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**Of Lizards and Ideological Entrepreneurs: Alex Jones and Infowars in the
Relationship between Populist Nationalism and the Post-Global Media Ecology**

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Of Lizards and Ideological Entrepreneurs: Alex Jones and Infowars in the Relationship between Populist Nationalism and the Post-Global Media Ecology

Keywords

Alex Jones, Infowars, ideological entrepreneur, celebrity populist, media and politics, populism, Alt Right, alternative-activist media, conspiracy theory, free speech

Abstract

This contribution analyses the nexus between contemporary US populist nationalism and the post-global media ecology through the case of US radio show host and ‘most paranoid man in America’ Alex Jones and his Infowars. It evaluates the role of Alt Right alternative/activist media and global digital platforms in the success of Jones as ideological entrepreneur. To this end, it looks at Jones’ and Infowars’s message (mostly Falls Flag conspiracy theories and pseudo-science-meets-popular-culture fantasy), persona as celebrity populist spectacle, business model, political alliances with Alt Right and Trump, audience as diverse mix of believers and ironic spectators and, most of all, media. In particular, we analyse the mix of legacy and social media and their respective role in his rise and alleged downfall. We evaluate Jones’ efforts

as effective ideological entrepreneur, pushing his counter-hegemonic ideology from the fringes to the mainstream.

‘There is a war on for your mind!’(1)

US radio show host, multimedia businessman, political pundit and ‘most paranoid man in America’, Alex Jones, and his Infowars have been followed and commented on by media in the US and, especially since 2016, across the globe. In scholarly analyses, Jones/Infowars tend to be mentioned only in passing in the growth of populism and the Alt Right in the US, in the role of (social) media in 21st Century populist nationalism and as fake news generator. At the height of his popularity (2017-2018), Jones and his message attracted two million weekly listeners to his syndicated and streamed radio show and up to 1.3 billion views to his YouTube channels, while Infowars.com had twenty million monthly visits – 80% from the US.

(2) These numbers alone warrant closer scrutiny.

Taking the case of the rise and ‘fall’ of Alex Jones and Infowars, this contribution elaborates on two things. First, it analyses Jones as ideological entrepreneur, promoting a counter-hegemonic mix of conspiracy theories and populist-nationalist political views that echo global ideological trends yet have a distinctly US flavour. Second, using the concept of alternative-activist media and weighing media-centric versus society-centric interpretations, it analyses the role of

legacy and digital media platforms in Jones/Infowars' position in the US socio-political landscape: did social media 'make' Alex Jones or did he use them as an extension and echo chamber for a message broadcast through legacy media? This question is epitomized in social media's role in Jones' 'downfall'.

The analysis takes a number of steps. After this introduction, we develop a theoretical framework that combines insights into contemporary socio-political trends (nationalism, populism, conspiracism) and the concept of the ideological entrepreneur with insights into the role of legacy and social media and the concept of right-wing alternative-activist media. Against this theoretical framework, we analyse the evolving position of Jones/Infowars. We dissect the message, discuss the role of Jones celebrity persona, profile the audience and evaluate the role of various media/platforms in Jones' rise and apparent fall in late 2018. We conclude with an evaluation of Jones' success as ideological entrepreneur and the media's role as instigators, amplifiers or gatekeepers.

The empirical material consists of primary and secondary sources. We followed Jones/Infowars for three years, analysing messages and media use, collecting data relating to Jones media business and audiences, and performing an extensive search and analysis of coverage of Jones/Infowars between 2012 and 2019 in mainstream and social media and in online communities like Reddit. All data were triangulated. Writing the analysis, we were confronted with the removal of much online, primary source material from August 2018 onwards (see further). Therefore, we back up our analysis of original Jones/Infowars content with secondary sources.

As a case study, the analysis is limited to one actor (Jones/Infowars) analysed during a limited time and space in what is a much more complex web of actors affecting long-term societal developments. Yet these limitations give meaning to the case as it allows us to de- and reconstruct specific processes and actors' involvement. As such, our case study aims to be descriptive but also interpretative and to have relevance beyond the particulars of Jones/Infowars and, even, the US.

