

CrossRef DOI of original article:

1 Digital Media and Culture Wars: The Wi Spa Case

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3 Received: 1 January 1970 Accepted: 1 January 1970 Published: 1 January 1970

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5 **Abstract**

6 This article aims to understand the role that digital media play in the culture wars
7 framework. To this end, a theoretical discussion of the notion of digital media and culture
8 wars is conducted, pointing to impactful aspects of both, which will be perceived in a
9 qualitative case study - the 2021 Wi Spa Confrontation - comparing Fox News, The
10 Washington Post and The Guardian, as well as general positionings on Twitter. The
11 conclusion is that digital media proves itself to be a central battleground in the conflict
12 between discourses and meanings that are central to the culture wars, with the deeper moral
13 debate surfacing only briefly, fueling the apparent dispute without dissolving the polarization.

14

15 **Index terms**— digital media. culture wars.

16 **1 I. Introduction**

17 With Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, not only fake news were popularized, but also the notion that
18 Western societies are at a historical crossroads, with one perspective in particular highlighting, even if often in
19 the margins of the debate, its encroachment in the culture wars. Succinctly, this notion reflects a deep conflictual
20 division in society, which transplants itself to multiple social institutions and ultimately transfigures into general
21 disputes over the control of meanings and discourses in the public sphere. In contemporary circumstances, it
22 seems to connect closely with digital media, which I understand here as a globalizing term that summarizes
23 the Internetcentric digital environment, thus encompassing the various forms of social media and online news
24 networks -the new public square. In view of its growing stature and effective social function, the question arises:
25 what role does digital media play in the context of the culture wars?

26 In other words, what is sought is to understand how digital media fit into the framework of the culture wars.
27 Two goals are derived from this, namely, to understand theoretically what both concepts bring to the debate,
28 and then to understand their relationship in practice from a specific case, thus dealing with the academic inquiry
29 whether such a conflict actually has precedence. Along the same lines, it should be made clear that the concern
30 here is not with the source of causality of the culture wars and whether digital media has an impact on their
31 occurrence, but whether they are involved in the battles of the former and how this occurs. Aligned to this,
32 the hypothesis is that digital media are a crucial confrontational field for the central conflicting element of the
33 culture wars, the clash between discourses/narratives and meanings, which is directly reflected by news coverage
34 and public stances on social media.

35 In its theoretical part, the work relies on a historically minded review of the concepts that shape the overarching
36 hypothesis, thus generating an analytical portrait for subsequent application. Laudan's (1977) meta-theory is
37 also used as a guide, which states that the main purpose of science is to acquire greater explanatory power in
38 relation to reality, regardless of strict adherence to a paradigm. The maintenance of clarity as to definitions
39 and concepts is the precondition for such interfacing between distinct strands of thought to be fruitful. Armed
40 with this understanding, the case study of the Wi Spa (June through September 2021) is made possible, which
41 is a qualitative comparative analysis of the content published by Fox News, The Washington Post and The
42 Guardian between June 27 and September 10, as well as the general reactions and positions within the Twitter
43 platform. This narrow cut-off in the broad picture of the topic is justified due to its social impact on the collective
44 consciousness as defined by Durkheim (1997), seeing the episode is exponentially magnified by digital media, thus
45 being a brazen example of the dynamics that the paper sets out to understand.

46 This article is socially important because it deals with a joint theme that is increasingly embedded in the
47 social fabric, with an entire generation of people being politically socialized with full immersion in digital media

3 A) DIGITAL MEDIA

48 and the cultural disputes that are exacerbated by its multiple forums. At the academic level, it seeks to provide
49 a synthetic basis for the debate on the relationship between media and polarization more generally, with the
50 most relevant and properly original facet of the empirical analysis being its comparative effort between select
51 traditional media and social media. The structure of the article is divided into two main parts, the first focusing
52 on the theoretical review and the second on the empirical study. Both are then subdivided into sections: the first
53 part has two, one dealing with digital media and the other with the culture wars; the second part begins with
54 an outline of the specific case, then moves on to the particular coverage by Fox News, The Washington Post and
55 The Guardian, and finally the general reactions and positions perceived on Twitter.

