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"FUCK YOUR FEELINGS"

The Affective Weaponization of Facts and Reason

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On 5 February 2016 the conservative influencer Ben Shapiro tweeted: "Facts don't care about your feelings." Within weeks, he would resign as editor-at-large of the far-right website *Breitbart*, declare himself firmly opposed to Donald Trump, and pivot to his own editorial brand, *The Daily Wire*. Accumulating over 300,000 likes by the end of 2019, the tweet would become a defining slogan for Shapiro as an influencer, a meme-friendly weapon by which conservatives of varying stripes could attack what they perceived as the emotional and thus irrational basis for social justice and identity politics.

Politics of the day notwithstanding, the phrase tapped into a broader array of sentiments around the crisis of facts and reason—one that could easily be found among even those who did not share Shapiro's specific political positions. In October 2016, a Trump supporter at a campaign rally could be spotted wearing a t-shirt that simply read: "FUCK YOUR FEELINGS."

There is an uncanny—and telling—slippage between the two slogans. What does it mean to not simply present the facts, but to loudly proclaim one's allegiance to facts, and to weaponize that allegiance into a condemnation of the irrational Other? What if the essential allure of "facts don't care about your feelings" is precisely the ability to say "fuck your feelings?"

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This chapter examines emerging trends in *fact signaling*: the strategic and performative invocation of epistemic and moral authority which may then be weaponized against the "enemy." This is not an assessment of the substantive factual claims made in the process; such an approach risks emphasizing their pretention to logical coherence and objective validity. Rather, I argue that such signaling is primarily aimed at a cultivation of affective attachment to the idea of Facts and Reason (and, in turn, the charismatic influencers that position

themselves as a proxy for those values). Specifically, the chapter focuses on the public presentation of conservative influencer Ben Shapiro, who has consciously crafted a personal niche around the *feeling of caring about the facts*.

This approach contributes to a broader diagnosis for unfolding crises of truth and trust. Over the 2010s, there has been a growing sense that what was initially felt as an outbreak of fake news, irrational beliefs and a "post-truth" politics may be better understood as a symptom of a broader societal shift in norms of credibility and authenticity. Public trust in traditional brokers of socially agreed facts, such as professional journalists and scientists, have generally been in steady decline (e.g., Boler & Davis, 2018; West, 2017). The new media environment, initially celebrated as a levelling of traditional gatekeepers in favor of a more democratic public sphere where good ideas might organically rise to the top (e.g., Shirky, 2008), is now widely recognized as a heavily but unevenly moderated site for a politics of visibility (Brighenti, 2007; Flyverbom et al., 2016; Thompson, 2005) governed by black-boxed algorithms and relatively unaccountable corporations. As Steven Shapin (2019) recently noted, the problem "isn't *knowing science* but *knowing science lives*: who to recognize as knowledgeable and reliable; who to trust; which institutions to consider as the homes of genuine knowledge." At stake is not merely a specific set of bad actors seeking to sabotage a healthy information system, but technologically provoked uncertainties around the more fundamental question of how exactly "good" information might be separated from the bad.

One consequence of this shift is a new, emerging category of influencers. From YouTube celebrities to stand-up comedians turned independent podcast hosts, these individuals build their audience primarily through online platforms, and remix the norms and resources of existing institutions into new blends of personal charisma and explicit commercialization. One relatively cohesive grouping—Rebecca Lewis (2018) calls it an "alternative influence network"—primarily operates through YouTube, and is loosely united by the opposition to what it calls the social justice warriors and the radical left. This network often inherits broader trends in American conservatism; for instance, Nadler in this volume identifies Limbaugh, Drudge, and Breitbart as earlier pioneers of "countercultural conservatism." My focus is not on the specific political views these influencers espouse, however, but the techniques of authentication they are helping pioneer and normalize: specifically, fact signaling as a vocal and performative commitment to the *idea of Facts and Reason* as a reliable source of credibility. As we do for "Truth" with a capital T, so we might with Facts and Reason: not specific, itemized factual claims that might be verified one way or another, but a grand, moralizing, civilizing principle to be invoked against unbelievers. Even as disinformation continues to proliferate in online spaces, right-leaning influencers in particular turn to the aura of Facts and Reason to invoke a grand alliance between Western civilization, the

Enlightenment, science—and themselves. The relentless cycle of new content and new outrage helps stabilize the *feeling* of being on the right side.

