all, they are very passionate about representing their affiliation with Trump and the movement through their clothing, flags, stickers and whatever else the current MAGA trend might be. It is fitting for MAGA to be so keen on materialistic devotional articles. The superficiality of their culture of political merchandise often compensates for their lack of concrete consistent policy advocacies.

Throughout this chapter we came across a variety of MAGA's devotional articles. The most central being the red 'Make America Great Again' hat. It is the movement's statement piece and primary identifier. Wearing

[73]
Wendling, Mike. "QAnon: What is it and where did it come from?" *BBC*, 06.01.21.

[74]
DeRose, Jason. "Trump assassination attempt lays bare deep religious divisions in the U.S.," *NPR*, 18.07.24.

[75]
Ibid.

[4][→]
Republican RNC-goers with ear bandages, *Reuters*.





it comes with an inextricable set of internal and external projections. Both on fellow right-wing patriots and on opposed progressives, seeing the hat out in the wild has an instant effect. The hat is also a floating signifier; within the confines of the MAGA universe it can represent a wide range of things and viewpoints. Everyone will agree on the generalising slogan on it and on support for Trump in general. Beyond that, it is up to each individual supporter to project their version of MAGA and Trumpism onto the movement – and onto the hat.

The MAGA machinery produces and prides itself in articles ranging way further than 'just' the red hat. Looking at their appearance at rallies, we noticed the large part of Trump merch coming from independent sources, in addition to all the official campaign articles. The former specifically demonstrates the authenticity of the grassroots movement and shows their dedication to represent their devotion in full force. At last, the speed with which Trump's followers responded to different key events of the election cycle with new, ever-crazier merchandise was remarkable. Only a cult-like movement like this can create a dynamic that, within a couple of days, leads to thousands of people rashly coming up with makeshift fake ear bandages to support their leader who's wearing one too. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery – and MAGA mimicry is right up there.

Reflecting on the impact of MAGA paraphernalia, its immense visual force should not distract from what actually matters here. The Trump T-shirts, MAGA hats and USA flags are being worn and brandished by people with extreme right-wing ideology. While they're above all defined by their adoration of Donald Trump and reactionism regarding a variety of political issues, the movement is also inherently xenophobic, anti-immigrant and nativist. It is filled with, among others, conspiracists, Christian nationalists, anti-feminists and even neo-fascists. *While otherwise publicly condemning diversity and inclusivity, Trump opens the door to the MAGA movement for everyone to feel at home.* The diverse nature of the movement's devotional items leaves room for everyone wanting to join in to pick their statement MAGA piece. From the suburban conservative upper-class mum to the ardent white-supremacist militia member, everyone finds their place under the red hat.

**Campaign,
Movement,
Media,
Trump**

**The Four Horsemen
of the Apocalypse**

"The man does not have a philosophy and if people try and draw lines between the dots of his decisions, they will fail"

[↩]
Former Trump National Security
Adviser John Bolton on Trump

The 2024 Republican election campaign that successfully reinstalled Donald Trump as President was unique in its public appearance throughout all channels of political communication. Decentralisation was key in the GOP's approach to win over voters, specifically decentralisation of propaganda. Where previous Presidential candidates usually had all their publicity come first-hand from their own campaign offices, Trump managed to mobilise multiple significant actors to push the MAGA message, resulting in a great quality and quantity of different forms and approaches to political propaganda that helped give him the edge over Democrats. This chapter will look into the intertwined dynamic of the official campaign, the MAGA movement, the media and Trump himself, deciphering the cycle of visual messaging these four installed during the election year.

In the past, US Presidential campaigns led their propaganda battles in quite streamlined manners. This was largely due to an analogue and much less diverse media environment before the turn of the century. The main means of political mass communication in the 20th century were newspapers and radio, and then television. These were the mass media that dominated the political sphere. However, regardless of the medium, political communication came mainly from the actual campaign and candidate, rarely from the voter base itself, as it was the case with the MAGA movement ahead of this election.

American journalist and writer Neal Gabler said, comparing Trump's use of the media to that of previous US Presidents: "What FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt, 32nd POTUS] was to radio and JFK [John F. Kennedy, 35th POTUS] to television, Trump is to *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *Facebook*, *Snapchat*, et al."^[76] Throughout the first two and a half decades of the 21st century, the arrivals of the internet, then social media and more recently meme culture and artificial intelligence have all left their mark on the ways in which election battles are fought out. And while those most recent tech novelties already had an impact on previous elections since the 2010s, their reach on the political playing field culminated in the 2024 US Presidential election. Political memes and AI-generated content poured even more fuel on the already wide-ranging and -raging fire set by the four apocalyptic MAGA horsemen.

[76]
Gabler, Neal. "Donald Trump, the Emperor of Social Media," *Bill Moyers Collection*, 29.04.16.

Let's shine a light on each of the four key actors involved in the MAGA messaging cycle. What was the secret to their success? What tasks did the four individual players accomplish? How exactly did they interact? Why were their Democratic counterparts unable to install similar dynamics?

“The established conservative liberal parties of today speak like the extreme right of the nineties, yet this is considered the “new normal” in comparison to the even more extreme standpoints of the extreme right of the extreme right. This is how propaganda works: what is considered as the norm is reestablished. A new reality is constructed through manufacturing consent, where what was once unacceptable is now standard.”^[77]

[77]
Staal, Jonas. “Propaganda (Art) Struggle,” *e-flux Journal* No. 94, 10.18.

The official Trump campaign was the central organ of Republican visual messaging during the 2024 election. With the official launch of Trump’s third run for Presidency, the campaign was responsible for the important initial visuals that people are going to first associate with ‘Trump 2024’ – the colours, the logo, the slogan. Aside from switching typography from ‘Akzidenz Grotesk’ (2016, 2020)^[78] to ‘Gotham’ (2024) and Trump’s running mate from ‘Pence’ to ‘Vance’, the logo remained the same throughout the three consecutive election cycles that Trump ran in.^[79] The campaign was also charged with distributing all forms of campaign material, most notably the paper signs that could be seen at any Trump rally and subsequently everywhere in American suburbs and landscapes. These mostly featured nothing but the campaign logo printed in red, blue and white. The campaign also shot campaign video ads, spammed Republican mailing lists with calls for contribution and organised for Trump – and later also his running mate and other personalities – to tour the states. They released the notorious MAGA merchandise items and started communicating to possible voters through their different (social media) channels.^[80] The campaign was also MAGA’s connecting branch and representative to the media. They sent cabinet-members, spokespeople and other Trump-affiliates to TV shows, debates and interviews. What these representatives said there then got picked up and regurgitated by other outlets and the base.

[78]
Silvertant, Martin. “The (un)kerned typeface of Trump’s ‘Make America Great Again’ campaign slogan,” *Medium*, 18.01.20.

[79]
Zhan, Irvin. “What Font Does Trump Campaign Use?,” *Subframe*, n.d.

[80]
Bade, Rachael. “‘All Trump, All the Time’: Inside the Trump Campaign’s Media Strategy,” *Politico*, 26.10.24.

Until here, all this is nothing but common campaign propaganda work, operating just like most other campaigns before them have as well – both on the red and the blue side of the aisle. Where the 2024 Trump campaign distinguishes itself from previous campaigns is their constant close dialogue with the grassroots movement. The official campaign was somewhat the business arm of the movement – their relation being very much a back and forth, a giving and taking. Where in traditional campaign structuring the political messaging almost exclusively functions as a one-way-street, going from campaign towards voter, in the Trump 2024 sphere the campaign and the movement enjoyed a much more bilateral relationship. The campaign continuously adopted visual material produced by MAGA-adjacent individuals. They were keen on emitting a close-to-the-people sentiment. This was also a way of rewarding MAGA folk for their active engagement in the movement's political propaganda. By platforming their memes, tweets and stories the campaign further incited Trump devotees to keep going, further and further. We'll get into how exactly this dynamic played out later.

Besides their constant appearances on established right-wing media like *Fox News*, the campaign also embraced rising stars of the MAGA 'new media'. Their officials showed up on conservative podcasts, gave out interview slots to MAGA-influencers instead of (liberal) mainstream media, and even heaved some of those influencers straight into prominent positions within the campaign.^[81] Where Democrats were often reluctant to engage in dialogue with liberal content creators – the Trump campaign saw their media camp rather as an authentic pathway into the eyes and ears of possible new voter groups – and sometimes even as a recruitment pool.

[81]
Lucas, Ryan. "President Trump names right-wing podcast host Dan Bongino as FBI deputy director," *NPR*, 24.02.25.

Next in line: The MAGA movement. Ardent Trump supporters had adopted this abbreviation of his iconic slogan 'Make America Great Again' as their very own movement's eponymous denomination back during Trump's first run. Since the unofficial forming of the movement in 2016, they evolved into a very particular political group. It's not a classic political movement, created and angled around the advocacy for specific causes, but rather a large-scale personality cult. It is hard to pin a lot of concrete policy convictions on MAGA. They form a large part of the Republican Party's followership and are its loudest and most influential group, however they cannot be equated to the entirety of the GOP. They are very reactionary, often orienting their political compass around whatever their 'leader', Donald Trump, is concerned with at the moment. You rarely see MAGA supporters protesting for actual political issues. During the COVID-19 pandemic MAGA protesters went out into the streets maskless, demanding the end of restrictions and also "the reopening of barber shops."^[82] In October of 2020 a Trump-adjacent militia group called 'Boogaloo bois' unsuccessfully tried to kidnap Democratic Governor of Michigan Gretchen Whitmer in the midst of anti-lockdown demonstrations.^[83]

[82]
Mansoor, Sanya. "'It's Devastatingly Worrisome.' Dr. Birtx Criticizes Anti-Lockdown Protesters in Michigan," *TIME*, 03.05.20.

[83]
BBC. "FBI busts militia 'plot' to abduct Michigan Gov Gretchen Whitmer," 09.10.20.

Aside from a few extreme exceptions like this one, MAGA's main field of activity consists of rallies (organised by the campaign, rarely by the movement itself) and the online sphere. What they lack in organising on the ground, they make up in their force on social media. MAGA supporters were highly active online, relentlessly posting on *X*, *Facebook* and *co*. In the time leading up to the 2024 US Presidential election MAGA followers were responsible for sheer endless waves of right-wing content, spreading memes and fake news, often accompanied by artificially generated visuals. Online MAGA is not structurally organised, it is a giant apparatus made up of individuals, both humans and

(lots and lots of) bots, launching their propaganda into the social media void.^[84] Within their material there is the deification, fandom and fiction (AI imagery) around and about Donald Trump. There is demonisation of political opposition, of Liberals and leftists, of minorities, migrants and more. They also indulge in conspiracy theories, among others, about the 'deep state',^[85] the 'great replacement theory' (also propelled by MAGA's most influential figures like Elon Musk)^[86] and 'widespread Democratic election fraud'.^[87] This is all channelled through aggressive forms of visual propaganda to reach a target audience as vast as possible. This audience is by design not limited to the like-minded, but is very much also supposed to include anti-MAGA people. The movement's online presence thrives on verbal clashes with – and enraged reactions by – users opposed to their ideology, their memes and posts. During the 2024 election period there were multiple notable instances where MAGA created or dug up local stories that subsequently turned into large-scale smear campaigns through the 'help' of the media, Trump and his campaign.^[88] There was a significant imbalance in terms of quantity and quality of MAGA's visual warfare compared to that of Democrats.

Besides their main field of expertise, the online sphere, the grassroots movement was equally engaged in the production of physical MAGA propaganda. They too, just like the official campaign, printed T-shirts, flags, caps and more. Often featuring even more unhinged statements and imagery than the already undiplomatic official material. The campaign store then regularly adopted the newest merch trend by on-the-ground-MAGA. The 'TRUMP WAS RIGHT ABOUT EVERYTHING' or the 'FOUR MORE YEARS!' red MAGA-hats come to mind, that are now both sold on Trump's personal shop. The former originated from online MAGA discourse self-affirming widely debated statements by the President, the latter from chants by MAGA rally crowds, demanding their candidate to remain President for a third term (which is outlawed by the 22nd amendment of the US constitution).

The movement functioned as the organic visual factory and primary distribution network for MAGA propaganda, feeding off of input by Trump, the campaign and the media, and then refeeding their 'work' into those same channels. MAGA installed this self-nourishing cycle, alimentering the campaign's communication ahead of the election.

[84] Duffy, Nick; Kilpatrick, Amina; Mikula, Jeremy. "MAGA bots split over Jeffrey Epstein, and a driver is shot after intentionally plowing into a crowd: Weekend Rundown," *NBC*, 21.01.25.

[85] The Guardian Editorial Board. "The Guardian view on Maga and Jeffrey Epstein: the truth about Donald Trump and conspiracy theories," 18.07.25.

[86] Klee, Miles. "Elon Musk All but Endorses the Great Replacement Conspiracy Theory," *The Rolling Stone*, 05.01.24.