56 2 II. Digital Media and Culture Wars

57 As highlighted earlier, digital media is a globalizing term that serves to summarize the digital environment
58 provided by computers and exponentially expanded by the Internet. While Hayles (2012) employs it in McLuhan's
59 sense as a medium, thus aiming to treat it as fundamentally altering social relations that are anchored in its
60 content (message), in this article it is employed only to refer to the essentially public space that is composed
61 of the various forms of social media and news networks. This choice is explained by the fact that the focus of
62 the article is not to explore the causality between both factors, although it is recognized that the changes that
63 accompany the popularization of the Internet certainly alter the function attached to the media. In the following
64 section, a brief exposition of the relevant topics is made, starting from social media to implications for mediated
65 communication in general.

66 3 a) Digital Media

67 As Geertz (1973, p.5) expresses it, "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun".
68 On a whole, humanity couples itself with symbolic forms to be transmitted to other individuals through the use
69 of a technical medium -a material substrate that enables mediated communication. One can distinguish several
70 attributes that differentiate media, such as their fixation (temporal longevity -mode of storing information), and
71 their reproduction (spatial extension -capacity for multiplication) -space-time distanciation. Reproduction is
72 essential to the success of their commercial exploitation -the commodification of symbols (THOMPSON, 1995).
73 Digital media and the Internet as a whole have reached a new level among these aspects, with special attention
74 being paid to the variations subsumed by the notion of social media.

75 Social media are "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological
76 foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (KAPLAN,
77 HAENLEIN, 2010, p.60). Web 2.0 represents a transformation of the online environment in which services
78 have gone from offering only communication channels to becoming interactive, bidirectional vehicles for networked
79 sociality, with users generating content rather than just consuming it, platforms oriented to the lay user experience
80 -with simpler interfaces -, and interoperability across devices (BLANK, REISDORF, 2012). Thus, as Dijck (2012)
81 explores, social media forms a new social layer in the online domain, through which people organize their lives
82 and socialize.

83 With the encoding of information (data) generated by people into algorithms, network connectivity has quickly
84 evolved into a valuable resource as they create an online sociality personalized to each user, monetizing the internet
85 akin to a marketplace from this personal and network traffic data -a byproduct of making connections and staying
86 connected. As Berry (2011, p.4) points out, as this software increasingly structures the world, "it also withdraws,
87 and it becomes harder and harder for us to focus on as it is embedded, hidden, off-shored and merely forgotten
88 about", as it increasingly quantifies our social and everyday lives they begin to engineer our desires and "choices"
89 rather than just discovering our needs. That is, platforms come to influence human interaction on an individual
90 and community level, permeating through the fibers of culture on a broader social level as online and offline
91 worlds increasingly interpenetrate, with the former gaining ends in itself for people, such as escape from everyday
92 annoyances, or as a precondition for participation in certain social circles (TURKLE, 2011; DIJCK, 2012).

93 Social media and technologies such as smartphones have not only facilitated networked activities, they have
94 constituted and matured as part of everyday social practices, with this mediated sociality becoming an essential
95 element of the social fabric (DIJCK, 2012). What we have today is the normalization of social networks, of
96 their culture of personal openness and masked collection of this data for commercial purposes, as demonstrated
97 by their global acceptance and centrality in the habits of an ever-increasing number of users. 1 Thus, one can
98 summarize the commercial structure of the web as dominated by gigantic corporations that act in a monopolistic
99 way, with partnerships among themselves to help in the computation of all possible information about people, in
100 order to keep users connected as long as possible, with high traffic to their platforms. The most important tool
101 in this sense are the algorithms, which are codes to Any "norm" in this sense necessarily ends up being part of a
102 larger culture, which Cohen suggests, in the same vein as Geertz, ?is not a fixed collection of texts and practices,
103 but rather an emergent, historically and materially contingent process through which understandings of self and
104 society are formed and reformed [...]. The process of culture is shaped by the self-interested actions of powerful
105 institutional actors, by the everyday practices of individuals and communities, and by ways of understanding and
106 describing the world that have complex histories of their own. (COHEN, 2012, p.17).

107 As Dijck (2012) continues, social media and its culture of connectivity are guided by some characteristics:
108 centrality of code and algorithms in human connections and interactions; from this, imposition of an economicist
109 logic, which pressures competitiveness through rankings and the principle of popularity -followers, likes, shares;
110 nebulous boundary between private, corporate, and public spheres, favoring the decrease of the latter in practice,
111 even if not in appearance, since the standard conduct of platforms is to exempt themselves from responsibility
112 over the content that circulate on them. assimilate patterns, of outstanding utility in personalizing the content
113 that each user will find online, facilitating their search and consumption, as well as the recommendation of news
114 and targeted advertisements. They are like a "black box", collecting data and not revealing how they organize
115 and use it, leading to demands for their accountability and transparency regarding the social effects caused
116 (reiteration of biases), which vary greatly due to their high scalability and learning (PASQUALE, 2015; O'NEIL,
117 2016).