Theoretical framework

[W]hat we are witnessing is a toxic combination of policy blunders on austerity, war and globalisation coupled with a new hybrid media and political system dominated by reality TV, social media and filter bubbles. Combined with what has been dubbed 'post-truth politics' [this] results in the emergence of swathes of expressive voters moved by dangerous rhetoric and nativism [...] increasing the potency of populist and nationalist appeals. (Suiter, 2016: 25)

The rise of a mix of populism and nationalism in the West has captured the attention of social scientists. The focus has been on the specifics of 21st Century populism and nationalism, on the role of legacy and, especially, social media in creating fake news, filter bubbles and echo-chambers and, to some extent, on populist celebrities. We

elaborate on some of these issues as a theoretical framework against which to analyse the Jones/Infowars.

Populist nationalism: global trend, local path dependence

It is beyond this paper to fully explain the current political climate in the US. Instead, we focus on how the US, while fitting global trends, follows a distinct path with a mix of Alt Right nationalism, populism and conspiracism.

Gattinara and Pirro (2018) and Lyons (2017) identify the Alt Right (short for Alternative Right) as loosely organized social movements at the far-right end of the political spectrum, encompassing ‘different branches of White nationalism, including “scientific” racists, sections of the neonazi movement, and adherents of European New Right ideology’ (Lyons, 2017). They reject mainstream conservatism, aggressive foreign policy, US moral leadership in the world, free trade orthodoxy, liberal internationalism and multicultural liberalism, (non-white) migration, feminism and political correctness (Heikkilä, 2017). Instead, they embrace a nationalist mix of isolationism (America First, MAGA) and a form of white racial identity. Jardina (2019) sees white nationalism as white identity ‘under threat’, becoming politically salient in a context where it is (pronounced by politicians or ideological entrepreneurs as) under attacked. As such, white nationalism fits the racism of white supremacy and nativists but is not restricted to racists. While occurring in women as much as men

(Jardina, 2019), some relate white nationalism to white male identity, considered under treat from the #metoo movement, feminism and gendered identity politics. This fits the misogyny of the so-called manosphere that harbours both activist men's movements, aiming to change a status quo perceived as dominated by women, and – predominantly online - communities like Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) that believe in a feminist conspiracy to manipulate men and that vow to stay away from women, stop dating and not have children (Lin, 2017).

Conspiracy, distrust and lack of agency

Current US populist-nationalism relates to an interest in conspiracy theories that is stronger than elsewhere in the world (Barkun, 2013). Conspiracism refers to a wide range of theories revolving around secret activities and subversions of invisible enemies, often relating to covered government operations (False Flags) and cover-ups (Deep State). For Aupers (2012: 22), conspiracy thinking is not a fringe pathology but

a cultural phenomenon that revolves around epistemological doubts about the validity of scientific knowledge claims, ontological insecurity about rationalized social systems like the state, multinationals and the media; and a relentless 'will to believe' in a disenchanted world.

Conspiracy operates as an ideological lens and belief in it is not so much about a theory's specifics but about higher-order beliefs such as distrust of authority.

Achterberg (2012) relates these beliefs to feeling a lack of agency/control and, thus, to Durkheim's (1897) notion of anomie: In a world where (you are told that) familiar norms are eroding, individuals experience feelings of powerlessness. Conspiracy theories 'help' people make sense of the world through simple, externalized explanations, restoring a sense of control and predictability.

Some conspiracy theories have been around for a long time, from Elvis Presley still being alive to Deep State involvement in the murder of JFK. Recent years saw a boom in people adhering to diverse conspiracies (Barkun, 2013), including Flat-Earthers who dismiss scientific proof of a round earth as a conspiracy of institutions like NASA and the Royal Society; Anti-Vaxxers who consider vaccines as harmful despite scientific consensus to the contrary; and Birthers who refute that former US president Barack Obama was born in the US, a presidential prerequisite. Profiles of conspiracists do not follow traditional party-political lines. For instance, Anti-Vaxxers and Flat-Earthers can be found across the political spectrum. However, there is a distinct relationship to Alt Right and populist politics, for instance in white nationalist paranoia.