[87] Horton, Jake; Wendling, Mike. "How US election fraud claims changed as Trump won," *BBC*, 09.11.24.

[88] Chang, Emily. "Timeline of unsubstantiated claims about Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio," *ABC*, 13.10.24.

[4] Two MAGA hat variants, Trump Store.



[89]
 Aratani, Lauren. "Election night on Fox News: hosts laud Trump as 'phoenix from the ashes'," *The Guardian*, 06.11.24.

The media plays a huge role in paving Trump's way to victory in the 2024 election. Established right-wing cable and digital media were a servile mouthpiece for the Trump campaign. *Fox News* hosts had seemingly unlimited access to Republican politicians, daily platforming them for hours on end. Throughout, the channel's prime-time politics shows didn't care to maintain basic journalistic duties, asking their guests predominantly favourable, easy questions and agreeing with whatever Trump and his representatives answered, without scrutinising or any form of push-back.^[89] They had casual conversations with the President who called into the studio live on a regular basis. *Fox News* also held town hall events bringing together Trump and a selected audience of obedient MAGA followers, giving the President unique occasions to produce positive TV appearance material.

Traditional right-wing media hailed the Trump campaign's position on any relevant issue during election season, echoing in unfiltered manner what Republican politicians said. A key point to their propaganda strategy was amplification and repetition. By constantly regurgitating MAGA talking points, deifying Trump and demonising Democratic opposition and their viewpoints, *Fox News* and co. drove the narrative of the conservative news cycle at their will. Also central to their approach: normalisation of Trump's words and actions. In response to the President's erratic, unpredictable and often incomprehensible behaviour, right-wing media created an echo-chamber within which anything coming from Trump and his orbit got soaked up and spun into the most positive narrative possible. Their unfiltered partisan reporting, lacking any form of nuance or contextualisation, created a MAGA reality in which none of the small and big scandalous stories around Trump were being reported on for what they actually were. The *Fox News* viewer didn't get to see any substantial criticism of their candidate. The channel ardently defended

Trump against his political adversaries, playing down any reasonable point of critique of his, moving the goalposts, strawmaning and deflecting. When liberal mainstream media reported negatively on the MAGA leader, they responded tenfold. Besides their platforming of Trump and the campaign, they also regularly reported on stories coming up through the grassroots movement. They shared right-wing memes from X and MAGA Facebook propaganda videos, treating them as journalistic pieces. This reinforced the MAGA content cycle, where the four actors continuously create, share and reshare the same content between them.

Another key point of communication, where MAGA differed heavily from their Liberal counterparts, was their activation of the 'new media'. During the 2024 election there was a decentralised digital army at work within MAGA media doing their part in trying to ensure Trump's victory. They are naturally very influential and successful within the confines of a movement that is notoriously critical of mainstream media. MAGA is susceptible to the simplification and alteration of the truth by alternative media outlets. Decentralised – because 'new media' comprised a large variety of right-wing media organisations like *The Daily Wire* or the late Charlie Kirk's *Turning Point USA*, unaffiliated podcasters, and other self-proclaimed independent journalists. Their independence made them even less obliged to follow any journalistic principles – opening the floodgates to ever more extreme forms of MAGA propaganda.

Then, an (*more or less*) unexpected group of actors intervened in the run-up to November 5th. A number of tech billionaires showed remarkable servility towards Trump. There was Elon Musk, *arguably the most unsurprising figure of the following trio to appear as a Trump-ally*, who restructured *Twitter*, one of the largest social media platforms in the world that he acquired in 2022, repressing free speech and elevating right-wing content. Under its new name *X*, Musk devoted his social network to right-wing propaganda, among other things replatforming previously banned MAGA personalities^[90] and heavily reducing the team responsible for platform moderation.^[91] Following this, *X* faced a seemingly never-ending streak of technical problems.^[91] While Liberals criticised the decision harshly, the MAGA base celebrated Musk for his move and heavily expanded its presence and visual messaging on the platform.^[92]

Meta, the next American tech-giant followed in Musk's footsteps with their own (though less blatant) Trump approximation. *Facebook* founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced, two weeks before Trump's takeover of the White House, that: "We're going to get rid of fact-checkers that have just been too politically biased and have destroyed more trust than they've created, especially in the US."^[93] In addition to dismantling their fact-checking department, *Meta* also rolled back on

[90] Ivanova, Irina. "These formerly banned Twitter accounts have been reinstated since Elon Musk took over," *CBS*, 21.11.22.

[91] Alba, Davey; Wagner, Kurt. "Twitter Cuts More Staff Overseeing Global Content Moderation," *Bloomberg*, 07.01.23.

Siddiqui, Faiz. "At Elon Musk's 'brittle' Twitter, tweaks trigger massive outages," *Washington Post*, 06.03.23.

[92] Popli, Nik. "As Elon Musk Buys Twitter, the Right Is Celebrating," *TIME*, 28.10.22.

[93] Bond, Shanno; Jingnan, Huo. "Meta backs away from fact checking in the U.S.," *NPR*, 12.01.25

[94] Ortutay, Barbara. "Meta rolls back hate speech rules as Zuckerberg cites 'recent elections' as a catalyst," *Associated Press*, n.d.

[95]
Ibid.

[96]
Tiffany, Kaitlyn. "Nobody
Look at Mark Zuckerberg," *The
Atlantic*, 04.11.24.

[97]
The Guardian Staff. "Jeff
Bezos defends decision to end
Washington Post endorsements,"
29.10.24.

[98]
Tondo, Lorenzo. "'Real threat
of autocracy': Washington
Post editorial staffers resign
in forceful letters," *The
Guardian*, 28.10.24.

[99]
Ibid.

its hate speech and abuse rules.^[94] Zuckerberg said he was going to "remove restrictions on topics like immigration and gender that are out of touch with mainstream discourse",^[95] allowing right-wing posters to share their opinion on those issues, unfiltered. While the official statement on these internal policy changes only came out after the election results, *Facebook* was already lax in their enforcement of the old restrictions months prior to 5 November – during the heights of the election battle. *The Atlantic* reported that: "highly deceptive political advertisements still run amok there, as do election-fraud conspiracy theories."^[96]

Last in line is *Amazon*-CEO Jeff Bezos. The multi-billionaire bought the *Washington Post*, one of the biggest and most influential American newspapers back in 2013. Ahead of the 2024 Presidential election he prohibited the Post's editorial board from publishing their traditional candidate endorsement, which would have most likely fallen towards 'Dem' candidate Kamala Harris.^[97] This was widely regarded as a blatant abuse of his powers as the owner of the paper, silencing his own writers and interfering with the journalistic integrity of the outlet. Following the announcement, a group of *Washington Post* writers, editors and other staffers decided to step down.^[98] The Post also saw an exodus of over 200.000 subscribers.^[99]

For the President it very much paid off that, one after another, tech billionaires fell in line. They all faced immense, predictable backlash – they all still decided that it was in their best business interest to kneel before Trump, whether out of fear (Zuckerberg, Bezos) or conviction (Musk). Ahead of the election, the MAGA movement thus had free range on *X*, struggled less with restrictions to their fake news-spread on *Facebook* and faced less pushback from traditionally liberal outlets, notably the *Washington Post*. *Confronted with the subliminal threat of retribution by a theoretical future Trump government after the election – in case of their platforms' disobedience leading up to the election – the tech CEO's caved and abandoned the progressive facade they had painted their platforms in throughout previous years.*

Donald Trump is the sole reason why MAGA and the intricate relations between its different actors exist in the first place. Everything revolves around him. Since 2016 he has reshaped the Republican Party to an extent that today, he controls it in its entirety. Back when he first announced his run for Presidency on June 16th 2015, established GOP politicians did not see him as a serious opponent. They couldn't envision the unprecedented success the famous New York businessman would end up having. They also feared the consequences of a potential Trump-led GOP. Even Republicans that are now occupying high-ranking positions within Trump's administration aggressively opposed his candidacy initially. Among others, Marco Rubio, now Secretary of State in Trump's cabinet, who called him a "con artist"^[100] and "an embarrassment"^[101] back during the 2016 Republican primaries. Today, there are not a lot of voices left in the Republican Party that dare to go against the Trump-line. The personality cult of the MAGA movement, in a way, also reached the Capitol. It resulted in an especially streamlined, resonant and powerful communication, which became evident in the 2024 election cycle.

Trump creates the narrative. He acts as the chief architect of any MAGA story that the three other actors then subsequently multiply in their messaging. The entire quadrinomial MAGA apparatus couldn't exist without him as the head. While for an official Presidential campaign it is normal and evident to be the direct mouthpiece of their candidate, this is normally not the case for the media, and not even for the party's movement. In Trump's case, everyone in the MAGA system orbits around him as closely as possible. Everyone regurgitates his talking points. He knows the influence he has, he knows the weight of every one of his words. And yet, or perhaps precisely because of this, he seemingly constantly expresses himself in an unpresidential manner, goes off script during even the most serious speeches, rambling off-topic. Through

[100]
Wright, David. "Marco Rubio: Not going to turn over GOP to 'con artist' Donald Trump," *CNN*, 26.02.16.

[101]
Siddiqui, Sabrina. "Rubio: Trump is 'an embarrassment' and Republicans will pay big in November," *The Guardian*, 15.03.16.

his unique lingo, he wants to show that he's different from his average Washington colleague. This authenticity in his demeanour is what his supporters appreciate in him.

Trump communicates through his very own platform Truth Social, through White House pressers, through call-ins to (right-wing) TV shows, through rallies, through addresses to congress, and often through any additional occasion to take questions by the media. Everyone in his orbit feeds off of him. Within moments of him saying something, his words can be found all over MAGA social media. The campaign, media and movement are attentive to his every move at all times. He completely dictates the MAGA story and still, online MAGA acts independently. His word is the initiating spark which lights the subsequent fire of the movement's propaganda. In his narcissistic fashion he indulges in the movement's hailing. He reposts screenshots of MAGA supporters' social media posts about him, memes about his political enemies and even the most bizarre AI-generated videos starring himself. Trump knows how to play the dog whistle, how not to condemn his supporters for their wildest actions, and instead subliminally encourage them in their activity, the most famous example of this being his comments ahead of the January 6th US Capitol riots. He said: "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by! But I'll tell you what, somebody's got to do something about antifa and the left", implying his compliance with violent action.^[102] In the case of the Michigan Covid restrictions controversy, Trump had tweeted "LIBERATE MICHIGAN" a month prior to the right-wing militia's kidnapping attempt of Governor Whitmer. The group felt the former President had backed them up with his statements at the time.^[103]

Trump is very susceptible to right-wing TV coverage, often furiously live-tweeting about issues that *Fox News* raises on their prime-time shows in the very moment that he takes to Truth Social. He is so focused on and fascinated by TV personalities that share and laud his every decision that he regularly recruits them for government positions. And not just any government positions. In his current administration we find former *Fox* hosts and contributors Pete Hegseth, now Secretary of Defense, Sean Duffy, now Secretary of Transportation, Tulsi Gabbard, now Director of National Intelligence, and Michael Waltz, now UN ambassador of the United States – to name just a few.^[104] In total, Trump named 19 *Fox* personalities for senior government positions for his second term.^[105] On top of acquiring personnel from right-wing mainstream media, Trump also dug into the new media scene to fill his cabinet. Kash Patel and Dan Bongino, both with a famous right-wing podcasting history, are now leading the FBI together.^[106]

[102]
Pilkington, Ed. "'Stand back and stand by': how Trumpism led to the Capitol siege," *The Guardian*, 07.01.21.

[103]
BBC. "FBI busts militia 'plot' to abduct Michigan Gov Gretchen Whitmer," 09.10.20.

[104]
Aitken, Peter. "Full List of Fox News Personalities Serving in Donald Trump Administration," *Newsweek*, 11.05.25.

[105]
Folkenflik, David. "Trump taps 19 Fox pundits, personalities and producers for second term," *NPR*, 20.01.25.

[106]
Lucas, Ryan. "President Trump names right-wing podcast host Dan Bongino as FBI deputy director," *NPR*, 24.02.25.

The intricate relations between the different central actors are key to 'Trumpian politics'.

Trump himself is always in control of the three other branches, driving the narrative at his will. Ahead of the 2024 election, he knew what buttons to press to activate his propaganda apparatus – and didn't shy away from making use of his unique movement's willingness to be his devoted mouthpieces and visual messaging factories, dominating media attention.



Doug Millis, New York Times

3.5 The four actors on the Democratic side – herd behaviour or lone wolves?

To fully grasp the uniqueness of the MAGA quadrumvirate and their successful communication ahead of the election, we also have to shine a light on the opposite side of the aisle. How did Democrats approach messaging during the months leading up to November 5th? How did they respond to Republican visual warfare? Why were they not as convincing and effective as MAGA was and what did that have to do with the interaction (or lack thereof) between their different actors?