Understanding these emerging circuits of credibility requires assessing the affective contours of fact signaling. The performative force of calling out "facts" or "fake news," and the *enjoyment* involved in that performance, reverberates on a different frequency from the epistemic apparatus that officially governs the boundaries of fact—though, of course, the affective payoff remains tethered to the epistemic rule. Much of the time, what these influencers provide for their audience is not so much substantive engagement with factual claims using any kind of rigorous methodology, but rather a habitual circuit of outrage, pleasure, and attachment. This positioning derives its legitimacy from the modern faith in Facts and Reason as depersonalized, independent, and objective. Yet this very valorization of "facts" over "feelings" requires a highly partial and strategic remixing of the modern legacy. Agonistic contestations designed to "destroy" the opposing side take precedence over a collective journey towards truth. Meanwhile, the history of the Enlightenment and the philosophical dilemmas it confronted are freely remixed to bolster current political positions. In short, Facts and Reason themselves are made into flexible instruments, able to support and attack different arguments as is politically expedient.

Affective Attachments

The mantra of "facts don't care about your feelings" leverages the long-standing myth of *separation*: that modern Reason is rational only insofar as it surgically cleaves itself of emotion. Yet facts have always been all about feelings (and vice versa), and the affective register has been front and center for the debates around "truthiness" or "post-truth" (Boler & Davis, 2018, p. 75). Influencers like Shapiro claim their place as standard-bearers of Facts and Reason not so much through the exact factuality of individual claims, or by constructing a logically consistent theory of politics and culture, but by building a recognizable style for confrontation and argument, solidarity, and pleasure.

I examine these relations in terms of affective attachment. In ordinary parlance, we might think of attachment as cultivating relations that we can lean on for our sense of ourselves. Sara Ahmed reminds us that "emotions are not only about movement, they are also about attachments or about what connects us to this or that" (2014, p. 11). These are, in Weber's famous terms, the webs of significance upon which we are suspended. If affect emphasizes the degree to which subjects are never stable, integral things, sovereign and discrete against the world around it, then an essential part of this movement is the way in which certain contours of feeling and responding become familiar points of return. The authority of Facts and Reason are appropriated to craft a stable

refuge for an intelligible subject, a sense of safe harbor against—in our particular context—what is perceived as a relentless societal demand to be "woke."

Central to this process is the repetition and stylization of these interactions. In Ahmed's terms, objects get "sticky," feelings become "fetishes," sometimes without our explicitly meaning to enter into such a relationship. These are networks of emotions and memes, reactions and mimesis, produced not through the coming together of individuals but a collective modulation of the very process of individuation (e.g., Brennan, 2004; Clough, 2010; Seyfert, 2012). Often, to affect and be affected is not something one "does" but rather finds oneself caught up in (Gibbs, 2010, p. 194). Visible acts of communication participate in relays of imitation, mimicry, repetition, forming relations that are "presubjective without being prosocial" (Mazzarella, 2009, p. 291). In the case of disinformation and radicalization, Jessica Johnson (2018) argues that paranoia is an affectively networked and environmental effect that is animated not by an individual's internal capacity for delusion, but the cultivation of affect at a distance through a broader media ecosystem. It is that wider landscape of stimuli—from, say, social justice discourse on Twitter to its coverage on mainstream media, its memefication on Reddit to reinterpretation by YouTube microcelebrities—that yields orientations like shame or pride, or that conspiratorial sense that there is "something going on" (Richardson, 2018). Here, my emotional response is not simply an *expression* (of what I feel inside me), but also an *impression* of that history of cultivation. A burst of outrage on social media seeks to impose my world and my contour of feelings upon others, but it also testifies to my vulnerability to and dependency on environmental affects.

This attention to the wider ecosystem also points to the ways in which affective transmission is shaped by technical infrastructures and commercial imperatives. Nadler in this volume shows how an earlier generation of conservatives like Rush Limbaugh took advantage of "new satellite transmission capacities, inexpensive national (1–800) dialing" and other developments in radio to develop charismatic influence. Today, influencers like Shapiro have risen to prominence by leveraging social media platforms' decision to favor minimal moderation and engagement-based metrics—motivated by the allure of lower costs, less regulatory oversight, and advertising revenue, and justified through the useful fiction of platform neutrality (Gillespie, 2010).

