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197

The Capitol siege was the biggest media spectacle of the Trump era

Joan Donovan, Brian Friedberg and Emily Dreyfuss

The storm on the Capitol was the culmination of a presidency defined by media manipulation and networked conspiricism



▲ Pro-Trump mob breach the US Capitol building on 6 January. Photograph: Michael Nigro/Pacific Press/Rex/Shutterstock

Donald Trump's presidency is ending as it began: in media spectacle. The 6 January siege of the Capitol was the culmination of a presidency defined by media manipulation and **networked conspiricism**, a presidency that turned politics into media and media into politics.

Trump leaves the news media scrambling to make sense of the post-Trump world, social media platforms reeling to catch up to the new uses and abuses of their technologies, the GOP grasping to keep hold of the Maga patriots who have cleaved from the party, and the nation wondering what the Maga mob will do next.

"The storm" on the Capitol is the result of a new kind of networked conspiracy – a potent brew of disinformation and rumor enabled by platforms, emboldened by politicians and influencers, and defined by a total lack of trust in the news.

The day in Washington began with a rather dreary and long-winded set of speeches, until Trump announced the next location. He said, "We're going to walk down to the Capitol, and we're going to cheer on our brave senators, and congressmen and women. We're probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them because you'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength, and you have to be strong."

This call to action was the explicit instruction many of the people who had gathered in the capital had been waiting for. They had been told to **"trust the plan"** and now it was happening.

That lawlessness was part of the plan had been clear to many observers, even though Capitol police **have claimed** they didn't anticipate any violence. For weeks, researchers and journalists had documented tens of thousands of social media posts on every platform about "wild" protests ahead. All of this evidence, coupled with the skirmishes in Washington on Tuesday night, when live-streamers broadcast calls to breach the Capitol, and **the arrest** of the Proud Boys leader who was charged with possession of two illegal high-capacity magazines, should have been enough to call in the national guard. This inaction cost lives.

What we talk about when we talk about politics

As a nation, we experienced the siege as a **"media spectacle"**, a momentous social event interpreted through the lens of traditional and social media, where cinema and society collide. It was the **most-watched day** in CNN history.

When talking about politics, we are really talking about media about politics, an axiom made explicit in the Trump era. And today, what people believe to be the truth is complicated by the structure of new technologies like social media, which have accelerated and fragmented media spectacle into competing alternative realities.

While those who stormed the Capitol seem to come from all walks of life, one faction of older white people stood out, aided by a viral image of **Richard Barnett**, 60, of Gravette, Arkansas, sitting at Nancy Pelosi's desk. Online they are called the **"boomerwaffen"**, a pejorative name for the boomers and normies radicalized by cable news and AM radio, likening their potential for rightwing violence to that of **Atomwaffen** terrorists.

The boomerwaffen showed up cloaked in Trump gear from head to toe, waving Trump flags, and drinking from Maga mugs. On live streams from the event, they gave testimonials parroting the claims of their favorite YouTubers and podcasters, referencing QAnon, and describing a conspiracy to steal the election from Trump. Eschewing the risks of the pandemic, they believed 6 January was the last day they could pressure Vice-President Mike Pence and Republicans to reject the results of the election, after watching nearly 60 court cases rebuffed without merit.

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▲ Pro-Trump rioters breach the security perimeter and storm the US Capitol. Photograph: Ken Cedeno/UPI/Rex/Shutterstock

Infrastructures of insurrection

Tech companies retroactively deplatformed known hate groups after seeing **"real-world harm"** following the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, and again they did not take sufficient action until five people died in DC. But we shouldn't have to wait for deaths.

Social media platforms give everyone the infrastructure to connect, collaborate and organize and that must come with greater accountability, especially for those with large networks and net worth. The same technology that supports historic movements for positive social change, in the wrong hands, can lead to political oppression. When the president uses social media to call for action with a tag like "Be there, will be wild," it is not a protest; it is an insurrection.

The very structure of these platforms incentivizes alternative influence, both financially and politically. Just as it turned Trump into the **"God Emperor"** of an online army, it makes siege participants like **Q Shaman**, **Baked Alaska** and **Richard Barnett** into trending topics of conversation. It turns **Ashli Babbitt**, who was shot by a Capitol guard, into a **martyr**. While partisan media outlets, like Fox, also play a pivotal role, Facebook and Twitter serve a different purpose. Social media not only facilitates content distribution, it organizes and coordinates action.

Since Trump's ascent, platforms have been focused on stopping bot abuses and hate groups, because they insist it is technically feasible to offload mitigation to machine learning. But as much as tech CEOs may wish it were true, that approach will not work against these conspiracy-minded adversarial movements, composed of real people who can easily evade bans or turn to alt-tech platforms to regroup and mount a different attack.

For boomerwaffen, storming the Capitol was the right thing to do and the media spectacle that it created is proof of the plot against Trump. Tech companies must do everything they can now to mitigate the damage this vast network of disinformers have done to the information ecosystem and the minds of millions. Enough is enough.

While policymakers got the message loud and clear that unregulated social media companies pose a danger to democracy, let this also be a lesson to tech companies: when disinformation is left to fester, it infects the whole product.

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Topics
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