Let's start by acknowledging that 2024 was a particularly difficult Presidential election for the Democratic Party – however, those difficulties were largely self-inflicted. Sitting President Joe Biden's lacklustre re-election campaign was always destined to fail. The 81-year-old quickly turned out to be a weak candidate who did not manage to garner much public support during the summer ahead of November's election. After the pressure on him had grown unsurmountably, in late July, he gave in. His late drop-out was a great disservice to his VP and successor as the Democratic nominee Kamala Harris. She had to mount a team, fundraise her campaign and construct a communication strategy in record time (for more on the backstory and the detailed story of how her strategy worked out, see chapter 1.2). In this subchapter, let's look at the Democratic counterparts to the four apocalyptic MAGA horsemen and how they intertwined ahead of Harris' eventual loss.

Addressing the elephant in the room right away: Kamala Harris is no Donald Trump. She is operating in an entirely different political sphere to her competitor. The Democratic Party is no personality cult; even less so are its voters. Nor are liberal mainstream media as partisan in their political coverage as their right-wing counterparts. They are, nonetheless, still quite partisan. This all sets a premise for possible approaches to campaign communication that is very much different to that of the right. Harris couldn't rely on *CNN*, *CBS*, *ABC*, *MSNBC* and co. to deliver

exclusively positive coverage on her campaign as *Fox News* did on Trump's. Here's also where we see a stark numeral imbalance between Dem-leaning and GOP-leaning established media outlets. While *Fox* is the only major right-wing mainstream TV channel, there is a long list of generally liberal-leaning outlets. And still, despite their clear advantage in numbers, they were not leading the propaganda battle. The *CNNs* of the world were deliberately not reporting as one-sided on politics as *Fox* did. There was more nuance, more scrutinising, more critical questioning. Democratic officials appeared on liberal mainstream media just as regularly as Republicans did on conservative mainstream media, though they rarely got hailed by the channels' respective journalists and hosts in the same way. They faced genuine pushback on their statements, got confronted with opposing viewpoints, unfavourable trends and polls, and were forced to be precise on actual policy issues instead of just being let loose to tout reactionary talking points like Conservatives were.

Liberal media, and the entire liberal-leaning public, are not a monolith. Their opinions are more diverse, their political actions and advocacies less streamlined. What counts for the liberal side of mainstream outlets also counts for Democratic-leaning 'new media'. There were lots and lots of successful podcasts, content creators, influencers, writers and more that very publicly opposed Donald Trump, MAGA and the Republican Party as a whole ahead of the election. However, that doesn't automatically mean that they also unconditionally supported Kamala Harris. These media figures pictured a much larger political spectrum, a more diverse field of opinion. They comprised everything between neo-liberalism and Marxism. They are united in their disliking of Trump, but showed to be more or less reluctant in their opinion on – and support of – Harris.

This also partially explains one big shortcoming of the Harris campaign ahead of 5 November. Compared to the Trump campaign, they did not appear on nearly as many independent media outlets. While Trump and his representatives went on podcasts and live streams, talked to smaller right-wing news sites and partnered with conservative content creators all throughout the election cycle, Harris and her people were a rare sight anywhere outside of liberal mainstream media. Democrats knew that they would face tougher questioning than Republicans if they appeared in similar contexts. While Donald Trump appeared on Joe Rogan, arguably the biggest podcast in the world, Kamala Harris did not – despite having been invited.^[107] Trump's episode was three hours long and racked up over 60 million views on YouTube alone. Harris would later say that she regretted not having done it.

[107]
Lucas, Ryan. "President Trump names right-wing podcast host Dan Bongino as FBI deputy director," *NPR*, 24.02.25.

Aside from these more conservative-leaning 'Bro-podcasts', the campaign equally feared liberal independent outlets. A large part of Democrat-leaning content creators are very progressive. They would not have played along with the Democratic candidate, providing them with a critically unchallenged ad slot like their right-wing counterparts did in large parts for Trump. Besides that, Harris already struggled enough in interviews with established liberal sources – the campaign deemed it too risky to let her run into even more hostile environments in independent left-wing circles.

The Trump-campaign's dogma in pursuing authentic public communication was very opportunistic. They appeared on alt-right and manosphere podcasts, they didn't care even if some of them were hosted by neo-nazis and conspiracy theorists – as long as they made numbers.^[108] The Harris campaign on the other hand was highly selective in their partnering with progressive outlets, fearing their critical environment. This 'danger' of being faced with concrete criticism largely stemmed from two substantial weak points of Harris' platform – her very unpopular stances on Biden and Gaza. Throughout her entire campaign, the former attorney general of California never distanced herself from her predecessor and his highly criticised policies and politics. She also never acknowledged the, to most people, evident unfitness for office that Biden demonstrated on an almost daily basis ahead of his drop-out. The enthusiasm and new hope that set in with Democrats after Biden's eventual pull-out died down, also due to Harris' inability to present herself as a candidate with a genuinely different agenda.

The second position that most Democrats, and even most Americans in general, strongly opposed her on, was Israel's war in Gaza. The genocide committed by Israel against the Palestinian people has long been deemed as such and strongly condemned by the United Nations, every major human rights organisation and an evergrowing list of nations from all over the world.^[109] The United States under Biden and Harris however, kept looking the other way in spite of Israel's war-crimes and kept funding and militarily supporting the Apartheid-state.^[110] The Democrats' complicity in genocide and Harris' unwillingness to oppose it made many voters turn away from the party. This election summer on *TikTok*, *Instagram* and co., people came across lots and lots of 'Kamala brat'-edits, but also across videos from and about Gaza and the West Bank. *An average 60 seconds on social media might have looked something like: Opening TikTok – scroll – A video of dead Gazan children being carried through the rubble of their homes after an IDF attack – scroll – An edit of the Democratic candidate dancing behind a neon-green filter, hyperpop tunes playing in the background – scroll – A video of Israeli precision*

[108]

Among others: "Joe Rogan Experience", "Impulsive", "All In Podcast", "This Past Weekend with Theo Von", "Shawn Ryan Show", "Lex Fridman Podcast", "Flagrant", "Full Send Podcast" and "The Dan Bongino Show".

[109]

United Nations. "Israel has committed genocide in the Gaza Strip, UN Commission finds," 16.10.25.

Nader, Emir. "Israel committing genocide in Gaza, world's leading experts say," *BBC*, 01.09.25.

[110]

United Nations. "Israel's occupation of Palestinian Territory is 'apartheid': UN rights expert," 25.03.22.

Human Rights Watch. "World Court Finds Israel Responsible for Apartheid," 19.07.24.

[111]
Reuters. "Netanyahu says
Israel regrets 'mishap' at
Gaza hospital," 25.08.25.

strikes wiping out a hospital, Prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu defending the war crime^[111] – scroll... Seeing this horror and knowing that the USA, the Democratic Party, and, as the VP, also very much Harris herself are complicit and largely responsible for those atrocities, makes the goofy 'brat' memes in between two scrolls appear in a macabre light. To avoid the inevitable questions on this subject by independent left wing media, the Harris campaign appeared rarely and exclusively on selected 'new media' outlets.

The diversity of liberal and leftist media reflects the diversity of liberal and leftist voters. Where MAGA supporters are very centred around deifying Trump, demonising the opposition and catering to reactionary culture war issues, the large Democrat-leaning spectrum doesn't have as many unifying convictions. There is no realistic scenario in which the Democratic candidate manages to genuinely captivate and activate the entirety of possible blue voters. In 2024, a large chunk of them voted for Harris because she was 'the lesser evil'. Another large section that voted 'Dem' in 2020 went to Trump this time, and lots became non-voters. While the diverse Democratic voting blocks often differ heavily in opinion on specific subjects, policy issues are at the forefront of their voting decisions for all of them. They are a more complex group to convince. If they don't see their political demands met in the Democratic candidate, they will in large numbers refrain from voting for them (see 'Harris on Gaza' above). Trump on the other hand has MAGA-fied the Republican base to a degree, that his persona is more important to them than his politics. This makes political propaganda easier and more effective – the messaging is often highly reductive and offensive, revolving more around deification of MAGA and demonisation of Democrats, leftists and marginalised groups than around genuine policy proposals.

3.6 'Swifties for Trump' – How MAGA drowned Taylor Swift's Harris endorsement in piles of propaganda

"I think she's beautiful—very beautiful! I find her very beautiful. I think she's liberal. She probably doesn't like Trump. I hear she's very talented. I think she's very beautiful, actually—unusually beautiful!"

Let's dissect how exactly this MAGA propaganda apparatus works its malicious magic by looking at one of the stories of this election – Taylor Swift's endorsement of Kamala Harris.

Briefly, the Swift-2024-election backstory: For a few years, international megastar Taylor Swift has been regarded as America's most (politically) influential celebrity. She had endorsed Democratic candidates on national and state-level before, and it was widely assumed that she would do the same for the 2024 US Presidential election. Democratic strategists planned exactly how to gain Swift's support,^[112] believing even it may eventually give them the edge in the close election race. In January, *Fox News* host Jesse Watters and other right-wing commentators claimed Swift was "a [Pentagon] PsyOp for combating online misinformation."^[113] Nearly one in five Americans said to believe that the singer "is part of a "covert government effort" to reelect Joe Biden" according to a February 2024 Monmouth University poll.^[114] In February, Trump took to Truth Social, hypothesising about Swift's awaited endorsement: "I signed and was responsible for the Music Modernization Act for Taylor Swift and all other Musical Artists. Joe Biden didn't do anything for Taylor, and never will. There's no way she could endorse Crooked Joe Biden, the worst and most corrupt President in the History of our Country, and be disloyal to the man who made her so much money. Besides that, I like her boyfriend, Travis, even though he may be a Liberal, and probably can't stand me!"^[115] Swift, *Time Magazine's* person of the year 2023, did however not respond to any right-wing hits at her until her endorsement post in September.

[*]
Donald Trump on Taylor Swift.

Stephan, Katcy. "Donald Trump Calls Taylor Swift 'Unusually Beautiful' but 'Liberal' in New 'Apprentice' Book (EXCLUSIVE)," *Variety*, 10.06.24.



[↑]
Jesse Watters on his prime-time show talking about Swift, *Fox News*.

[112]
Epstein, Reid J.; Glueck, Katie; Lerer, Lisa et al. "Inside Biden's Anti-Trump Battle Plan (and Where Taylor Swift Fits In)," *New York Times*, 06.11.24.

[113]
McHardy, Martha. "Fox News pushes conspiracy theory that Taylor Swift is a psy-op," *The Independent*, 10.01.24.

[114]
Mahdawi, Arwa. "It's no surprise a Newsweek writer panned Taylor Swift for being single and childless," *The Guardian*, 06.07.24.

[115]
de Guzman, Chad. "Donald Trump Can't Stop Talking About Taylor Swift," *TIME*, 27.08.25.

[116]
Corasaniti, Nick; Nehamas, Nicholas; Schleifer, Theodore. "Taylor Swift Endorses Kamala Harris," *New York Times*, 06.11.24.

[117]
X. "Account 'aka' (@akafaceUS)."

[118]
Ewe, Koh. "Dear Reader, Taylor Swift Endorsing Trump Is an AI-Generated Fairytale," *TIME*, 19.08.24.

[↓]
Donald Trump on *Truth Social*, 18.08.24.



Minutes after Trump and Harris had stepped off the debate stage on September 10 after their first and last televised Presidential debate, the global popstar Taylor Swift published a long Instagram post, in which she shared her remarks on the election battle and, most importantly, her endorsement of the Democratic ticket.^[116] The reactions after her statement rolled out just as fast as her endorsement did after the TV debate. The campaign, the media, MAGA supporters and Donald Trump all chimed in.

At this point in time we're closing in on the peak of the story they are spinning, and we'll get into unwiring it later. Let's first take a look at its groundwork however, which was laid weeks earlier. In mid-August Trump-adjacent accounts on X post fake AI imagery falsely claiming that Taylor Swift and her fans support the Republican candidate in the coming election. One of these accounts is user @akafaceUS, who describes themselves as 'An average guy that posts about politics' in their bio.^[117] They post daily reactionary, right-wing, often AI-generated ragebait memes. On the 18th of August Trump reposts rashly cropped screenshots of three of @akafaceUS's AI memes and a fourth one from a different account, all showing 'Swifties' – Taylor Swift's fan community – and Swift herself displaying their support for the Republican nominee and calling to vote for him, on his social media platform *Truth Social* commenting it with "I accept!".^[118]

The fact that these relentlessly Trump-loyal MAGA mouthpieces are posting on X, while Trump – their idol – himself stays on his own social media platform is a telling testament to the real shenanigans behind their activity. MAGA meme accounts post for their own followership, but very much also for their opposition to see. They feast on liberal reactions to their ragebait posting. Without this, their accounts would not have nearly as much traction and following. And every MAGA supporter taking pleasure in consuming this content online does so partially because they know there are also left-leaning people on X seeing the same things on their timeline. The joy they get from seeing riled up Liberals in the comments of these posts, the adrenaline in each small – more or less intellectual – battle getting decided by whichever side earns the most likes, the soothing feeling of a little online us-v-them.