The corollary is that the audience's attachment to an influencer and their message of Facts and Reason is not reducible to a conscious selection of the most preferable ideological portfolio or the raw charisma of the influencer. Rather, familiar trappings of expertise and authenticity are borrowed from a wide range of cultural sources, such that virtues like objectivity are "experienced aesthetically, or affectively" (Boler & Davis, 2018, p. 78). Below, I show how Shapiro's physical appearance and biography, his debating techniques and slogans, consistently emphasize a confident, adversarial, patronising

performance of rationality in order to maximize the affective payoff. Similarly, Roberts and Wahl-Jorgenson in this volume describe how *Breitbart* leverages the trappings of journalistic objectivity precisely to legitimize the way it taps into the linguistic and narrative register of the alt-right. Rather than performance as a strategic instrument of politics, we must consider the ways in which politics is mobilized as a means *for* profitable attachment.

All this is not to say that there isn't coherence and meaningfulness in this attachment—only that a meaningful, sensible world for living does not equate to a logically consistent network of arguments. "People hoard idealising theories and tableaux about how they and the world 'add up to something'" (Berlant, 2011, p. 2; also see Berlant & Greenwald, 2012). Those very fantasies might constantly let them down and confound them, but it is in the repeated ways of coping, moving on, shrugging one's shoulders, trading memes for answers, clicking the next video, that attachment is knotted ever tighter. The reward is, again, a sense of stability. Judith Butler (1997) describes the cruel bargain that makes the subject a subject to begin with, whereby the ability to render oneself intelligible in the wild and contradictory network of collective meanings and affects requires a certain subjec*tion* to grids of intelligibility not of one's own making. There is pleasure as well as violence in that becoming recognizable to oneself and others, being able to sort the world into clear relations of moral value or political and cultural identity. It is upon this foundation that the influencer and their entertained fans may exercise their practised lines of attack: why should *my* facts care about *your* feelings?

The Factual Brand

As his slogan of facts over feelings suggests, the conservative influencer Ben Shapiro is an exemplary case in fact signaling. Shapiro has branded himself as a youthful prodigy, a Harvard Law School graduate with both the pedigree to know the facts and the courage to speak them. He offers a confident, adversarial style, in which a battery of what he claims to be scarcely contestable facts are launched rapid-fire in a bid to overwhelm the opposition. In recent years, Shapiro has achieved not just a loyal following but broader mainstream visibility—and the speaking fees and product placement sponsorship that comes with it. In 2017, *The New York Times* controversially christened him the "cool kid's philosopher" who dissects "arguments with a lawyer's skill and references to Aristotle" (Tavernise, 2017), helping cement his new position of influence.

This kind of affective appeal to Facts and Reason is not exclusive to any one side of the partisan landscape; after all, these values remain far too broadly attractive for anybody to disavow. Even as some on the Right mobilize a typically romanticized Western modernity to insist upon the facts against the perceived irrationality of social justice, others on the Left build their own credibility on the Right's apparent abdication of science or statistics. However,

some of the most explicit, and strategically effective, weaponization of Facts and Reason is happening through right-leaning influencers. There is Carl Benjamin, who has developed as an online persona the ancient Sumerian emperor Sargon of Akkad; or Jordan Peterson, a card-carrying psychologist who runs a popular YouTube channel and regularly collaborates with individuals like Shapiro and Benjamin (Lewis, 2018, p. 9).

In what follows, I draw on qualitative analysis of Shapiro's public presentation to triangulate a sense of his affective appeal vis-à-vis techniques of fact signaling. I examine his content neither to "fact-check" his substantive claims nor to reconstruct his political views, but to sketch out the array of strategic performances towards the cultivation of affective attachment. This requires tracking Shapiro's content across a variety of outlets. *The Ben Shapiro Show*, a podcast primarily available through the conservative publication *The Daily Wire* (co-founded by Shapiro himself, and initially funded by the fracking billionaires Wilks Brothers) and YouTube provide a regular feed of several hours of commentary per day. This is supplemented by guest appearances on mainstream media outlets such as *Fox News* and columns for major publications like *USA Today*. Shapiro also maintains a regular schedule of university campus talks, largely thanks to a sponsored lecture series by the Young America's Foundation, a longstanding conservative organization. This financial support has allowed Shapiro to visit a wide range of American campuses, and then to leverage the publicity and controversy around these events to grow his online following.