Ideological entrepreneurs

While much attention has gone to the relationship between these political movements and the US presidential election campaign, victory and politics of Donald Trump, we follow Gattinara and Pillo's (2018) suggestion to look beyond party and institutional politics to include non-party actors, especially political pundits like Glenn Beck, Russ Limbaugh and, indeed, Alex Jones. Avlon (2010: 2) calls them wingnuts: 'professional partisans and unhinged activists, the hard-core haters and the paranoid conspiracy theorists [fuelled by] self-segregated echo chamber of talk radio, television news, and the Internet'. We consider them as ideological entrepreneurs (North, 1981): figures that play a key role in ideological change and that thrive in times of upheaval and alienation - a condition that also feeds conspiracism - when people are open to alternative interpretations of how things work. Combining North's conception with insights from Kirzner and Schumpeter, Storr (2011:107-8) states that:

[an ideological entrepreneur] would be alert to opportunities to sell a new ideology that better explains the world than existing ideologies. [He] would be a bold innovator who created new conceptions of how the world works or combined and presented existing models of how the world works in new ways (i.e., to promote ideological development). He would work to capture the ideological marketplace, competing fiercely against other ideological entrepreneurs as well as against the weight of existing public opinion and conventions.

While an ideological entrepreneur cannot be sure he will persuade people, his counter-ideology has a better chance of success if he can provide ‘a convincing image of a relationship between the specific injustices perceived by various groups and the larger system which the intellectual entrepreneurs desire altered’, as well as a guide to action and a distinct alternative picture of a world free of these injustices (Storr, 2011: 108). Importantly, the entrepreneur’s alternative can be dystopian or utopian and can compete with more scientific/common-sense/meaningful explanations of how/why things are as they are.

We argue that the ideological entrepreneur’s *modus operandi* is influenced by the media-saturated and celebritized nature of US politics and by populism’s affective performativity. We consider a celebrity as a construct, resulting from negotiated relationships between a person wanting to be/remain famous, audiences and media (Authors, 2018). A celebrity’s image consists of a public persona based on the job they do and the ideas/products/issues they endorse; a private persona, i.e. the official private life; and the ‘real’ person behind the mask (Turner, 2004). The relationship between the three is based in a celebrity’s performance and determines their perceived authenticity. Celebrity is essential to ideological entrepreneurs who extract political conviction from their mediated celebrity status and performance. As such, they must be understood in their ‘affective, communicative, and performative dimensions’ (Sengul, 2019: 1).

Media in 21st century populist-nationalism

Academics have tried to understand the role of legacy and, especially, social media as creator and catalyst of (nationalist-populist) extremes. Authors suggest that media feed polarisation by creating filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) and echo chambers (Sunstein, 2007), and analyse the relationship between so-called fake news and post-truth politics (Waisbord, 2018). Some analyse right (Guardino and Snyder, 2013) and left-oriented (Jutel, 2016, 2018) legacy media, many others dedicate attention to the Web and social media. For one, social media have created a drift of opinion formation and commentary from mainstream media outlets to a digital ecology. Not curbed by corporate interests, a wide range of personalities use digital platforms to address large audiences with opinions from across the political spectrum, including the left leaning humorous podcasts of Chapo Trap House; blogger, atheist public intellectual and one of the 'Four Horsemen of the Non-Apocalypse' Sam Harris; YouTube Professor Jordan Peterson, a Christian traditionalist and critic of authoritarianist political correctness and Alt Right, former Breitbart editor, neo-liberal podcaster Ben Shapiro, amongst others.

To understand Jones/Infowars position in this digital media ecology, we follow Heikkilä (2017) and Lyons (2017) definition of the Alt Right as an online movement in several ways. First, the web and social media allow dispersed individuals to meet and create a community and movement as a network of networks. So, ironically, isolationist, anti-global and anti-cosmopolitan movements embrace

global-cosmopolitan media technologies like YouTube and Facebook. Second, the Alt Right has ‘firm links with participatory media networks through websites such as 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit’ (Heikkilä, 2017). Championing free speech, these websites turn a blind eye to hate speech, welcoming communicators banned elsewhere. Third, the Alt Right engages the web to deploy online meme, bashing and trolling tactics (Lyons, 2017). They spread their extremist message using irony and repurposing popular cultural references (cf. Pepe the frog), allowing the message to hide in plain sight and making it hard to criticize or unmask (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

This paper focuses on a somewhat different range of mediated interventions that sit between mainstream mass media and individual use (by citizen or politician) of social media. Sometimes called fringe media, we follow Rolingher and Bunnage (2017) in considering them as alternative-activist media at the disposal of ideological entrepreneurs like Beck, Limbaugh and Jones. Atton (2006: 574) explains how academics mostly use the term alternative media to reference media that want to compensate shortcomings of mainstream media and to strengthen democracy through radicalized professional practices and participatory communication. Right wing media are not considered alternative because they develop a ‘community with closure’ (Couldry, 2002) rather than encourage participation and different voices. However, we argue that alternative-activist media refer to media that are outside of the mainstream or counter-hegemonic, can have a left-progressive or right-conservative political leaning, and may (e.g. 4Chan, Reddit) or may not (some Alt Right websites) invite participatory communication.