The MAGA posting-machinery doesn't work when there's no opposing side on the same platform. That's what Trump's *Truth Social* is desperately lacking. He created the network in 2022 after being banned from *Facebook* and X (then *Twitter*) in 2021 following comments he made about the January 6th riots in Washington, DC. After Elon Musk had bought the website and reinstated Trump's X account, the President still stayed on his own site. The most influential MAGA accounts how-

ever are all on *X*, *Facebook* and *Co*. Now, this leads to Trump having to post screenshots of tweets from people that are on *X*, the very website whose ban led him to create his own website, onto his *Truth Social* account in order to engage in discourse with his supporters.

Getting back to Trump's post itself – certainly neither the original posters of the AI content nor the President who shared it believe the images to be real. But while there are certainly users that will detect their artificial nature, there are others that are going to think that Taylor Swift really did endorse Trump while posing in an Uncle Sam costume. In the end however, in the AI-infested online 'Magaverse' it doesn't really matter how many of the people seeing fake content actually believe it to be true – as long as they see it. There's a variety of motivations and convictions behind MAGA's extreme usage of AI-generated imagery.

1. There's the Bannon-esque 'Flood the zone with shit' dogma; putting an endless quantity of content out there, knowing that by most people it will be received as racist, fascist, obnoxious and completely absurd. *The type of content that will make people go 'But they don't mean that, right? Right??'*. Flooding the zone with so much shit that people, in a first step, get desensitised by it and then, in a second step, subconsciously start accepting more and more crazy realities that would have seemed unfathomable just a few years back as today's new normal. When the President posts cheap fake images of Taylor Swift in MAGA gear, when right-wing media smears her and Elon Musk publicly fantasises about 'giving her a child' ('as a joke of course'), there is a dynamic that creates so much precedent for people to accept actual real serious things happening in a next step as well.
2. There's also the fact that AI is ideal for creating fearmonger content. Being able to shape a fake reality depicting your wildest fantasies within a few clicks and a few seconds goes along well with the MAGA mindset. When there's no real imagery of Swift wearing MAGA merch and endorsing Trump – because she didn't – you can always just fall back to letting Sora and Midjourney create that imagery. A large portion of the target audience will believe it to be true. And on those who don't, this AI propaganda still has an effect. They don't care whether the imagery is blatantly fake or not, they see their preexisting convictions confirmed (see also chapter 1.1). The MAGA thought process in this context goes a little along the lines of: *The imagery is real > if it's not real, it's AI imagery that is based on real events > if it's not based on real events, it's still*

true deep down > if it's really not true, I still want it to be true > I'll happily take, like, comment and share it in any case. This dynamic of disregarding the factual truth and instead taking the MAGA stance on any particular issue as the truth, together with the power of artificial intelligence is a dangerous pairing.

3. Then there's the ideological and moral argument around the use of artificially generated imagery. Liberals and the left are much more critical of the technology than the right is. As Dan Brooks writes in the *New York Times Magazine*: "[...] the demographic that appears to have embraced AI most enthusiastically is MAGA meme accounts, possibly because the people who have most loudly rejected it – graphic designers, journalists, photographers, filmmakers, musicians, teachers – are archetypal liberals. In the reactive logic of the MAGA rank and file, AI is good because the right people hate it."^[119] And if, on top of that, the sprawl of fake content online even further erodes people's trust in what they see online, MAGA will happily take that as a welcome side effect.

[119]
Brooks, Dan. "How Generative A.I. Complements the MAGA Style," *New York Times*, 13.03.25.

In the MAGA quadrumvirate of campaign, movement, media and Trump himself, the President echoing a story is the absolute take-off point for any news feedback loop. Naturally, this was also the case with his comments on Taylor Swift's Harris endorsement. Following his repost of the AI-generated memes the online MAGA movement responds by further increasing their visual propaganda about Swift. More fake photos, more instrumentalisation, more harassment. Then the media, the next of the four players, chimes in. *Fox News* publishes articles about the President's post; their TV hosts laugh about it on their politics shows. Then, actor number four, the official Trump campaign, also gives their two cents. A Trump spokesman tells *Fox News* "Swifties for Trump is a massive movement that grows bigger every single day, while Kamala Harris is guilty as sin for all the hurt she has caused every American" weighing in on the AI images trope and trying to mislead the public into believing this made-up movement to be real. All of this MAGA coverage of Swift is pre-emptive. They're just awaiting the singer's inevitable endorsement of the democratic ticket. It is not a question of whether Swift will endorse Harris, but when. The lengths to which they go defaming her ahead of her statement reflects their fear of the weight of the political endorsement of the global superstar.

It is then, minutes after the Trump-Harris debate on September 10, that it finally comes. Taylor Swift endorses Kamala Harris for President of the United States.^[120] In her Instagram post Swift mentioned Harris' leadership qualities and her running mate Walz's longtime commitment to securing LGBTQ+ rights as particularly important points to her. She also devoted a paragraph to her fears about the growing danger of artificial intelligence, largely fueled by Trump's repost of MAGA AI content featuring her and her fans a few weeks prior. In her statement, Swift denounced the former President sharing this false content and said that "It brought me to the conclusion that I need to be very transparent about my actual plans for this election as a voter. The simplest way to combat misinformation is with the truth." She signed off her post as "childless cat lady", a hit at Trump's running mate JD Vance who, back in 2021, had called Harris and other female Democrats "a bunch of childless cat ladies who are miserable at their own lives."^[121] As *NPR* pointed out, in his comment Vance was regurgitating an old sexist trope that dates back centuries.

The reactions after Taylor Swift's statement rolled out just as fast as her endorsement did after the TV debate. Kamala Harris thanked the popstar at a post-debate party the same night while Swift songs were being played at the event.^[122] Liberal media outlets and commentators welcomed the move, having pinned their hopes on Taylor Swift as their most anticipated celebrity endorsement. Conservatives naturally reacted very differently to the news. And naturally, the four MAGA communicators riled each other up to take part in their united propaganda efforts. "You can kiss your sales to the Republican audience goodbye, Taylor, hope you enjoyed them while you had them." said *Fox News* host Megyn Kelly on her show.^[123] Donald Trump himself went on the *Fox* morning programme the following day complaining: "She seems to always endorse a Democrat. And she'll probably pay a price for it in the marketplace."^[124] He later posted on his social media platform, less cordially: "I HATE TAYLOR SWIFT!"^[125] Karoline Leavitt, a spokeswoman for the Trump campaign, dismissed the endorsement as "more evidence that the Democrat party has become the party of the wealthy elite."^[126]

The vicious cycle of the four MAGA actors begins. Trump says something, right-wing media picks it up, the Trump Campaign uses bites of that very same coverage to regurgitate it through their channels, media picks that up again and spins it into an even bigger story, Trump sees it, ...etc.

All the while, MAGA supporters participate just as actively in the process. They too distribute what conservative media writes, shows and says, recite what Trump and his campaign staff said and add to it with new



[120] Swift's endorsement post on Instagram, *New York Times*.

[120] Swift, Taylor (@taylorswift). "I'm enchanted to announce my next tour: Taylor Swift | The Eras Tour, a journey through the musical eras of my career (past and present!) [...]" *Instagram*, 01.11.22.

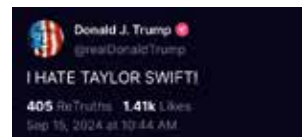
[121] Treisman, Rachel. "JD Vance went viral for 'cat lady' comments. The centuries-old trope has a long tail," *NPR*, 29.07.24.

[122] Cochran, Emily; Rogers, Katie; Stevens, Matt. "How Taylor Swift Surprised Harris, and Entered a New Political Era," *New York Times*, 11.09.24.

[123] Nerkar, Santul. "How Media on the Left and Right Covered Taylor Swift's Harris Endorsement," *New York Times*, 12.10.24.

[124] Ibid.

[125][4] Spangler, Todd. "Donald Trump Rages at Taylor Swift After Singer Endorses Kamala Harris: 'I Hate Taylor Swift!'," *Variety*, 15.09.24.



[126]
Corasaniti, Nick; Nehamas,
Nicholas; Schleifer, Theodore.
"Taylor Swift Endorses Kamala
Harris," *New York Times*,
06.11.24.

[127]
Musk, Elon (@elonmusk). "Fine
Taylor ... you win ... I will
give you a child and guard
your cats with my life," X,
11.09.24.

harassment and conspiracy theories, generated memes and ragebait content. Then, one of the most famous MAGA men, Elon Musk, sparks a new fire with his Taylor Swift comment. The day after her Harris endorsement he tweets "Fine Taylor ... you win ... I will give you a child and guard your cats with my life."^[127] This deeply weird and uncalled for self-insertion of Musk into the Swift-discourse could be interpreted as a rape threat. X user @AutismCapital comments "Honestly, this pairing might heal the nation.", adding this AI-generated image of what appears to be Swift and Musk holding their baby. @TRUMP_ARMY_ comments a photo of Musk and Trump, happily arm in arm. The image of course also derives from artificial intelligence. The user adds "America loves this duo!!" into the caption and onto the photo itself.

There's hundreds and hundreds of these MAGA accounts in the comments of Musk's post. Some, like @AutismCapital, feel the need to artificially visualise the above tweet, others, like user @TRUMP_ARMY_, post loosely related AI memes underneath it. There's a wide variety of MAGA content to be found in the depths of the comment section of Musk's possible rape-threat-post. We find AI MAGA Taylor Swift of course, conspiracies about Kamala Harris, about South American migrants, and in general lots of supporters celebrating Musk for his comment. There are, however, given the appalling nature of Musk's tweet, also people showing their disgust. Two days after Swift's endorsement the Trump campaign came out with a new coup shaking up the saga again. The campaign's official X account published the following post saying:

"NEW MERCH Calling all Swifties for Trump
Get your Trump Era shirt today [...]"^[128]

[128]
Team Trump (Text TRUMP to
88022) (@TeamTrump). "NEW
MERCH. Calling all Swifties
for Trump. Get your Trump Era
shirt today," X, 12.09.24.

The tweet contained a link to a subpage of Trump's web store with a new T-shirt to buy. The shirt's motif is a colourful collage of photos of the President with one big cropped photo front and centre. The visual is subtitled 'DONALD J. TRUMP – MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN'. The shirt is an adaptation of the poster for Taylor Swift's global 'Eras Tour'. The speed and amplitude with which the campaign responded to Swift's Harris endorsement is astounding. Coming up with the T-shirt, launching its production and creating the shop for it – all in a matter of less than two days (For a deep-dive into the website, see chapter 4.3). Their opportunism spreads its wings and seeks out any possible avenue of visual propaganda. Plus, any plan is extra tempting to Trump's entourage if it can make them money along the way. And, as discussed above, where the campaign was productive, so were Trump himself, right-wing media and the grassroots movement – the three other apocalyptic MAGA horsemen.

The day after her endorsement, Swift posted a link to the public voter registration site [vote.gov](https://www.vote.gov) in her Instagram story, again inciting her American followers to register and cast their vote. The site reported more than 400.000 visits in the 24 hours following the singer's story. The usual daily traffic in election season for [vote.gov](https://www.vote.gov) is around 30.000.^[129]

[129]
Spangler, Todd. "Donald Trump Rages at Taylor Swift After Singer Endorses Kamala Harris: 'I Hate Taylor Swift!'," *Variety*, 15.09.24.

MAGA made out of the 2024 US Presidential election the culmination of a decade-long transformation of political communication. Their success proved how essential making use of modern forms of visual propaganda is and how decentralisation can multiply its effectiveness. The campaign as the central conductor and connector between the movement and mainstream media. Trump himself as the very centre of the MAGA orbit, constantly feeding its other entities with content and guiding them through the election warfare. Right-wing media, both established and independent, as the echo, jumping on every one of Trump's moves and turning any election news into propaganda bits, deifying MAGA and demonising Democrats. Finally, the movement as the never-resting force, the factory for memes and merch, acting as an aggressive hivemind, backing and pushing Trumpism online, at rallies and in the streets and sharing fake news, AI-generated imagery and creating division on social media.

While the Democratic campaign under Kamala Harris tried to install a similar dynamic in the liberal ecosystem, they had neither the unique candidate nor the devoted movement to do so effectively. The imbalance resulting from the MAGA campaign's aggressive, decentralised visual warfare that managed to captivate the entire Republican base and the Democrats' lack thereof was a decisive factor in the election outcome. The ability of the four MAGA actors to coherently interact, push each other onto ever-new levels of visual propaganda and weaponise online culture allowed them to dominate the political battlefield and successfully reinstall Donald Trump as US President.

[→]

AI generated picture showing Swift and Musk with a baby, posted by X user @AutismCapital in response to Musk's tweet.



[→]

AI generated picture showing Swift and Musk with a baby, posted by X user @TRUMP_ARMY_ in response to Musk's tweet.