"A Fully Automatic Verbal Assault Rifle"

Across this voluminous output, Shapiro consistently depicts a society in which Facts and Reason are in crisis, leaving the few principled individuals like himself to battle in its defence. In this story, Shapiro and his allies are rational individuals committed to open society and civil disagreement—whereas the kind of disagreement raised by the "radical left" is characterized as emotional and aggressive attempts at censorship. "There's a certain level of hatred and tribalism that's building up in American politics that I hadn't seen before," Shapiro says in one video, eliciting hearty agreement from his chosen interlocutor, Jordan Peterson (Peterson, 2019). In an episode of *The Ben Shapiro Show*, the prominent skeptic Michael Shermer warmly identifies with Shapiro as a fellow classical liberal "in favour of Reason, and logic, and empiricism"—which, Shapiro responds, stands in contrast to "the Left [which] has become so focused on . . . identity politics and Unreason" (Shapiro, 2018a).

What is striking about these performances is the degree to which they are focused on the words, actions, and conspiracies of the political enemy. Attachments do not always manifest as happy and fulfilling relations (Berlant & Edelman, 2014, p. 5); straddling the boundaries of voluntary and involuntary, these

affective orientations are very much capable of binding through disgust or hate. Sara Ahmed argues that hate operates as a form of attachment that generates the endangered and aggrieved body (2014, p. 42). And insofar as this attachment creates an unresolvable predicate (the final purification of that body, whether the individual body or the body politic), it provides an indefinitely sustainable relation. This must not be confused as the individuals in question possessing that infinite capacity for hate; rather, it is a mediated pattern of feeling through which individuals become primed with an open wound, a sensitivity, a willing trigger, for new opportunities to hate—until, finally, it genuinely feels like it "comes from inside" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 50). It is then no surprise that even as this drive for purity seeks to eliminate its identified enemy, it also requires an indefinite and obsessive attachment with that enemy. Much of Shapiro's content revolves around the interpellated figure of the social justice warrior or the "extreme" feminist, reliably eliciting loud cheers and sympathetic outrage from his predominantly conservative audiences (e.g., *The Daily Wire*, 2019). His most popular videos, across his own YouTube channel and *The Daily Wire*, advertise Shapiro "DESTROYING" Transgenderism; "CRUSHING" a question on Atheism; and "SMACKING DOWN" on Black Lives Matter. The self-identification of these influencers (and their followers) with hard facts and cold Reason is often belied by the daily pleasure they take in "destroying" their political opponents through highly choreographed performances.

Shapiro's content thus opens up new habits of responsivity and pleasure for his fans. One YouTube comment exudes: "It feels good to listen to people that actually think about the problems we face rather than just focusing on emotions only. Facts are valuable as well to find solution [sic]" (Shapiro, 2019b). In the aforementioned video with Michael Shermer, another fan writes: "Anyone else notice the intellectual dark web is made up of people who just want to have a civil conversation? Like an honest, civil, conversation has been driven underground" (Shapiro, 2018a). As these influencers grow their followers on social media and are invited on mainstream media, they accrue new opportunities to grow their branding as purveyors of Fact and Reason, even if there is not quite time to really see if their ideas stand up to scrutiny. On an *ABC News* profile of Shapiro's talks at university campuses, host Dan Harris expresses surprise at the "violent protests" springing up in response to a "33 year old father of two" who "holds forth inside the lecture hall" while "scuffles break out" outside (ABC News, 2017). Such coverage allows Shapiro's signature style, in which he lobs factual claims rapid-fire and constantly namedrops the idea of Facts and Reason, to be broadcast to a far wider public.