This theoretical framework inspires our analyses of Alex Jones as a celebrity ideological entrepreneur who employs a range of alternative-activist media to get his counter-ideological message across and whose political alignment with a presidential candidate helped to push himself, his media and his message into the mainstream.

Ideological Entrepreneur Jones and his alternative-activist Infowars

Meet 'the most paranoid man of America'

Starting out as a relatively unknown radio show, Jones incorporated a mix of Internet and, later, social media platforms into his strategy to sell conspiracy and Alt Right messages to ever wider audiences. Media profiles dedicated to Jones mention a youth as a college drop-out, an early interest in conspiracy theories and media, and a volatile, larger-than-life personality - the basic ingredients for his success as ideological entrepreneur:

wildly successful libertarian- and conspiracy-news juggernaut: Take a kernel of truth, warp it and its context in a funhouse mirror, and set it against a heavy backdrop of conspiracy, while raising the stakes with a generous dose of fear. The strategy has made Jones — a stocky central Texan with a penchant for clamorous outbursts, fanciful digressions, and

meandering stream-of-consciousness monologues — a celebrity. It's also made Infowars — his broad kingdom of media properties, including a website, webstore, and four-hour daily broadcast — a required part of the far-right's media diet. (Wartzel, 2017)

We dissect these claims to understand Jones as an ideological entrepreneur who sells 1) his message by means of 2) the affective performativity of his celebrity persona and 3) alternative-activist multimedia 'empire' and 4) business model, reaching 5) diverse audiences that help him push his counter-ideology into the mainstream.

Alex Jones and Infowars: The message

Jones presents a mix of economic predictions, pseudo-science-meets-popular-culture fantasy and various conspiracies. First, his economic predictions invariably feed into apocalyptic doom scenarios, dating back as far as the Y2K/Millennium bug, expected to lead to world-wide chaos and recession (Bilderberg, 2014). To date, none of his predictions have been proven right. Second, Jones composes intricate views of the universe and human existence, a mix of pseudo-science and fantasy based loosely in Simulation Theory (Bostrom, 2003) – Jones' 'false hologram' - but adding his own insights ('12 dimensions', 'Evil'). As Jones 'explains' when invited on the *Joe Rogan Experience* (PowerfulJRE, 2017):

Einstein's physics showed it, Max Planck's physics showed it: there's at least 12 dimensions, and all the top scientists and billionaires are coming out, saying it's a false hologram. It is artificial; the computers are scanning it and finding tension points where it's artificially projected, and gravity is bleeding into this universe - that's what they call dark matter - so we are like a thought or a dream that's a wisp in some computer programme [...]

There is this 'Sub-transmission Zone' below the third dimension which is turned over to the most horrible things - that's what it resonates to - and it's trying to get up into the third dimension - that's just a basic level consciousness, to launch into the next levels. And our species is already way up at the fifth/sixth dimension consciously [SIC] - our best people.

But there's this war, trying to basically destroy Humanity, because Humanity has free will. And there's a decision - which level we want to go to. We have free will, so Evil is allowed to come and contend (and not just good).

In the Rogan interview, Jones ultimately connects these dimensions to a war of the elites against the American people.

This illustrates, third, how the economic predictions and fantasy-inspired theories are based in Jones' main message that the world is dominated by conspiracies, mainly False Flags. The U.S. government, especially the Deep State, is

behind natural and man-made accidents and disasters. Jones' visibility as conspiracist was minted when he was one of the first to claim that the government was behind the 9/11 terror attacks. As his popularity grew, so did the spectrum and outlandishness of his claims. United around a fear-mongering threat of the immanent fall of America, his main conspiracy themes include (Klein, 2016), 1) Satanist- Illuminati (globalists, business men, world leaders) are building a New World Order that will be run by a lizard super race; 2) The government is controlling the weather, most notably through so-called chem trails; 3) Prominent Democrats including Barack Obama, Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton are lizard people and demons, smelling of sulphur; and 4) the Deep State is complicit in mass shootings by lone gunmen to take away people's guns. Most notably, Jones insisted that the 2012 Sandy Hook elementary school shooting never happened and that child actors played the victims. This resulted in a defamation lawsuit from Sandy Hook victims' parents claiming harassment from 'truthers' that follow Jones' lead. In November 2017, Jones issued an apology, of sorts: 'I don't know what the truth is. All I know is that the official story of Sandy Hook has more holes in it than Swiss cheese' (Jervis 2017). The fall-out of this case was significant (see further).

