"FUCK YOUR FEELINGS": THE AFFECTIVE WEAPONISATION OF FACTS AND REASON

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This paper examines emerging trends in *fact signaling*: the performative invocation of the idea of Fact and Reason, distinct from the concrete presentation of evidence or reasoning, as a way to cultivate affective solidarity. Emblematic is the conservative influencer Ben Shapiro's slogan, "facts don't care about your feelings": a paean to the mythological figure of emotionlessly objective truth which may then be weaponised against one's enemies. Scholars are increasingly attentive to the ways in which what was once popularised as a 'fake news' epidemic is not simply a virulent strain of bad information in a fundamentally rational online ecosystem, but rather a broader crisis and transformation of what counts as truthful, trustworthy and authentic (e.g. Boler & Davis, 2018; also see Banet-Weiser, 2012). Our contribution emphasises the affective and habitual dimension of this phenomenon. Through a close analysis of Ben Shapiro's content and personal brand, we show how the generic invocation of Fact and Reason cultivates a sense of affective attachment not defined by ideological consistency or, indeed, the actual practice of research or logical reasoning, but rather a particularly masculinised and adversarial ideal of Truth. The payoff is the reassurance and pleasure of a stable subject position from which one's political opposition may be Othered with impunity. Facts may not care about your feelings, but insisting upon this fact is all about building a certain structure of feeling.

The Factual Brand
Such weaponisation of 'truth-telling' has emerged as a particularly effective technique for navigating an online information ecosystem that is increasingly driven by algorithmically modulated standards of visibility and engagement. A loose constellation of right-leaning microinfluencers, primarily operating out of YouTube, have proven particularly adept at fact signaling – what Rebecca Lewis (2019) calls an 'alternative influence network' (AIN). The AIN is defined less by a strict set of ideological doctrines and more by a shared opposition to what it calls social justice warriors and the radical

left. Our analysis focuses on Ben Shapiro, who has explicitly built his personal brand around the imagined ideal of cold, dispassionate Reason and principled truth-telling in the face of censorship. The paper will also secondarily draw examples from Blair White, a micro-influencer who has positioned herself as a right-leaning, anti-social justice transgender person to build a robust online following.

Through a qualitative analysis of Shapiro's and White's public presentations, the paper triangulates a sense of their respective affective appeals vis-à-vis techniques of fact signaling. The analytical lens is designed not to fact-check substantive claims or map out a coherent set of political viewpoints, but to examine these influencers' strategic performances towards the cultivation of affective attachment. Drawing on theories of affect and specifically of its role in forms of attachment (e.g. Ahmed, 2014; Berlant, 2011; Brennan, 2004; Clough, 2010), we examine Shapiro and White's personal branding through their content on YouTube and other social media platforms. For example, one of White's most popular videos – titled "There are Only 2 Genders" (White, 2016) – exemplifies how the performance of fact signaling is tethered to the weaponisation of those 'facts' against one's political opposition. In the case of Shapiro, we also analyse his public presentation beyond the platforms – in guest appearances on television (such as Fox News), or his regular schedule of university campus talks.

Performing Reason
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 a habitual circuit of attachment through the sharing of anxiety and outrage. Ben Shapiro's voluminous content thus builds towards no coherent political philosophy or theory of Reason, but focuses on a rotating portfolio of generic attacks around the ostensible enemies of Fact and Reason. For instance, we show how his most popular content involves the reduction of discourse around transgender rights and nonbinary gender into the simple mantra that 'a man is a man and a woman is a woman'. 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. Such reductive sloganisation provides no meaningful engagement with the substance of the debate, but represents a short-cut towards building affective solidarity around an imaginary of 'traditional values'.

The affective payoff of these performances are maximised through careful tailoring of the charismatic influencer. We show how Ben Shapiro and Blair White's physical appearance and biography, their debating techniques and slogans, consistently emphasise a confident, adversarial, patronising performance of rationality. It is, we argue, a masculinised aesthetic of rationality as confident and adversarial, as a militaristic concept for domination, as requiring no reflexive introspection of its own positionality. This extends and resonates with the wider cultural rhetoric in the far/alt-right around the crisis of white masculinity and its attempted recuperation in terms of a mythic past when America and its men were 'great (e.g. Kelly, 2017).

We further argue that much of this fact signaling draws its sense of plausibility, legitimacy, and historicity through a selective appropriation of an imagined modernity. Shapiro and White both rely on a particular amalgam of pseudo-historical tropes around the Enlightenment and Western civilization, constructing a homogenous and entirely consistent picture of the tenuous and contradictory history of the West. Political philosophy from classical liberal thinkers, the Enlightenment, and other sources are remixed into an impressionistic blend of rhetorical and visual tropes that signify what commitment to fact looks and feels like. In this way, they weaponize the myth of the Enlightenment to serve their current political goals and to build a flexible, repeatable genre of authenticity and entertainment.

Overall, emerging performances of fact signaling such as those of Shapiro and White therefore 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. 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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