These strategically crafted performances of Facts and Reason are delivered not through the careful qualifications of the professional scientist or the self-critical and exploratory spirit of the Enlightenment, but a confident and

aggressive stance whose repetition breeds a *feeling* of being on the right side. The logician Ben Burgis (2019, pp. 28–29) notes that the bulk of Shapiro's content involves talking *about* his commitment to Facts and Reason, rather than actually engaging in any such meaningful practice. Consider Shapiro's 2014 book, *How to Debate Leftists and Destroy Them: 11 Rules for Winning the Argument*, published by the conservative think tank David Horowitz Freedom Center. The majority of the eleven rules are debating strategies designed for point-scoring in the immediate adversarial context, rather than, say, techniques derived from deductive logic or the scientific method as a way to assess the claims at hand in a rational way.

Perhaps the defining aspect of Shapiro's performance is his penchant for rapid-fire bursts of citations, factual claims, and arguments. Critics have called it *gish galloping*—a debate term for the strategy of overloading the conversation with so many claims that the opponent is forced to either laboriously unpack their flaws one by one, or forego contesting the house of cards upon which bolder claims are now being made (e.g., Robinson, 2018). Allies like Jordan Peterson (2019) praise Shapiro as an "unbelievably sharp debater," and his fans regularly delight in that relentless pace, as if a visceral proxy for the power of his intelligence. In these victory laps, Shapiro is described as "[spitting] fighting words here like a 50 cal" (Shapiro, 2019c) and "a fully automatic verbal assault weapon [that] spits a thousand facts a second" (The Young Turks, 2017), dominating his opponents as one might in a video game. The distinction between sophistry and truth-seeking, the skill of debating and the skill of logical argumentation, is brushed away. As one commenter taunts: "I never knew that there was an argument that arguing too well makes you a bad guy. Sounds like desperation to me" (EWTN, 2018).

In all this, Shapiro's ability to shape the sense of what looks and feels like truth depends on his ability to control the terms of mediation. Many of Shapiro's most popular videos consist of "destroying" leftist arguments in a controlled setting. As of December 2019, "Ben Shapiro Destroys The Abortion Argument" is the fourth most watched video on *The Daily Wire*'s YouTube channel at over 3.8m YouTube views. In it, Shapiro displays a pre-existing video from actress, director, and activist Olivia Wilde, in which Wilde notes that as someone about to give birth, reproductive rights are "on her mind." Shapiro, filming from his studio, is able to pause the video and enter into a tirade about how Wilde must be fantasising about killing her own baby while pregnant. This controlled setting is crucial for stoking the desired nexus of affective orientations, from outrage to solidarity—and one that Shapiro has been reluctant to step outside. Nathan Robinson (2019), the editor of *Current Affairs* and a vocal critic of Shapiro from the Left, has claimed that Shapiro and the Young America's Foundation have consistently refused to hold a moderated debate on college campuses with him, preferring to either hold a solo talk or to simply cancel the campus visit.

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Masculine Reason

It is no coincidence that anger and anxiety over gender are fodder for some of Shapiro's most popular performances. The contemporary rise of the alt-right and the related rise of the "manosphere" is in many ways aimed at a long-felt crisis of white masculinity, seeking its recuperation in terms of a mythic past when America and its men were "great" (e.g., Hermann, 2019; Kelly, 2017; Van Valkenburgh, 2018). Such "gender wars" have become increasingly visible and widespread, hosted and amplified across social media platforms (e.g., Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Ging & Siapera, 2018)—extending the postwar history of computing as a strongly masculinized activity in general (e.g., Salter, 2018). From Stefan Molyneux's notorious handwringing over women without children letting their "eggs go to waste," to Ben Shapiro's stereotyping of the Left as defined by an obsession with transitioning young children, gender politics has increasingly become an unavoidable site through which such influencers signal their allegiances and mobilize affective solidarity.

Yet there is another historically entrenched intersection at work between gender and the performance of rationality. Insofar as Reason exists for us not simply as abstract ideal but as an object of attachment and an aesthetic landscape, there is a long history of its association with male and masculine elements. While the Enlightenment is hardly a homogeneous intellectual project, the conceptualization of dispassionate Reason (or Reason emerging through controlled passion) frequently relied on contrasts like the feminine/domestic and masculine/public (e.g., Rooney, 1991). Later, the emergence of race as a dominant classifier for the differential capacities of human beings in the 19th century was supported by a division of "the sentimental woman, who possessed both a heightened faculty of feeling and a more transparent animal nature, and the less susceptible and rational man, thereby relieved from the burdens of embodiment" (Schuller, 2018, p. 16).