How to Sell MAGA Merch Online (fast)

**Dark Patterns
and Cheap Templates
in Trump's Websites'
User Interfaces**

"The demand was so incredible, [...] we started selling roughly \$8,000 in hats per day. [...] Soon we increased online hat sales tenfold from \$8,000 to \$80,000 per day, which funded most of the campaign's overhead costs"

[4]
Jared Kushner, *Breaking History: A White House Memoir*, Broadside Books, 2022.

...Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner wrote in his 2022 book *Breaking History: A White House Memoir* about the initial sudden success of the red MAGA hat.^[130] According to Kushner, purely the hat sales covered most daily running costs of the Trump campaign in the election year 2016.^[131] The hat became the primary contribution method for everyday supporters wanting to financially support their candidate and show it off at the same time. While the hat remains the iconic piece of the MAGA merch universe, the Trump store offers a variety of other devotional articles for his fans to purchase.

[130]
Massie, Graeme. "Trump made \$80k a day from selling MAGA hats on 2016 campaign trail, says Kushner," *The Independent*, 29.07.22.

[131]
Ibid.

Given the unique importance that Trump- and MAGA-branded products of all sorts have for the movement, as a monetary source for the campaign but mainly as visual propaganda to Americans in general, let's look at Trump's official web-presence. How are the websites structured to increase revenue? How do they reflect Trump's character and that of the movement? What does their design tell us about the campaign's view of their own supporters?

To start, it is crucial to analyse the user interface and experience of the two places where all these merchandise items are mainly coming from: The Trump Store^[132] and The Official Trump Campaign Store.^[133] The former is the online shop of the Trump Organization, the latter is that of the Trump/Vance campaign. While they both largely sell the same items, there are good reasons as to why the two coexist nonetheless. We will get into deciphering the structures behind this later. First, we'll look into the precise user interface elements; though this is not so much a pure UX/UI comparison of the two, but rather an extended analysis of the entirety of the online Trump merch orbit. Let's start however, with Trump's general website,^[134] that completes the intertwined trio that we will

[132]
<http://www.trumpstore.com/>

[133]
<http://secure.winred.com/trump-national-committee-jfc/storefront/>

[134]
<http://www.donaldjtrump.com/>

look into. Upon entering the President's website, the user gets greeted by a popup that blacks out the entire rest of the website. It shows a text in which Donald Trump himself appears to address the user:

[4] [→]
Trump website pop-up.

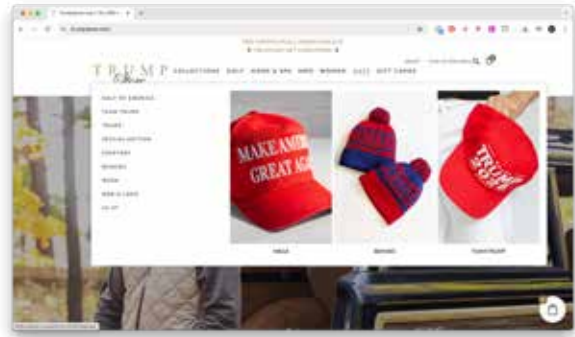


“Hello Patriot, this is President Trump! I want to thank you for your constant support, and I want to be sure you stay up-to-date with everything the MAGA Movement is doing to usher in the next Golden Age of America. Please download my official Trump Contact Card, so my phone number is saved in your address book.”

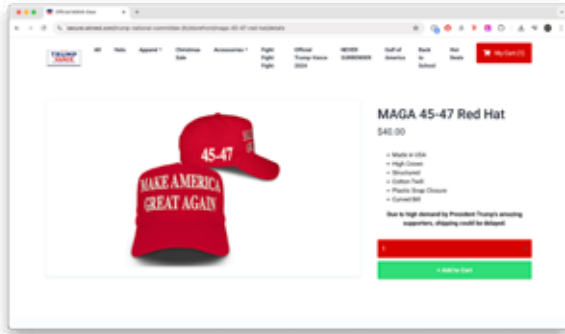
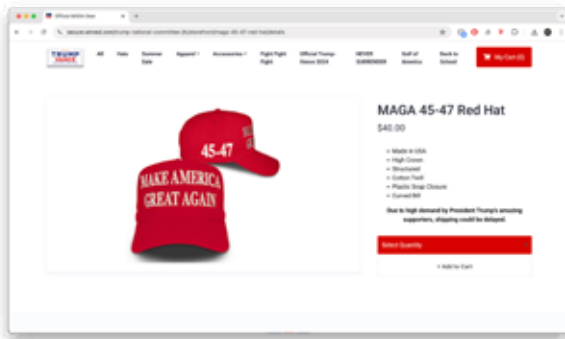
It is unlikely that the President himself wrote this text, and it is certain that this is not his actual phone number. The users do not get in contact with President Trump himself through the indicated number as the phrasing of the text might suggest. By downloading the contact card they sign up to receive campaign newsletters and calls for financial contribution via SMS. Underneath the text there's a red button, inciting the user to download said 'contact card'. Above the text we see the card as a GIF. It is coloured in shiny gold, even leaving a light reflection in the top right corner. It is moving slightly from left to right. The credit card-style object features Trump's photo and his apparent phone number. Once the user closes the pop-up, they see a basic interface with the Trump/Vance campaign logo in the top left as well as a few links to subpages and two call-to-action buttons. One leading to a campaign contribution page, the other to the campaign shop.

The short below-the-fold part of the landing page features nothing more than a sign up field for the Trump newsletter, a quick text about the 'Agenda47 Platform', a large banner advertising and linking towards products of the campaign store and finally the footer. The merch items take up almost 30% of the actual content part of the landing page. In the footer we find a variety of different social media platforms' logos that mostly link directly to Trump's personal accounts on those websites. We notice a difference in their graphic treatment, with four out of seven logos (Truth Social, Rumble, Facebook, Instagram) that are displayed in a dark navy blue tone including a light drop shadow. The 'X' logo however appears finer and bigger than the others, it also doesn't share the same blue or the drop shadow. The 'TikTok' logo is the only one that comes in its actual brand colours and the only one to be displayed on a black circle. The 'YouTube' logo is the last in the line, it also neither has the blue tone nor the drop shadow. There's a grey rectangle filling just the bottom right corner of the rounded logo, the other corners are clean.

Getting into the Trump store and the campaign store, let's look at the respective product pages of the infamous red MAGA hat, sold on both websites. The first observation, before going into the user interface, is a difference in price of the hat between the two sites. The Trump store (TS) sells it for 55\$, on the campaign store (CS) it retails for 40\$. Judging only by the photos and the short descriptive info both websites provide, they seem to be the same hat. This is however impossible to verify. The product page of the CS, which the general Trump website links to, has a quite rudimental user interface design. The tabs bar features four tabs that take up one line and seven that take up two lines. This reduces legibility and makes the layout appear very busy. Only one of the eleven tabs is spelled in all-caps, the others aren't. The tabs do not have a hover-state and the two that come with a drop down menu do not even change state upon click. In addition, both drop down menu tabs ('Apparel' and 'Accessories') feature as part of their own sub-categories. This creates confusion about subpage hierarchy and impedes coherent navigation through the website. The product page features one single photo of the hat that shows it from the front and the right side. The drop shadow the hat is casting is cut off half-way. Upon selecting a quantity of hats, the 'Add to Cart' button switches to its active-state, featuring a light green tone that is visible nowhere else on the website and does not pass the colour contrast test against the white text on it. The 'Select Quantity' button is filled in red, both before and after having selected a quantity. Logically, this red tone should be the primary CTA-colour. The 'Select Quantity' text on the red button comes in white, the '<>' selection-icon however is black. There is no apparent reason for two different colours within this one button. The colour choice of black also does not pass the contrast test. There's a shipping time disclaimer above the quantity select-



[1]
User Interface of the Trump Store.



[↑]
User Interface of the Campaign
Store.

or that is phrased in a particularly non-objective manner ('Due to high demand by President Trump's amazing supporters, shipping could be delayed.'). The lower 60% of the entire product page are taken up by legal information, mostly regarding campaign contribution laws. They appear more or less without any CSS formatting, it is a long block of pure text. There was seemingly no effort put into optimising, structuring or embellishing the layout. Looking at the same product page for the TS, this one comes in a more bespoke and coherent user interface than the CS one. Starting from the top, the tabs bar does not feature some of the same errors the CS one does. All tabs are spelled in all-caps, they are precise and concise and come with hover states and elaborate drop-downs. The space underneath the header is better optimised, there's a typical image carousel that doesn't take up more space than necessary like the CS one does. There are five product pictures that better allow the user to get a feeling of the product. It also shows the hat from all sides as opposed to CS. The bullet points informing about the product are more precise. There's also a short descriptive text ('The classic high crown red hat that has made waves across the world just got a time-stamp update. Celebrating the past while looking hopefully forward to the future, pick up the greatest hat of all time and make America great again.') that comes in similarly colourful phrasing as the disclaimer on the CS page (which doesn't have a descriptive text at all). The TS also allows the user to directly share the article and to browse similar items underneath the selected one. This is a typical web store feature that the CS page doesn't have. The TS 'quantity' button is designed more intuitively than the CS one and the use of primary and secondary colours in UI elements is more coherent. All in all, the Trump store provides an overall better customer experience than the campaign store if comparing similar product pages.

Why still have the two then?

This is not a question of different quality user interfaces. While it's true that the Trump store does come in a more modern refined design than the campaign store, they're still both based on very common webshop templates. Instead, there's a variety of legal and strategic reasons behind the coexistence of the two. The campaign store is subject to Federal Election Commission (FEC) campaign finance laws. Every purchase by an individual on this site legally is a campaign contribution. Every dollar spent here goes to the Trump National Committee JFC, Inc., a legal entity that has to answer to the FEC, hence the large legal paragraph at the bottom of each page of the website. The Trump store on the other hand operates very much like any other business. It is operated by the Trump Organization, Trump's private business venture. There's no FEC oversight. Perhaps that's why they offer the same items as the campaign store – at a higher price point. The earnings of the campaign store go in parts to the Republican Party while those of the Trump store entirely go straight into the President's private pocket. A further key point for both websites is data collection. The Trump store does so with the goal of constantly gaining intel on commercial consumer behaviour, like most webshops do. The campaign store however, through intensive tracking and retrieval of personal data upon purchase, seeks out as much information about their potential voters as possible to target them with ads #and calls for contribution more effectively later. There are other unique characteristics to the clutter of Trump's websites. Aside from the actual items sold there, that often range from bizarre to outright anticonstitutional (more on that in chapter 6). The colourful language used in pop-ups, descriptive texts and notifications seems very unprofessional. This is however perfectly 'on-brand'-lingo for Trump and MAGA. The disclaimer for the MAGA hat on the campaign store: 'Due to high demand by President Trump's amazing supporters, shipping could be delayed.' being the prime example of this (normally) unpresidential phrasing. This is very much how Trump himself talks, and thus his campaign adopts this speech in their online presence too. The stores' user interfaces and user experience are engineered towards the average MAGA consumer. They're easy to navigate thanks to the common shop template design, and address the user in Trumpian manner to increase the chance of a successful purchase.

The following subchapter dives into specific categories on Trump's store that demonstrate the unique and all-encompassing coverage of every aspect of his followers' lives with merch articles. From onesies for babies to Svarovski-stone-covered handbags.

Among the dozens of different collections available on Trump's personal store we find the 'Trump Kids' category. It comprises forty-five Trump-branded products for everything and everyone ranging from babies to early teens. There are onesies, sand shovels, bibs, teddy bears, sweets, shirts and more. Trump-devotees can purchase all sorts of accessories for their little ones ranging from a 'MAGA Hat Sticker' for \$8.00 to a 'GIANT Trump Chocolate Gold Bar' available for \$86.00.^[135]

[135]
Trump Store. "Product page:
MAGA Hat Sticker."

Trump Store. "Product page:
GIANT Trump Chocolate Gold
Bar."

[136]
Trump Store. "Product page:
MAGA Flag Pickleball Paddle."

[137]
Trump Store. "Product page:
Patriotic Advent calendar."

[138]
Trump Store. "Product page:
Gold Bar USB."

[↓]
(Screenshots of the product
pages three pages further)

Are you "Looking for a way to make your summer pickleball league more patriotic?" Don't worry, the collection proposes a MAGA Flag Pickleball Paddle for \$180.00.^[136] For parents planning on installing a certain MAGA spirit during this year's holiday season, the Trump store offers two different 'Trump' and 'Patriotism' themed advent calendars, describing them as follows: "Surprise and delight children of all ages with the Trump Patriotic calendar. [...] brighten the holiday season with a beautiful calendar that can hang in your home with American Pride."^[137]

And then there's gold. Tons of gold everywhere. There are precisely one hundred items that show up under the search term 'Gold'. Golden playing cards, golden sneakers, golden earbuds, golden USB's ("With a slide out USB, no one will ever know you're not really carrying a bar of gold!").^[138] There are golden bracelets, earrings and necklaces, golden mugs, shot glasses and champagne flutes, golden T-shirts, jerseys and hats – of course. *Obviously, it's never actual gold, but yeah.* With, to be fair, the notable exception of five out of the one hundred products that do actually feature genuine gold; their prices ranging up to over \$500.00. One of those five is a 'Bling clutch' bag – *the photo speaks for itself.*

The dimensions of the Trump store are far-reaching. MAGA supporters can deck out their entire household with Trump-branded paraphernalia on there with ease (and the necessary budget).