Alex Jones and Infowars: The political support

Despite early (unsuccessful) political ambitions, for a long time, Jones focused on conspiracies without taking a party-political stand. He claimed he wanted to break through the Left-Right distinction to focus on False Flags. Certainly, some of the Deep State and Truther conspiracies resulted in both a far-right and far left following.

In recent years, Jones identifies more openly as a libertarian and paleo-conservative, a fraction of conservatism rooted in New Deal opposition and Edmond Burke (Scotchie, 2017). He was strongly involved in the Birther Movement attacking Obama (cf. his documentary *The Obama Deception*) and in the 2016 presidential election race he sided against Hilary Clinton. He had a pronounced role in propagating Pizzagate, the - since debunked - conspiracy that Hillary Clinton was running a child sex ring out of a pizzeria, resulting in a man firing a gun in that restaurant. Jones was forced to apologize for propagating this theory. This turn to politics coincided with his embrace of social media (see further), reaching ever larger audiences and, thus, pushing his counter-ideologies into the mainstream.

The biggest boost to his work as ideological entrepreneur and status as celebrity-conspiracist came when he and – then presidential candidate - Donald Trump endorsed each other. In December 2015, Trump was a guest on the Alex Jones show. When Jones told Trump: ‘Ninety per cent of my listeners are Trump supporters’, Trump replied: ‘Your reputation is amazing. I will not let you down’ (Ohlheiser, 2018). As triumphant president-elect, Trump called Alex Jones live on air, saying: ‘Listen, Alex, I just talked to the kings and the queens of the world. I want to thank you, your audience’ (Ohlheiser, 2018). This mutual endorsement gave Trump

access to Jones' Alt Right following and helped push Jones/Infowars and their counter-hegemonic message closer to the mainstream. Over the years, Jones claimed that Trump echoes Jones/Infowars viewpoints. However, Trump's 2017 order of an attack on Syria went against Jones' isolationism, resulting in Jones crying on air, calling Trump a fraud and ranting: 'Fuck Trump, and fuck these fucking people' (Politi, 2018).

Alex Jones: The persona

Crucial to Jones' success as an ideological entrepreneur is his celebrity status, built on his political views and packaged in a persona of mediated populist spectacle. This crucially revolves around the apparent merging of his public – Jones the radio host and conspiracy theorist - and private – Jones the man's man and true 'believer' - persona, presenting an authentic person who lives and breathes his ideas, carrying his politics into his private life. This is established, first, through highly emotional rants filled with diatribes, shouting and crying, warning the audience in a booming voice that the end is near and/or the Deep State is watching. Jones thus becomes a conduit for affective attunement, confirming the relationship between affect, ideological and power (Papacharissi, 2015).

Second, he bridges his public and private persona by presenting himself as a man's man. He displays his physical fitness, referencing his body builder past –

‘proof’ of the effectiveness of the health products he sells (see business model). He combines attacks on LGBTQ, feminists and identity politics with boasts about his sexual prowess (RightWingWatchdotorg, 2017). His act as extreme performer and his rhetorical style that is wild but carries, seemingly, sincere masculine emotions, make Jones the embodiment and spokesperson of the manosphere and angry white man on the right.

Alex Jones and Infowars: The media

Analyses of the media’s relevance for populist movements and ideological entrepreneurs tend to emphasize social media. However, Jones’ ‘media empire’ is rooted in legacy media (Blakeslee, 2010). He started out as a public access television host for ACTV before becoming a radio presenter for KJFK in 1996, a period when talk radio was booming (Berry & Sobieraj, 2011). In 1999, he was fired for his political views which upset advertisers. In response, he started his own online radio programme, the *Alex Jones show*. By 2001, it was syndicated to a hundred stations through the Genesis Communications Network, for which he was one of the first and most popular voices. At that point, he combined a daily three-hour radio show with a television show three days a week, while developing infowars.com, the website he started in 1995, predating social media. By 2010, Jones’ radio show reached about 2 million weekly listeners and his enterprise, operating from an undisclosed location in