In invoking the heritage of "Western civilization," influencers like Shapiro prefer not the messy, heterogeneous history of the Enlightenment or modernity, in which sensibility and sentimentality was sometimes disavowed but often recognized as a crucial element for Reason (O'Neal, 1996; Riskin, 2002), but a masculinized aesthetic of rationality as confident and adversarial, as a militaristic concept for domination, as requiring no reflexive introspection of its own positionality. Yet for all this signaling, Shapiro's content has very little to do with, say, any systematic effort to eradicate emotion from the reasoning process, as scientists sought to do in various ways across the 19th and 20th centuries (Daston & Galison, 2007), or any substantial degree of research on available data. Neither do these performances compel the influencer and their audience to question their most fundamental experiences and beliefs, as in the tradition of Descartes or Hume. Rather, the invocation of the idea of Facts and Reason allows the influencer

to summarily dismiss certain kinds of problems and arguments, to redraw clear lines dividing right and wrong, to erect that reassuring web of classifications in which one is on the right side of Reason and there is seemingly no contesting such a fundamental good. The result is a genre of content where the "radical left" is portrayed as an emotionally unstable proponent of anarchic gender fluidity, and is subsequently defeated by the calm, logical explanation that sexual difference is a basic biological fact. "Ben Shapiro DESTROYS Transgenderism And Pro-Abortion Arguments," the most watched *The Daily Wire* video (5.2m views as of December 2019), shows an edited clip from Shapiro's talk at Ferris State University (Shapiro, 2017). Shapiro, as the sole invited speaker, exercises the power to dictate the terms of engagement for questions from the audience:

SHAPIRO: . . . My answer is no. I'm not going to modify basic biology because it threatens your subjective sense of what you are.

STUDENT: You're still saying that these kids shouldn't belong though because they're —

SHAPIRO: I'm saying that the Boy Scouts have a standard. You have to be a biological boy to be a boy scout, you have to be a boy to be a boy scout.

STUDENT: Where is that written there though? [inaudible]—

SHAPIRO: In the name boy scouts.

The crowd laughs and applauds—and as the student seeks to reply, Shapiro again interrupts: "For all of human history, boy meant boy, and girl meant girl . . . if I call you a moose, are you suddenly a moose?" (We might imagine that Shapiro would ask the same of Louis Althusser.) Shapiro's argument does not develop beyond stating the biological difference of the sexes, because its repetition is precisely the point of pleasure and attachment—and because, with numerous other students waiting in line, this was never the time and place for a more thorough questioning to begin with. This choreographed performance is further reinforced through Shapiro's consistent "look"—from the clean-cut hairstyle to smartly fitted jackets in neutral blues—that has been carefully crafted and maintained by his long-time collaborator and Hollywood producer Jeremy Boreing (Nguyen, 2018). Shapiro is thus depicted as a calm, dispassionate speaker armed with an encyclopedic range of facts and logical arguments, engaged in an adversarial conflict with a "radical left" dominated by their own emotions and biases into rational incapacity—or, as Shapiro himself puts it, "intellectual flabbiness" (Crysta, 2019). Distinct from the question of what exact combination of arguments are being made about gender or feminism, these performances point to a deeper cultural imagination of what Reason looks and sounds like that influencers like Shapiro are leveraging for their personal brand.

Mea Culpas

From the "assault rifle" of facts to sensational takedowns of the radical left, these performances cultivate attachment around not simply Shapiro as a charismatic persona, but the broader moral authority of Facts and Reason, and the associated mythic tapestry of Western philosophy and modern civilization. This array of virtuous associations is further reinforced by a defensive strategy: when challenged on specific factual claims or incendiary statements he has made, Shapiro's tactic is to cite "an entire list on my website . . . of dumb, bad things that I've said [and taken back]" (Shapiro, 2019a). Shapiro frequently refers back to this list—hosted on *The Daily Wire* website (Shapiro, 2018b)—as evidence of his exceptional commitment to the facts and to civil discussion in a rational public sphere. In practice, the list also serves as another kind of performative citation, a reference to his factual and rational integrity that cannot easily be scrutinized in the moment.