The focus on glamour, kitsch, gold and golf screams 'Trump'. Beyond that, it's the extent to which the Trump merchandise targets children that is remarkable. *A good cult of personality acquires and indoctrinates its future members as young as possible.* Could you envision Democratic-leaning parents changing their newborn's diapers in a 'Harris' onesie? A 'Starmer', 'Merz' or 'Macron' onesie? For any other current leader of another democratic state this level of materialised deification would be unthinkable.



Republican parents in the US certainly do not see any problem in buying MAGA merch for their little ones, the large palette of kids-themed items in the Trump store being proof of that. Trump's willingness to aggressively lean into his followers' inclination for consumerist shows of loyalty is very lucrative for the Organization. He is arguably the President whose movement is the most inseparably tied to their devotional articles, selling his supporters way more than just red hats.

This opportunistic approach to Presidential merchandising is displayed to perfection in the following example. Diving back into the 'Swift endorsement saga' that made waves and entailed large-scale attacks on the popstar by all relevant MAGA actors (see also chapter 3.2).



4.3. Deep down the Dark Patterns jungle

[139][4]
Trump Vance Official Campaign
Store. "Look What You Made
Me Do."



[4]
'Eras' tour poster, Taylor
Swift.



The brief recap: the Trump campaign posted a link to a subpage of the campaign's online shop on which there was exactly one item listed for purchase: The 'Trump Era shirt', featuring a colourful photo collage of Trump, heavily inspired by the poster of Taylor Swift's 'Eras' tour.^[139]

In its post the campaign incites "all Swifties for Trump" to go buy the 'Trump Era' shirt. Upon entering the linked website, the user gets greeted by a shop element in the form of a small vertical stripe on the left in front of a photo of the President stretching over the entire width of the screen. There's the logo of the Trump/Vance campaign at the very top and the phrase 'LOOK WHAT YOU MADE ME DO...' just underneath. This is a reference to Swift's 2017 hit 'Look What You Made Me Do'. Scrolling down, the user finds two marquees displaying the names of people that just donated to the Trump organisation including the exact amount they allegedly gave. Having opened the website multiple times over the span of a few weeks for this analysis, the names, sums of money, and order in which they appear on the marquees have always stayed exactly the same throughout. This thus seems to be a fake donation counter falsely making the user believe that there's other people currently donating to Trump at the very moment they're visiting the page. This deceitful user interface element then incites people to go ahead and donate as well. If this is to be true, it shows an immense lack of integrity and respect by Trump and his campaign towards their followers, taking advantage of their blind devotion to the President, MAGA and the cause at large in order to raise more money. Under the marquees, there are six different CTA buttons to purchase the shirt from. The options differ heavily in price, with the first one saying '\$45 - CLICK THIS AMOUNT IF YOU'RE SUPPORTING PRESIDENT TRUMP IN 2024 + SHIRT!', the next one '\$75 - DONATE THIS AMOUNT IF TRUMP IS THE BEST PRESIDENT OF ALL TIME + SHIRT!' and then four other ones going all the way up to \$1000

for one 'Trump-Eras-Tour' shirt. The shirt is being sold for a minimum of \$45, but the user gets pressured into adding a generous donation on top. The button allowing you to purchase the shirt for \$100 is continuously pulsating, making it stand out among the others. The campaign probably deemed the \$100 mark as the sweet spot in terms of the highest amount that people are realistically willing to give. Upon 'click' on one of the six black buttons, they turn red and unleash a burst of little US flags onto the screen. There is also an input field underneath the six buttons allowing the user to pay a custom amount (starting at \$45, of course), for those MAGA supporters for whom \$1000 isn't enough.

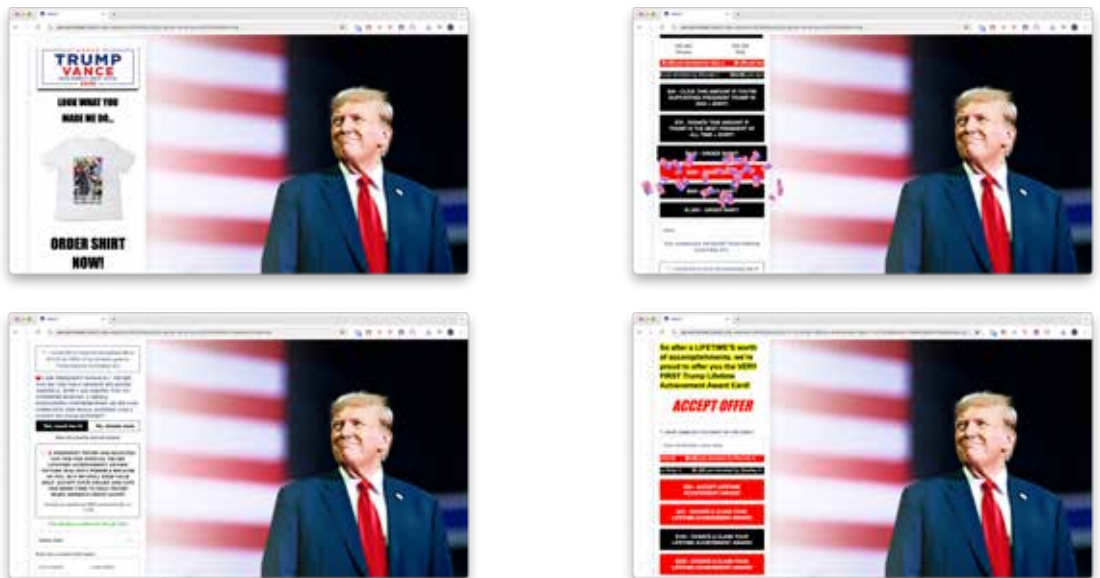
But the campaign's begging still doesn't end here. Having made their choice regarding the price of the shirt, the user gets presented with the option to cover the 'processing fee' for this transaction so that "[...] 100% of my donation goes to Trump National Committee JFC." This fee amounts to four percent of the donation sum. Just underneath this option the user finds the President himself addressing them. He shouts: "I AM PRESIDENT DONALD J. TRUMP. YOU'RE THE ONLY REASON WE SAVED AMERICA. NOW I AM ASKING YOU TO CONSIDER MAKING A SMALL SUSTAINING CONTRIBUTION, SO WE CAN COMPLETE THE MAGA AGENDA! CAN I COUNT ON YOUR SUPPORT?" Following this, the user has the option to make this a monthly donation or to 'just' donate once. After getting through this money grab scheme, there's yet another waiting just underneath. Here, the website tries to make the user believe that the President selected them specifically to receive the 'Official Trump Lifetime Achievement Award'. This is supposed to be his show of gratitude, because: "VICTORY WAS ONLY POSSIBLE BECAUSE OF YOU [...]." Of course, this made-up award doesn't come for free, as the sentence continues: "[...] BUT WE STILL NEED YOUR HELP. ACCEPT YOUR AWARD AND GIVE ONE MORE TIME TO HELP TRUMP MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!" By accepting the award, the previously selected amount for the T-shirt gets doubled. There is no information about what this award actually is, in what form the user receives it, or if they even receive anything.

The Trump campaign applies a mix of excessive expression of gratitude towards the user, highly exaggerating the user's influence on Trump's success and thus very much pressuring them at the same time to get them to keep contributing in order to 'truly make America great again'. The MAGA supporter seeing the tweet and opening the website quickly gets ensnared by 'the President himself' to make monthly donations of hundreds of dollars – in exchange for one Taylor Swift-inspired T-shirt.

[→]
'Trump Era'-shirt webpage,
Campaign Store.

This subpage of the campaign store got set up within two days of Swift's Harris endorsement. *Opportunism + Efficiency = Money* was the Trump campaign's mantra. To be fair, they didn't actually design the page within those two days, as the same template can be found on other subpages of their website, including the same dark pattern money grab schemes, of course.

Taking a step back and looking at the analysed Trump websites, we find a variety of oddities, both in terms of the monetary strategies behind the multi-faceted websites, their UX/UI, as well as the actual products that are purchasable. The Trump campaign knows of its followers' soft spot for MAGA merchandise and thus misses no opportunity to satisfy their demand. The entire online appearance and experience is fully coherent with the 'Trump-DNA'. The sites have it all – cheap shop templates, exploding USA flags under buttons, items for babies, Taylor-Swift haters and 'gold and glamour'-lovers, donation requests and subscription models, dark patterns, texts in all-caps, exclamation marks, exclamation marks, exclamation marks... *A combination that the MAGA mind can hardly re\$!\$t.*



Haitians in Springfield, Ohio

A Case Study

“Kouri pou lapli tonbe nan rivyè”

[4]
Haitian Creole saying
("While trying to avoid the rain,
one falls into the river.")

Tracing back the hoax about immigrants eating pets that started with a Facebook post and ended with a city being rattled by bomb threats.

The city of Springfield in Clark County, Ohio counted roughly 60.000 inhabitants in 2020.^[140] In the past three years, Springfield's population grew by about 25%, largely due to Haitian migrants coming into the city.^[141] There are estimated to be between 12.000 and 20.000 Haitians living there now.^[142] This influx mainly came down to two reasons: Haiti has long been in a seriously critical state with no end in sight to poverty, hunger, gang violence and eroding government presence.^[143] Existential challenges facing Haiti today are still largely rooted in the country's colonial history. Colonial oppression of the natives and overall resource extraction by the French until the late 19th century, followed by American domination over the island deprived the nation of economical and societal development. Today, many Haitians are seeking refuge in the United States, a shift that only intensified in 2021 after the Haitian President got assassinated.^[144] At the same time, city officials in Springfield came up with plans to attract more business and workers, trying to combat the ever-dwindling population size.^[145] Promising well-paying blue collar jobs and low cost of living, the city managed to convince large numbers of immigrants, mainly of Haitian origin, to settle down in the Ohio town.^[146]

The plan worked. Businesses opened up, jobs were created, quality of life rose.^[147] Seemingly a win-win, for both the city and its inhabitants, whether longtime or newly arrived.^[148] This all changed in early September 2024, when one Facebook post started, what turned out to become an avalanche of hatred.

An undated screenshot from a local private Facebook group starts making the rounds in right-wing circles on X, formerly Twitter. The author claims Haitian immigrants had been abducting and eating pets of Springfield residents. *NBC News* said, reporting on the spreading of that original post "On Sept. 6, there were 1.100 posts on X mentioning Haitians, migrants or immigrants eating pets, cats, dogs and geese",^[149]

[140] United States Census Bureau. "Springfield City, Clark County."

[141] Shoichet, Catherine E. "'Why Springfield?' How a small Ohio city became home for thousands of Haitians," *CNN*, 19.09.24.

[142] City of Springfield, Ohio - Government. "City Commission Meeting, July 16, 2024."

[143] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. "Haiti."

[144] BBC. "Haiti president's assassination: What we know so far," 01.02.23.

[145] Jordan, Miriam. "How an Ohio Town Landed in the Middle of the Immigration Debate," *New York Times*, 03.09.24.

[146] Ibid.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Ibid.

[149]
Gomez, Henry J.; Smith, Allan;
Tsirkin, Julie et al. "How
a fringe online claim about
immigrants eating pets made
its way to the debate stage,"
NBC News, 12.09.24.

[150]
Ibid.

[151]
Ibid.

[152]
Thomas, Merlyn; Wendling,
Mike. "Trump repeats baseless
claim about Haitian immigrants
eating pets," *BBC*, 15.09.24.

[↓]
Trump claims migrants are
eating pets during the TV
debate with Kamala Harris,
ABC News.



[↑]
The private *Facebook* post that
started the avalanche, early
September 2024.

citing PeakMetrics, a research company. The next day there are 9.100, marking an increase of 720%.^[150] Three days later, on September 9th, the Vice-President of the United States reshapes the baseless rumours on his X account. The total number of posts jumps to 47.000.^[151] The avalanche is unleashed.

The timing of Vance's involvement in the matter is not coincidental. The day after his post, Donald Trump and Kamala Harris meet for their first – and last – Presidential debate ahead of the election. In front of an audience of millions of Americans following the debate live on TV, Trump repeats the fake stories about Haitian migrants in Springfield, saying "They are eating the dogs, they're eating the cats."^[152] Harris laughs the ridiculous claim off, the debate hosts push back on Trump, citing Springfield officials that deny any veracity to his statement. Nevertheless, the damage is done.