Texas, employed fifteen people (Blakeslee, 2010). With the rise of social media, he developed a strong presence on Twitter and YouTube where he created up to 18 channels. In 2011, he launched Infowars Nightly News TV programme to anchor his new subscriber TV network. By 2017, Jones was running a multimedia business and his general visibility and reach had grown exponentially, with 2 million weekly listeners for his syndicated and streamed radio show and up to 1.3 billion views for his YouTube channels which, in turn, helped his websites to accumulate 20 million monthly visits.

Jones understands the way various media work. Starting from his streamed radio and television show, he repackages this content to fit web and social media formats, markets and algorithms. Every day, new material is re-edited into shorter videos befitting social media like Facebook and YouTube. Algorithmic sorting and recommendation systems make sure this reaches a wide audience (Wong, 2018). So, rather than social media simply 'making' Alex Jones, he uses social media as amplifiers of his right-wing alternative media enterprise, itself a tool in spreading his message as ideological entrepreneur.

Alex Jones and Infowars: The business

At the start of his career in the late 1990s, Jones adhered to a business model typical of talk radio (Barry & Sobieraj, 2011), selling airtime to advertisers, books from other

conspiracy thinkers, and Infowars merchandise (Brown, 2017). Over the years, this extended to selling banner ads on infowars.com, DVDs of his conspiracy documentaries and podcasts of his shows. He launched subscription-only streaming service PrisonPlanet.tv that gave access to his live radio broadcasts. In 2009, his annual revenue approximated \$1.5 million (Blakesee, 2010); by 2013, this had gone up to an estimated annual \$10 million from web and radio advertising, video subscriptions and sales of books, DVDs and merchandise (Seitz-Wald, 2013).

In late 2013, Jones changed his business model (Brown, 2017), almost exclusively generating revenue through the sales of an *Infowars Life* branded, health-related product range. Indeed, Jones' radio show does not generate syndication fees. Distributor Genesis Communications Network operates a barter system, 'paying' radio hosts with three/four minutes advertising time per hour which Jones does not sell on but uses to advertise his own products. Similarly, infowars.com started running almost solely ads for Infowars Life products. Jones stopped chasing subscribers and his YouTube channel video ended with commercials for said products. This resulted in an estimated annual revenue of \$20 million for 2014-2017 (Brown, 2017).

The Infowars Life brand consist of health related and survivalist products, mainly geared towards men, including dietary supplements, brain pills and survival shields with names like Infowars Life Brain Force Plus (allegedly 'supercharging cognitive abilities'), Infowars Life Silver Bullet Colloidal Silver ('indispensable part of any preparedness supply'), and Infowars Life Super Male Vitality ('to boost

testosterone'), amongst others. Lab testing suggests that these are equally (un)effective but overpriced versions of similar products in the market.

As such, Infowars' business model 'is based in monetising the fears created by Jones' messages' (Williamson & Steel, 2018). Next to health-related products, he advertises products such as freeze-dried food, water filters, shortwave radio and seeds. These are aimed at survivalist preppers, an American movement of people preparing for natural or social/man-made disasters with strong imagery of apocalyptic manhood (Kelly, 2016). While this self-sufficient business model probably was a response to a wider slump in talk radio revenue, it contributes to the 'community of closure' and confirms Robertson's (2015: 83) hypothesis that 'contemporary conspiracy theory culture is both constructed from, and in turn produces, material things'.

Alex Jones and Infowars: The audience

As the numbers above indicate, at the height of his success, Alex Jones reached extensive audiences, 80% US-based. There is little research into the characteristics of his following and traffic monitors like alexa.com provide no demographics. A 2016 Infowar.com media kit suggests an audience of: 72% men and 28% women; an age distribution of 22% in the 18-34, 35% in the 35-49 and 43% in the 50+ age bracket; education levels at 35% no college degree, 48% college degree and 17% graduate degree; and income brackets of 30% \$0-49.000, 33% \$50-99.000 and 37% 100.000+.

According to the media kit: ‘Our audience of professionals and active enthusiasts from a wide demographic range are highly engaged’ (Infowars, 2016).