For the list is not entirely a text of retractions or apologies. It opens, rather, with a grievance: the liberals have made a habit out of "bullying" individuals by taking their words out of context to decry them as evil. It is within this framing that Shapiro offers a number of retractions, calling specific statements from him "garbage" or "embarrassing"—though only after painstakingly citing how young he was when writing each statement. However, the majority of the text is in fact dedicated to material that Shapiro explains the left is "taking out of context," "happens to be true," or "just doesn't like." While Shapiro is far from alone in seeing the strategic benefits of the passive–aggressive non-apology, it is effectively combined with other performances of fact signaling in a bid for moral legitimacy.

In other words, the *mea culpas* provide again a reference point, something through which Facts and Reason may be invoked while avoiding substantive engagement. Shapiro's audience may resume consuming the far more popular and pleasurable part of his branded content—the mocking "destruction" of the Left—secure in the idea that their charismatic influencer remains the kind of intellectual who values Facts and Reason above his own pride, and that if he —and they—should revel daily in pillorying their political opponents, this is merely a logical outcome of immutable truths about the world.

The Feeling of Fuck Your Feelings

We began with a certain slippage: between that self-righteous slogan of "facts don't care about your feelings," in which a pretention to dispassionate objectivity affords a sense of moral legitimacy—and "fuck your feelings," that brusque, no-frills shortcut to the pleasures of affective attachment. Facts may not care about your feelings, but insisting upon this fact is all about building a certain structure of feeling (Williams, 1961). Ultimately, it is this repeatable,

enjoyable habit of feeling that influencers like Shapiro offer their audience. They pay for this pleasure first of all by purchasing Shapiro's books, *The Daily Wire* merchandise, and other sponsored products. (Shapiro is notorious for abruptly interrupting his discourse on Facts and Reason at regular intervals to recite endorsements for *Stamps.com* or *LendingClub.com*.) But more fundamentally, the influencer's audience pays through that basic commodity of the platform economy, *attention*: the attention that fuels the YouTube views and website hits, and the subsequent flow of advertising revenue and mainstream media visibility.

In other words, to say that influencers like Shapiro sell particular structures of feeling gestures not only to the immediate, visceral pleasures, but to their uses for managing our sense of who we are and what the world adds up to. From the virtuoso performance of the "fully automatic verbal assault rifle," staged to maximum effect in the semi-controlled environments of the college lecture or the YouTube video, to the communal affirmation of fellow influencers as independent thinkers committed to an open society, Shapiro's content provides a relentless daily flow of parasocial experiences through which a particular kind of adversarial, self-confident, and morally and intellectually superior subjectivity may be cultivated. This enables not simply a stable grounding for the subject's internal orientation, a way to feel tethered to some reliable anchors of identity, but also a platform to denounce competing claims. The repetition of the simple mantra that "a man is a man and a woman is a woman" serves as a rallying cry not merely for a rejection of specific arguments around gender fluidity, but an affirmation that one's own position is backed by incontrovertible basic facts. A position of certainty is carved out into the historical monument of Reason, from which social justice is perceived and rejected as a sprawling network of complicity and guilt.

Emerging performances of fact signaling reflect not only new circuits of affective attachment, through which individuals seek solidarity and influencers seek effective personal branding, but also our evolving sense of what looks like truth, what sounds authentic, what feels reasonable in politics. I have suggested that influencers like Shapiro leverage the accumulated credibility and legitimacy of Facts and Reason by generating an imagined, romanticized heritage of modern Western civilization. Political philosophy from classical liberal thinkers, the Enlightenment, and other sources are remixed into an impressionistic blend of supporting tropes for what this commitment to fact looks and feels like. It is a Hollywood Enlightenment in which Truth is a superpower, and the pleasure of wielding it against one's enemies far outweighs the responsibilities and complexities that come with it.

In short, what was initially publicized as a trend towards a "post-truth" society rather reveals the powerful vestigial authority of the ideas of Facts and Reason, and the associated imaginaries of modernity and the Enlightenment. This suggests that measures like media literacy and transparency—

often the default tools to which we have turned in this crisis—can only be partial solutions that are most helpful when the other affective conditions are favorable, and less so when the headwinds are strong. It is becoming increasingly important to better understand the kind of *environments* facilitated by new media technologies, and their affective affordances: the rhythmic, habitual feed of signals and triggers, the cycles of outrage and laughter, the pleasure of "destroying" one's enemies in the name of Reason and civility.

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