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The Capitol siege was the biggest media spectacle of the Trump era Joan Donovan, Brian Friedberg and Emily Dreyfuss

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



onald 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 conspiracism, 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

"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 Advertisement instruction many of the people who [> V had gathered in the capital had been waiting for. They had been told to "trust the plan" and now it was

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

That lawlessness was part of the plan

had been clear to many observers,

even though Capitol police have

mob will do next.

happening.

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

been enough to call in the national guard. This inaction cost lives.

What we talk about when we talk about politics

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.



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. The boomerwaffen occupy an area of our media ecosystem where Trump still has a chance, QAnon is still leaking privileged government secrets, and Rudy Guliani is a good lawyer up against a rigged system. They were fighting against what Joe Biden and Kamala Harris represent, the coming multiracial

to steal the election from Trump. Eschewing the risks of the pandemic, they

Creating and maintaining the boomerwaffen universe requires an incredible amount of resources. Trump's disinformation campaigns are a media spectacle involving a stunning array of political operatives, media pundits, lawyers, and influencers who day-to-day create, publish and share a cascade of lies and speculation across webspaces, cable news and radio all at once. This alternative media network features an all star cast of Steve Bannon,

democracy.

Sidney Powell, Lin Wood, Rudy Giuliani, Ali Alexander, Roger Stone, One America News, Newsmax, Peter Navarro, Mike Lindell (yes, that's the My Pillow guy), Nick Fuentes, and Ron Watkins just to name a few. This group spent the last four years building upon the networks and infrastructure of conservative media in order to serve Trump's interests. And, it pays off by creating a panoptic enclosure of Trump Media. For example, millions of Americans believe the storming of the Capitol was

orchestrated by antifa because the Washington Times placed a false story on

social media during this moment of national crisis, the Republican

representative Matt Gaetz repeated the claim on the congressional floor, and other influencers tweeted it. While the Washington Times later corrected the story, it accomplished a political objective: it muddied the waters and shifted blame in the moment. It's an example of misinformation-at-scale, where numerous people now believe a false version of events because manipulators employed the tactic of "trading up the chain", leveraging breaking news to accelerate algorithmic amplification. If antifa did it, how could Trump be at fault?

advertising abuse, extremist organizing, hidden virality of conspiracy and woefully inconsistent application of terms of service. Along the way, social media continues to be abused by political elites and well-networked influencers. While tech companies have instituted policy changes following the **hearings** about foreign disinformation and bot

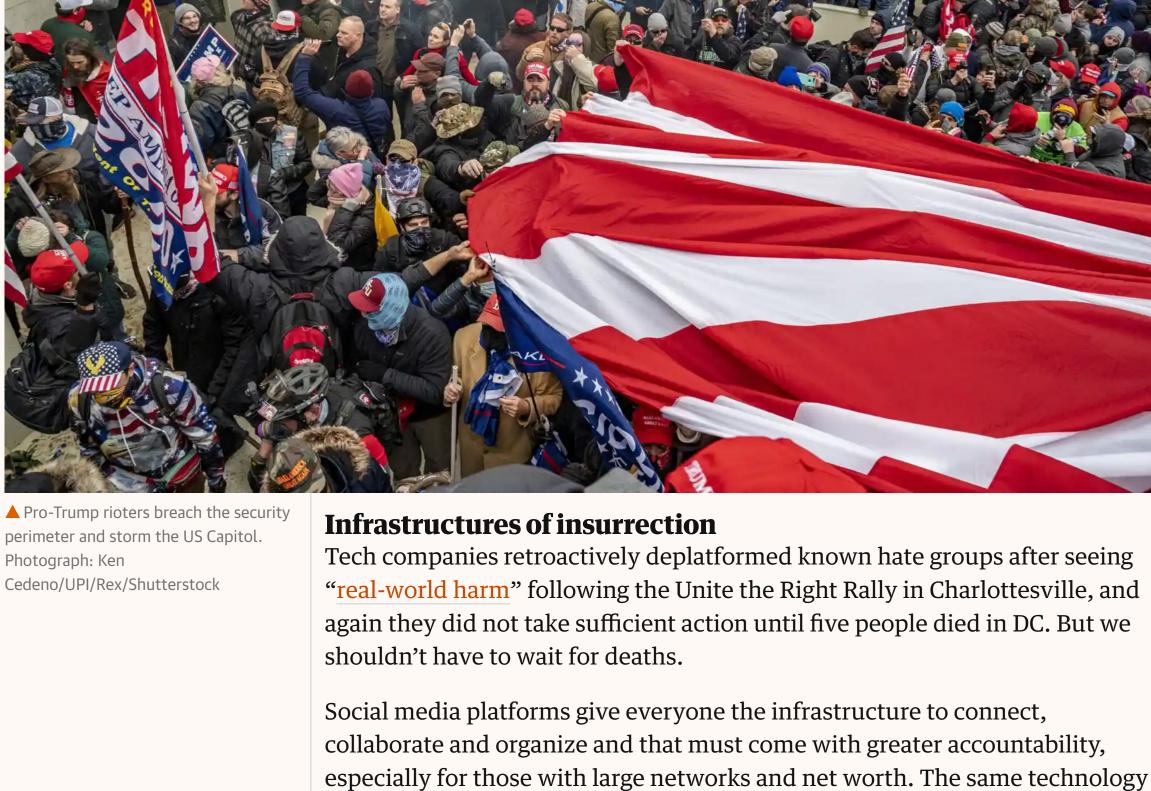
networks, and made limited interventions to deal with white supremacists'

extremism, but the siege of the Capitol is stark proof that we have entered a

new era, long in the making. The platforms facilitated this through years of

Social media platforms have incentivized and enabled conspiracy and

hate speech, pornography and conspiracy, it was never to powerful effect. The Capitol insurrectionists were not the alt-right, nor were they driven by foreign bot networks. Social media platforms were used to carry out a grand attempt at election suppression and disenfranchisement of millions by Trump and his allies.



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

true, that approach will not work against these conspiracy-minded

mitigation to machine learning. But as much as tech CEOs may wish it were

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

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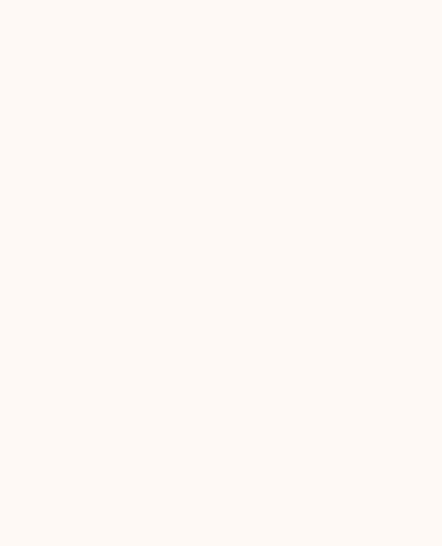
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