In terms of political and wider views, there are indications that Jones’ media attract a fractured audience. First, Jones has a dedicated if eclectic following of individual and loosely networked groups of conspiracists, Alt Right folks, libertarians, members of the manosphere and preppers. Confirming the relationship between conspiracy and anomie, Socolow (2018) says about Jones and Infowars: ‘They speak to – and claim to speak for – not simply the downtrodden and downwardly-mobile; they also speak to those feeling wronged and forgotten’. These audiences turn to Alex Jones to give meaning to experiences in a world they do not understand and feel let down by.

A second, related type of audience is not Alt Right or prepper but, likewise, feels abandoned by government and society. Interviewing Jones fans, Belluz (2018) found:

The Infowarriors I spoke to didn’t fit the stereotypes. Most said they believed in climate change and the benefits of vaccines. Some were former NPR listeners who felt the mainstream media had let them down. Others were looking for interesting and alternative opinions online. Still others championed science.

What brings these people to Alex Jones, is that they ‘felt let down by government, medicine and the media’ (Belluz, 2018).

A third type of visitors is attracted to Jones as exuberant performer rather than to the message. Indeed, part of his fame comes from parodies, meme culture and remixes such as those of video creator Vic Berger who adds music and special effects to Jones’ broadcasts and posts the edits on social media to popular response. (3) These are ironic spectators who do not necessarily believe nor oppose Jones’ ideas but enjoy the entertainment of his rants and outbursts, and who like to make fun of his man’s man performances. This group includes both members of the general public and public figures like stand-up comedian, commentator and podcast host Joe Rogan, who liked Jones’ eccentric ideas and style and in 2017 invited him to his highly popular online radio show *The Joe Rogan Experience*. This third type of audience strengthened Jones celebrity status and, implicitly or explicitly, endorsed him as a popular culture ‘innocent wacko’ performer rather than a right-wing ideological entrepreneur. As such they helped Jones move from the fringe closer to the mainstream.

The fall of Alex Jones?

From 2018 onwards, several building blocks of Alex Jones’ success as an ideological entrepreneur and his media empire as potent activist instrument appeared to crumble.

First, the authenticity of his celebrity conspiracist was questioned during custody hearings in his divorce proceedings when Jones' lawyers identified his online antics and alt-right conspiracy promotion (i.e. his public persona) as a performance act that does not extend to the private person Alex Jones (Jervis, 2017). Aware that this undermined his credibility and true to his cause, Jones blamed a conspiracy of mainstream media wilfully misinterpreting his lawyers' words, claiming: 'I can't even read a teleprompter' (Jones, quoted in Jervis, 2017).

More importantly, in April 2018 he was sued for defamation by Sandy Hook parents, a turning point in his work as ideological entrepreneur. Celebrities like Joe Rogan turned their back on him. From August 2018 on, social media like Facebook, YouTube and, later, Twitter, took down his accounts while Apple removed his podcasts from iTunes and PayPal withdrew its services from Infowars' onsite store (Wodinski, 2018). In their statements, these Cos referred to how Jones' messages violate their policies and terms of use. However, pulling the plug on Jones' accounts was not necessarily about the nature of Jones/Infowars message, considering social media condoned Jones (and similar ideological entrepreneurs) for many years. Rather, it was part of a response to wider public and political criticism of their unwillingness to deal with issues like fake news, hate speech, bots and hacking. Regardless of the platforms' ulterior motives, it appeared Jones was effectively cut off from audiences and revenue as, in the weeks following the ban, his media outlets lost up to half of their audiences (Nicas, 2018).

And yet. After Twitter banned his accounts in October 2018, Jones' syndicated radio show was picked up by a conservative radio network (Tehee, 2018) and his streaming (briefly) by platform Roku (Blistein, 2019). More importantly, despite the much advertised and discussed ban, several secondary accounts and much content of Jones/Infowars remained available on these same platforms (Breland, 2019). Moreover, Jones' celebrity status ensured that mainstream media continued to cover his every move, while his eccentric performances help to deflect attention from the harsh message. Meanwhile, the bans played into Jones' narrative that he is 'persecuted' (by Illuminati, the left, mainstream media) and that tech companies are part of a conspiracy to cut off his and similar voices in an assault on free speech, a claim picked up by white supremacists. In true Jones style, he extended this message to his commerce: following the ban, Infowars Store offered 'deep' discounts, accompanied by the message 'Fight the bullies, save the Internet, save Infowars'. At the time of writing, his products were still available via Amazon.com.