It doesn't matter whether Trump and Vance really believe in the fabrication they promoted or just knowingly spread fake news to demonise immigrants. What matters is the effect their involvement had on the further dispersion of the eating-pets-myth into the mainstream. The concrete consequences for Haitians in Springfield, and the more general implications stories like this one have on immigrants of any ethnic background all over the country. The uniting factor this offers to the MAGA movement – uniting against minorities and political opposition.

5.2. There's no such thing as bad publicity

The shift in media attention towards this topic is a huge propagandist success for the Trump campaign – no matter how much of the TV coverage is denouncing their claims. The mere fact that the media is talking about Springfield, about migrants, about disappearing pets and rumours of them being eaten is exactly what Trump wants to get out of this. It doesn't hurt his narrative that, outside of *Fox News* and a few other exceptions, every established news source says that there is no evidence supporting these claims whatsoever. On the contrary, it helps propel them even more. In a world where a politician feels no shame and their base doesn't hold them accountable, there's no such thing as bad publicity. When you cultivate a base that is defined by its absolute lack of trust in mainstream media, that very same media calling out the lies of your candidate will only make the bWase believe in them even stronger. And the base shows that.

[→]
Some AI generated images
posted by MAGA supporters.

In the days and weeks following the Presidential debate, the online MAGA movement produces endless amounts of visual propaganda material surrounding Haitians in Springfield. Very prominent in their visual corpus: AI-generated imagery. We see Donald Trump on Air Force One, surrounded by dozens of cats and ducks. Cats in military gear wearing MAGA hats. Cats sadly holding up signs saying "Kamala hates me." Trump lovingly hugging cats and ducks. Trump in a forest riding a giant cat and holding a machine gun. Trump holding a kitten in each hand, running away from two topless black men. Kamala Harris at the dinner table, looking menacingly at a cat on the plate in front of her.



Let's take a closer look at one of these images. This AI-generated picture shows the President in a brown coat and a crimson red cape adorned with military-like insignia covering his shoulders. He is standing in a deserted winter scene, dry grass and patches of snow stretch into the distance. The centre of the image are a cat and a duck that Trump is holding close to his chest, one in each arm. Only at second glance do we notice that his entire right hand got lost in the AI creation process. The animals are staring straight at the viewer, Trump's look is wandering off into the distance. His eyes show a certain fatigue and distress, his facial expression is warm and loving. The veins on the one hand that he has are exposed and his knuckles are red. He seems to be squeezing the pets as tight as possible, suggesting a threat, not visible in the image, that he is protecting them from.

The picture's target-audience of course knows what, or rather who, this ominous threat is and auto-completes this missing piece in their minds while looking at the image. They see their Presidential candidate saving these cats and ducks from Haitian migrants in Springfield, and more broadly, from pro-immigrant (= pro-pet-eating) Democrats. With the look on his face and the emperoresque cape that he is wrapped into, Trump is being displayed as the empathic strongman who single-handedly saves the innocent little pets from immigrants coming to devour them.

The image itself does not offer any textual context or information, it doesn't come cluttered with campaign slogans or calls to go out and vote either. This might get added as an image caption by whoever posts and reposts it, but it might also not. In the age of perfectly tailored social media feeds, propaganda doesn't need to be appealing to an audience as diverse as possible, like a billboard might need to. If your feed decided to show you this image, you are very likely to understand it. There's no need for contextualisation and explanation, no need for long paragraphs that would only take away from the direct visual impact.

The elephant in the room with this image, just like with many other pieces of Republican propaganda throughout this election cycle, of course, is the fact that it is completely artificial and devoid of any real-life basis. While the picture of Trump in his snow soldier apparel holding two pets with one amputated hand in the middle of nowhere isn't necessarily going to look convincing to many people, other AI images are more difficult to detect as such. And even the mentioned above can be mistaken for a real photograph by people that aren't very media-literate.

With the following example of AI-generated propaganda, there much more room for misinterpretation. It is by design, that certain people will mistakenly believe it to be a real photo. And for the majority that doesn't, it still holds the same effect.

[→]
Analysed AI imagery.

This image is supposed to depict Democratic Presidential nominee Kamala Harris, menacingly smiling at the viewer over a live cat sitting on the dinner plate in front of her. The message is clear: Harris is supporting immigrants coming into the country, Harris is the real threat to Americans' pets. There are other plates with more food on the table, as well as a glass and two bottles of alcohol. The scenery is rounded off by three shelves in the background, filled with spirits. Taking a closer look at the text on the bottle to Harris' left and the necklace that she is wearing, it becomes clear that this image is artificially generated. There is, however, certainly a part of the target-audience that is neither going to notice these faulty traces of an image generator, nor recognise the classic 'AI-look', which this picture very much has. Even though it is most likely a very small percentage, there are people that, after having come across this image on their social media feeds, are going to believe Harris herself eats cats. The vast majority of MAGA supporters who will understand this AI image for what it is, are nevertheless going to be just as agitated by it. Because the key message behind it (Harris is supporting immigrants coming into the country, Harris is the real threat to Americans' pets...) stands true to them no matter the artificial nature of this picture. AI is a powerful visual vessel, transporting a message that goes way beyond just whether Harris does or does not eat cats, whether Trump did or did not save those pets with his own hand(s). It provides a tangible visual anchor for the Republican base, to solidify and connect their preexisting perceptions to. AI-generated imagery is an amplifier, a powerful tool, enabling MAGA to creatively live out their fanatic fantasies, to spew out their far-right ideologies.



5.3. The avalanche and its aftermath

These images are getting created, posted, liked and shared by MAGA supporters. Reposted, reliked, reshared by people all over the internet. By right-wing extremists, by impressionable teenagers, by media-unsavvy grandparents. On *X*, on *Instagram*, on *TikTok*, on *Facebook*, on *YouTube*. Eventually there are also the official accounts of the House Judiciary GOP, Donald Trump, JD Vance, Elon Musk and many more high ranking officials of the MAGA entourage reposting these memes. The avalanche reaches peak velocity.

“Don’t let the crybabies in the media dissuade you, fellow patriots. Keep the cat memes flowing.”

[*]
JD Vance on X, 10.09.2024.

And their visual warfare goes way beyond AI memes – it is very much multifaceted. There are thousands of videos on TikTok racking up millions of views. There are large right-wing podcasts reciting the Springfield lies to millions of listeners. There are billboards, paid for by the Republican Party of Arizona saying “Eat less kittens – vote republican!” in the corporate identity style of the fast food chain *Chick-Fil-A*.^[153] There are signs at rallies, flags in the streets, stickers on cars and prints on T-shirts.

[153]
Melnick, Kyle. “Arizona GOP billboards implore voters to ‘EAT LESS KITTENS’,”
Washington Post, 11.09.24.

A dynamic is created, in which the various actors of the MAGA propaganda machine never cease to elevate one another onto even more extreme levels of visual messaging. Trump’s discourse, in terms of what he says and how he says it, creates the initial breeding ground for his base to build their propaganda upon. He knows how to read the room, what conspiracies, culture war issues and dog whistles to cater to.

When the political leader of the movement is prepared to go beyond any limits and norms previously existent in Presidential races, the base is going to follow him and respond by only intensifying the ways in which they show their political convictions.

One private social media post puts the fairy tale out there. Online MAGA people get wind of it and start vehemently pushing the fake story. Trump's entourage picks up on it and propels the hoax. Right wing media produces hours and hours on end of coverage. Trump says he has "seen it on TV" and boosts attention even further. MAGA supporters turn to social media, deifying Trump and demonising Haitians. *Telling the story of their heavenly saviour coming down to protect the kittens from the Democrats and their immigrants.* This hateful messaging doesn't just stay online, it also results in tangible real life consequences: Banners get put up outside the Springfield city hall saying "Haitians Have No Home Here" in English and in Haitian Creole. Ku Klux Klan fliers are spread around town. A Neo-Nazi group waves swastikas in front of the home of the mayor. Shoppers are meowing at Haitians in supermarkets. There are white supremacist marches. Windows of homes shattered. Acid thrown on cars. Waves of bomb threats all over the city. Two hospitals going on lockdown. Schools and businesses closed.^[154]

[154]
Donegan, Moira. "The American right is inciting a pogrom against Haitian immigrants in Ohio," *The Guardian*, 18.09.24.

It is a vicious cycle of ever-intensifying right wing propaganda. An avalanche of hatred that takes up so much speed and force on its way down the fake news hill that it becomes uncontrollable even for its initial architects. And that is by design. An avalanche that takes off online, gains momentum, and crashes into the real world, claiming real world victims.

Back in Springfield, many Haitians that took the difficult decision and the excruciating journey to flee their country in hope of finding a new, better life in the US, suddenly end up finding themselves facing an even worse reality. *While trying to avoid the rain, one falls into the river.*



[→]
AI imagery that made it onto a protest sign in Springfield, Noble, Rebecca, *AFP*, 12.09.24.

To Wield the Double-Edged Sword

**Navigating the
Ambivalent Power that
Communication Design
Holds in Today's
Politics**

"If we lose the midterms and we lose 2028, some in this room are going to prison, myself included."

[*]
Steve Bannon in a speech at a Conservative Partnership Institute event, 05.11.25.

Dear reader,

As you reach the end of this thesis, you will have found grounds for pessimism. If you too object to Trumpism, we'll agree that things do not look bright in US politics. We'll also agree that the role visual communication played in aggravating the situation throughout the 2024 election cycle was significant. We'll agree that voices and forces opposing Trump and the far-right were not in the position to put up a genuine fight on the propaganda playing field. We'll agree that the glass seems half empty.

After six chapters full of right-wing populism, post-truth politics, AI-generated memes, social media bubbles, fearmongering, ragebaiting, cult-like devotion, deified consumption, radicalisation, conspiracy theories, demonisation of opposition, fake news, violence, hatred, lies, division.

Over 100 pages full of Republicans, Democrats, conservatives, liberals, Kamala Harris, Joe Biden, JD Vance, Joe Rogan, Musk, Swift, *CNN*, *Fox News*, podcasts, *TikTok*, *Instagram*, *X*, USA, USA, USA, MAGA hat, MAGA movement, MAGA something, Donald Trump, Trump, Trump...

I imagine that this read has not always been easy. The topic, the people and the dynamics to which I have dedicated this work are difficult to digest. When I embarked on this journey I was equipped with a conception of Republicans' visual propaganda during the 2024 election, but mainly with a lot of questions. Now, on the last metres, it's time for a reflection.

What did I find?

The 2024 US Presidential election was heavily influenced by novel communication strategies. Imagery and messaging marked this cycle like no previous election. The eventual success of the Grand Old Party partially came down to the ways in which Republicans utilised visual communication to push their candidate and political agenda. It went way beyond classic political propaganda – the impact that media and public had on this election marked the turn of an era. In the past, discourse used to be held and led by the political parties and the established media. Previously, political communication, no matter how flawed an argument or how malicious an attack, was still more or less firmly grounded on a common truth. A set of objective facts, that most actors within that system believed in and agreed on. Never entirely solid – as the fact that Hannah Arendt already discussed these issues over 70 years ago shows – but more solid than today. This used to provide an anchor point for people to orientate their beliefs around. Crucially, it also facilitated discourse between supporters of different parties, candidates and convictions. We have now fully entered an era where none of this is the case anymore. 2024 was not the starting point of this era but rather its preliminary culmination. The era of post-truth communication.

In a societal environment more and more captured by post-truth politics, by the death of a common truth and the birth of AI realities, the MAGA movement thrived. Donald Trump and his entourage of established and independent right-wing media, wealthy elites and powerful tech-billionaires, fellow Republican politicians, campaign strategists and MAGA supporters went into this race prepared. At the heart of the Republican propaganda triumph was the MAGA movement's presence on social media, in the streets, and in every aspect of its followers' lives. Fueled by Trump and his devoted entourage, his supporters became ever more united and radical in the time leading up to this election. They understood the power of wielding visual communication as a weapon to push their message. With a base so committed to the cause, messaging became all about deifying their side and demonising the opposition – facts were unimportant. They went above and beyond in their visual propaganda. They showed remarkable endurance and persistence in their pursuit of winning every small battle, dominating every narrative. Stories like the aftermath of Taylor Swift's Harris endorsement and the smear campaign against Haitian immigrants come to mind. The grassroots movement lights the first spark, the campaign, the media and Trump then quickly jump on the burning propaganda bandwagon.

Together, the four Republican Horsemen of the Apocalypse ignite a fiery spiral of ever-intensifying visual warfare. They bury any victim in their way under tons and tons of fake news, AI-generated imagery and malicious news coverage. Better than ever before, Steve Bannon's 'Flood the zone with shit'-mantra proved to be working as intended ahead of this election. Neither Democrats nor the media nor anyone else could keep up with the speed, the intensity and force of right-wing communication. The American political discourse ahead of the 2024 election did indeed get flooded. Flooded with fake news and far-right ideology. This warfare galvanised the base, no matter how much the reasons for the attack were pure fiction. The base doesn't believe in facts that don't comply with their own truth. Whatever a Republican politician says about an opponent, whatever an AI image from a MAGA social media account displays, whatever conspiracy theory a right-wing podcaster spins, the movement will go along. This complete erosion of a common truth is an urgent sign of a democracy in acute danger.

Democrats tried to stand up to Republican visual warfare. Despite their best efforts, they never reached a dynamic close to that of the 'Make America Great Again' movement. Their messaging wasn't as strategically fragmented, they didn't have as many different key actors fighting on different fronts for the same cause. There were brief moments where they did dominate the narrative, the media attention and the polls. However, liberals didn't manage to make it stick. They did not have that singular figure that supporters rallied around. They did not have the policy proposals that got people excited. They did not have the propaganda strategy to communicate to voters. And, they did not want to fight MAGA with its own weapons. Because adopting MAGA's communication methods would have meant stooping down to its political principles. Democrats didn't manage to find a viable alternative, making equal use of new modes of propaganda while still sticking to truth, integrity and democracy.

Now, from the graphic designer's perspective, what remains? The 2024 election saga was a resounding testament to the impact that visual communication can have. The large repertoire of visual material, imagery and communication that MAGA applied played a significant role in pushing their far-right agenda. Their decentralisation of means of propaganda made their visual warfare highly effective – and impossible to contain. We entered an era where powerful political imagery doesn't come from campaigns, agencies and graphic designers anymore, but from anyone and everyone with a phone, a social media account and access to artificial intelligence. There are ever-more visual communication

and graphic elements everywhere to be seen, but the share that actually gets created by the hand of a designer steadily decreases.

This is not a reason for the rise of the era of post-truth communication – but a result of it. The designer has to adapt to this new set of circumstances, this new ambiguous dynamic. In a (political) environment that is more and more incapable of sharing a common truth, that is so over-saturated with imagery of all sorts, traditional streamlined political communication is not prone to be successful anymore. The designer needs to reflect on their role in today's visual political discourse. We need to acknowledge that novel media and technology have so far proven to be more useful for right-wing causes than progressive ones. When your ideology indulges in inventing realities that confirm your bigotries, you are going to like generative artificial intelligence. When you shield yourself off from engaging in reflection and discussion, you are going to like social media and filter bubbles. When you stand with your political leader in cult-like deification, you are going to like the endless craziness of their devotional articles. When your trust in mainstream media is inherently eroded, you are going to like independent alternative media sources, telling you what you want to hear. The conscious designer has to understand this in order to define strategies for progressive democratic forces to better navigate this novel playing field and to make better use of its powerful tools.

Visual propaganda is of course not solely responsible for the rise of Trumpism. But in a climate of dwindling trust in democratic institutions and established media, in a world of ever-growing far-right sentiments and destruction of objective common grounds, in the age of social media, AI and fake news, authoritarian despots like Donald Trump and his MAGA movement are wielding the sword of visual communication, defeating anything that lies in their path to power.

But, dear reader,
I want to leave you on a note of hope.

I want to end on the perfect example of how political propaganda can, today, also help a progressive movement to success – in a big way. The first example of this since Trump’s victory in late 2024. And the perfect example, given its historic character and the fact that it unfolded in the heart of America – and the heart of American capitalism: *New York City*.

Twelve months after the American Presidential election, New York City held its mayoral election. 366 days after Americans had heaved a 78-year-old authoritarian right-wing populist back into Presidential office, New Yorkers chose a 34-year-old socialist muslim as their mayor. Zohran Kwame Mamdani won in historic fashion. Over two million New Yorkers went out to vote, more than a million for Mamdani. A turnout the Big Apple had not seen since 1969. He became the first ever muslim mayor-elect of the biggest city in the country, the first ever south-asian and the youngest in more than a century.^[155]

In one of the first polls of the race in February 2025, polling all Democratic candidates, Mamdani was in last place at 1%.^[156] Six months later in July, he won the Democratic primaries, forcing his biggest opponent, centrist Democrat and former Governor of New York Andrew Cuomo to concede and continue his mayoral bid as an independent candidate. In that same February poll, Cuomo had still led Mamdani by 32%. Then in November, another four months after the primaries, Mamdani won the general election for mayor of New York City, leading Cuomo by almost ten percentage points.

He did so mainly due to two things: agenda and communication. He focused on a set of precise policy proposals that resonated with many voters. Most New Yorkers that knew Mamdani, also knew exactly what he stood for: Rent freezes, fast and free buses, universal child-care. Three resoundingly popular policies that he kept relentlessly pushing

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Oreskes, Benjamin; Syam, Umi; Weingart, Eden. "How Mamdani Built a Winning Campaign in One Short Year," *New York Times*, 04.11.25.

[156]
Emerson College Polling. "New York City Mayoral Poll: Cuomo Leads Primary, Adams Faces Low Support Amid High Unfavorability," 07.02.25.

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Fitzsimmons, Emma G. "N.Y.C. Grocery Prices Are High. Could City-Owned Stores Help?," *New York Times*, 12.12.24.

[158]
Chen, Stefanos. "What's Behind This \$10 Chicken Over Rice? An \$18,000 Permit.," *New York Times*, 04.02.24.

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Fitzsimmons, Emma G. "A Bigger N.Y.P.D.? Mamdani Has a Different Idea.," *New York Times*, 01.04.25.

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Mamdani, Zohran (@zohrankamdani). "Why did so many working class New Yorkers vote for Donald Trump last week – and even more not vote at all? [...]," *Instagram*, 15.11.24.

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Oreskes, Benjamin; Syam, Umi; Weingart, Eden. "How Mamdani Built a Winning Campaign in One Short Year," *New York Times*, 04.11.25.

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Mamdani, Zohran. "I'm freezing... your rent as the next mayor of New York City. Let's plunge into the details.," *Facebook*, 02.01.25.

[163]
Chen, Stefanos. "What's Behind This \$10 Chicken Over Rice? An \$18,000 Permit.," *New York Times*, 04.02.24.

[164]
Mamdani, Zohran (@zohrankamdani). "Today, I confronted a cowardly 'border czar' Tom Homan [...]," *Instagram*, 12.03.25.

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Mamdani, Zohran (@zohrankamdani). "Billionaires ke paas already sab kuchh hai. Ab, aapka time aageya. Billionaires already have everything. Now, your time has come.," *Instagram*, 04.06.25.

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Mays, Jeffery C. "As N.Y.C. Mayoral Primary Nears, Money Talks as Mamdani Walks," *New York Times*, 20.06.25.

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Fandos, Nicholas. "Mamdani Plans to Keep Tisch as Police Commissioner if Elected," *New York Times*, 22.10.25.

in his messaging. *Mamdani = Rent freezes + fast and free buses + universal childcare*. That is the essential that people throughout the five boroughs retained from his campaign. Building on that foundation, his campaign then went way beyond.

In terms of policy, aside from his three signature proposals: Mamdani advocated for installing five city-owned grocery stores to tackle the cost-of-living crisis.^[157] Reforming laws for city business permits that had drastically driven up costs for street food vendors and thus subsequently for customers.^[158] Creating a Department of Community Safety to handle social issues that police showed they were not capable of dealing with.^[159] And, and, and... He also clearly positioned himself against Israel's genocide in Gaza, an issue that was important to many voters, even though not NYC-related.

And then, in terms of communication: The Democratic socialist mastered the social media game. A typical Mamdani video featured him walking through a specific place in New York, talking about concrete issues. With seriousness, enthusiasm, determination. Without cheap opposition attacks, empty rhetoric, superficial self-adulation. He showed that he cared.

And he listened. His campaign took off after Trump won in Washington. Mamdani posted a viral video of himself out in the streets of New York, talking to voters.^[160] He asked simple questions, leaving people space to freely share what's on their mind in the aftermath of the Presidential election. The NYC assemblyman talked to a diverse group of people in his interviews, they had almost exclusively voted Trump – or not voted at all. He asked what the important issues were to them and what Democrats would need to do to win them back.

Shortly after his campaign launch in late October of 2024, Mamdani shares a video of himself running the famous New York marathon and talking about his agenda.^[161] He then shares a video of himself taking part in a legendary New York tradition, swimming in the city's freezing waters on New Year's Day (talking about freezing the rent).^[162] He's filmed outside at night, talking to food vendors who, just like their clients, are suffering from surging prices.^[163] (Every New Yorker can relate to anger about expensive halal food). He goes to confront Trump's border czar who's visiting New York, going head-to-head with police officers and trying to confront the Trump man.^[164] He makes videos in a variety of languages that represent New York's demography,^[165] walks the entire length of Manhattan for seven hours, using the time to thank his supporters and volunteers,^[166] he goes on the popular show 'Subway Takes', talking about his proposals on a New York metro line, doesn't shy away from mainstream TV either,^[167] organises a scavenger hunt

through the city with thousands of attendees,^[168] hosts a 13.000 people rally together with other progressive Democrat voices and the Governor of New York,^[169] and, and, and...

[168]
Zohran for NYC. "Over 4,000 New Yorkers Participate In Zohran's City-Wide Summer Scavenger Hunt," 24.08.25.

Zohran Mamdani was everywhere. He went to every corner of the city he sought to represent. He was on everyone's social media and news feed. His reach even went beyond New York City. His communication strategy exposed his campaign to a global audience. He was approachable, interested and invested. He went where his voters were, he talked about the issues they talked about. And, critically, he proposed concrete solutions to those challenges facing New York(ers). He packaged all of that in an exciting, powerful and all-encompassing propaganda strategy (for more on his campaign's visuals, see chapter 2.4). Mamdani proved that a thought-through political messaging campaign can move mountains.

[169]
Lerer, Lisa. "Mamdani and the Left's Biggest Stars Unite Before a Sea of Supporters," *New York Times*, 26.10.25.

But he also proved that the right stories and visuals only weigh as much as the message they are trying to convey. He won because he delivered on both. Exactly, what the Democratic Party didn't do on a national level a year prior. At times, Kamala Harris also had a well conceived messaging strategy. However, her campaign never succeeded in communicating her as a charismatic, courageous and authentic person. She didn't have the political agenda that people rallied around, the concrete proposals that inspired hope.

Throughout the 2024 US Presidential election Donald Trump and the MAGA movement held a monopoly on political propaganda. The Democratic Party under Kamala Harris wasn't equipped to propose a well-communicated alternative. One year later, in New York City, Zohran Mamdani showed how it could be done; proved that it can be done. It remains to be seen if more politicians and parties will follow his example. In other cities, in the United States, around the world.

When progressive policies meet political propaganda, prosperity is possible.

The final words belong to Mayor Mamdani.
An extract of his victory speech on election night,
November 5th, 2025:

"The sun may have set over our city this evening, but as Eugene Debs once said: "I can see the dawn of a better day for humanity." For as long as we can remember, the working people of New York have been told by the wealthy and the well-connected that power does not belong in their hands. Fingers bruised from lifting boxes on the warehouse floor, palms calloused from delivery bike handlebars, knuckles scarred with kitchen burns: these are not hands that have been allowed to hold power. And yet, over the last 12 months, you have dared to reach for something greater. Tonight, against all odds, we have grasped it. The future is in our hands. My friends, we have toppled a political dynasty.

[...]

Now, I know that many have heard our message only through the prism of misinformation. Tens of millions of dollars have been spent to redefine reality and to convince our neighbors that this new age is something that should frighten them. As has so often occurred, the billionaire class has sought to convince those making \$30 an hour that their enemies are those earning \$20 an hour. They want the people to fight amongst ourselves so that we remain distracted from the work of remaking a long-broken system. We refuse to let them dictate the rules of the game any more. They can play by the same rules as the rest of us. Together, we will usher in a generation of change. And if we embrace this brave new course, rather than fleeing from it, we can respond to oligarchy and authoritarianism with the strength it fears, not the appeasement it craves. After all, if anyone can show a nation betrayed by Donald Trump how to defeat him, it is the city that gave rise to him. And if there is any way to terrify a despot, it is by dismantling the very conditions that allowed him to accumulate power. This is not only how we stop Trump; it's how we stop the next one. So, Donald Trump, since I know you're watching, I have four words for you: Turn the volume up.

[...]

New York will remain a city of immigrants: a city built by immigrants, powered by immigrants and, as of tonight, led by an immigrant. So hear me, President Trump, when I say this: to get to any of us, you will have to get through all of us.

[...]"



On your Marx, get
set, Zo! Socialist
Mamdani wins
race for mayor

THE RED APPLE



After a campaign that promised high taxes, free stuff, hating Israel and vibes, socialist Zohran Mamdani romped to victory last night and will become the 111th mayor of New York City.

PAGES 4-11

NY Post: Peter LisVigna

[↑]
The front cover of the right-wing tabloid *New York Post*, the morning after Zohran Mamdani's election victory, Nov 5, 2025.

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Deify, Demonise, Divide.

Graphic Design Lessons from
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in the 2024 US Presidential
Election

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Typefaces

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IBM Plex Mono

Paper

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