Discussion and conclusion: 'Just Take the Red Pill, People!!' (4)

Analysing Alex Jones and Infowars, this contribution set out to understand Jones' position and success as an ideological entrepreneur, pushing counter-hegemonic ideologies into the mainstream, and the role of celebrity and various media in this

endeavour, meanwhile identifying the national path dependence of a global populist-nationalist movement.

First, the analysis suggests that Jones fits Storr's (2011) characterization of an ideological entrepreneur. As long-time media owner and personality, Jones has made it his life work (1) to find and, in fact, create opportunities to sell his world views. He qualifies as (2) 'bold innovator', creating a counter-ideological mix of False Flag/Deep State conspiracies with fantastical theories about lizard-elites ruling the world. This is backed by a business model based in monetising the fear he creates with messages explicitly presented as (3) a 'better' explanation for what is happening in the US and beyond than what mainstream media and politicians suggest. Interestingly, the 'better' alternative is dystopian and competes with more scientific/common-sense explanations. Assaulting all aspects of democratic society, 4) he aggressively dismisses mainstream ideological paradigms, hereby 5) openly attacking any person (like Hillary Clinton) and institution (like mainstream media) that criticize him. In fact, he is at his 'best' when opposed, as it fits his idea of a conspiracy to shut up him and his followers. The attention that his spectacle of populist-nationalist conspiracism generates with mainstream media and diverse audiences, has been instrumental in pushing his counter-ideology from the fringe into the mainstream, further enabled by Jones and Trump's mutual endorsement.

Second, our case suggests the importance of the celebrity persona in the success of a contemporary ideological entrepreneur. Jones presents himself to the world as a true conspiracist: his exaggerated style and highly emotional rants evince a

fusion between his public and private celebrity persona, creating a heightened sense of authenticity (authors, 2018). Alex Jones IS his message. Interestingly, the remix and meme culture around Alex Jones, both in favour and as a mockery of his message and persona, have helped to bring his fringe message to wider audiences. By presenting him as a ‘harmless fantast’ and a ‘crack-pot conspiracist’, his ironic spectators arguably have been complicit in the mainstreaming of his message. In this regard, Jones is part and parcel of the ironic, popular culture infused populist messages on the right (and the left), aimed to appeal to a wide following while making it hard to unmask and stop their distribution (cf. Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

Third, the analysis of his (use of) media presents a complex picture that refutes interpretations that social media ‘create’ ideological entrepreneurs and their following. The core of Jones’ media empire are legacy media including talk radio, public access cable television and the Internet, that are alternative-activist in their content and approaches to audiences. Social media serve as amplifiers rather than creators, in part because Jones understands how to attune his legacy media content to their formats and algorithms, connecting with the online movement of the Alt Right (Heikkilä, 2017). The role of social media is most evident in their ‘ban’ that hampered Jones’ outreach, yet did not terminate his ideological endeavours as his legacy media found other platforms and distributors. While not this paper’s focus, the Jones/Infowars case certainly lays bare both the technical question of what constitutes a ban (e.g. stop hosting vs banning content host elsewhere) and the legal-conceptual weighing of free speech versus hate speech. The social media ban certainly came

across as highly reluctant and as a public relations exercise to please users (Roku hosting then removing Jones following customer outcry) and politicians (US congressional and European Commission hearings with Zuckerberg). If anything, by the time Jones was banned, his work as ideological entrepreneur was done, as he had managed to infuse his ideas from the fringe into the mainstream.

Finally, the Jones/Infowars case illustrates the path dependence and idiosyncrasies of national emanations of a global phenomenon such as populist nationalism. To the extent that white nationalism in the US is based in victimhood, it is related to conspiracy, itself an ideological lens rooted in distrust of authority and loss of control (Aupers, 2012). In the US context, conspiracists and Alt Right feed off of each other, creating a climate in which ideological entrepreneurs such as Alex Jones thrive and can recruit a considerable following from amongst those that feel powerless and left behind (Achterberg, 2012). Their simple, externalized explanations (it's a conspiracy!) help people make sense of the world. At the same time, the digital ecology that operates as a platform and amplifier for political opinion making, is global in nature. As such, and ironically, while deeply rooted in US socio-political culture, Alex Jones and Infowars represent a local exponent of a contemporary trend that is global in nature while populist-nationalist in its message.

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Endnotes

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