118 Aiming at our theme, it is more worthwhile to highlight here the immense risk, even if unintentionally as among
119 these other non-premeditated consequences -of algorithmic personalization creating a media and information
120 environment conditioned to our preferences, generating an echo chamber that reinforces users' preestablished
121 convictions, thus aggravating the existing political abyss in society (BAIL et al., 2018). As Baldi (2018)
122 emphasizes, they reinforce the psychological (collective acceptance) and cultural specificities of each internet
123 user's identity niches, creating clusters isolated and polarized among themselves.

124 The importance of this overview was guided by the fact that, at the very least, the development of social media
125 has kept pace with the transformation of the public sphere of liberal democracies into a dissonant, fragmented, and
126 noisy space of political communication. With this new media space, the traditional top-down flow of information
127 -the definition of the public agenda by political elites and the media -is broken, and a de-professionalization of
128 journalists is generated, since they lose their role as guardians of the public debate when people can interact
129 directly through the Internet, exchanging user-generated content. Moreover, Pfetsch (2020) reminds us that the
130 public can approach political parties and governments directly without the intermediation of newsrooms that
131 used to connect with political authorities and movements. That activists, agencies, and the online commercial
132 industry do not bind themselves to the professional and ethical standards of journalism, and thus are more
133 susceptible to manipulating content for their own cause. Furthermore, through digital media, they have as great
134 a reach as traditional information chains.

135 Especially with social media, the illusion of an unmediated public debate has been created, in which everyone is
136 free to express themselves, while in reality no exchange of opinions occurs, but the opposite, the strengthening of
137 individuals' opinions from the bubble filter that their relationships form (PARISER, 2011; PICCININ, CASTRO,
138 CASTILLO, 2019). New technologies certainly offer opportunity to increase the reach and diversity of opinions by
139 connecting people who are distant and from diverse perspectives, thus blurring the distinction between groups,
140 but in practice the dissonance of voices and competitiveness for maximum content propagation prevent this
141 from happening (HAWDON et al., 2020). What is more, they turn the apparently beneficial democratization of
142 information into an extremely effective means of weakening the boundaries between facts and opinions.

143 In this direction, one can also cite the notion of a post-truth, which denotes the moment when appeals to
144 emotion and personal belief are more influential in shaping public opinion than objective facts, signaling the
145 loss of legitimacy of science in the face of the greatly amplified digital requirement for bombastic rhetoric and
146 impactful stories, belittling experts. By instance, Kakutani (2018) reminds us that the average of contemporaneity
147 has turned out to be paranoia and exaggerations -a society of fear and moral panics which are catalyzed by
148 general uncertainties, regarding economic, health, and environmental conditions as a whole. With its culture of
149 connectivity, the Internet seems to bring these concerns to the boiling point, spilling over into the core of the
150 cultural disputes that mark the current political confrontation.

151 In this sense, for example, Baldi (2018) focuses on populist reactions to ideas of a cosmopolitan culture -
152 collaborative, based on the intelligence of crowds and with transparent mediation -that take the form of political
153 propaganda (fake news) to take advantage of the disintermediation and apparent horizontality of the internet.
154 She thus identifies a constant search for aggregative reactions around slogans and insults, exposing those involved
155 with these common goals as carrying social bonds of pure conviction in counterposing targets that do not align
156 with the same vision, in this case experts, traditional media, and authorities. 2 Going back a bit, one should
157 note the importance of liberal democracies for the expansion of media outlets and their placement at the center
158 of the political process, since television-mediated public image management of authorities was the main mode
159 of contact with potential voters and distant audiences. As John Thompson puts it, since print media and even
160 more so with electronic media, "struggles for recognition have increasingly become constituted as struggles for
161 visibility within the non-localized space of mediated publicness. The struggle to make oneself heard or seen (and
162 to prevent others from doing so) is not a peripheral aspect of the social and political upheavals of the Despite the
163 author's specific target, it is expected that these conduct traits are not exclusive to this "conservative" portion
164 of the political dispute, but should also be perceived in progressive opponents proponents of this cosmopolitan
165 culture -through our empirical study.

166 Year 2022 C modern world; on the contrary, it is central to them" (THOMPSON, 1995, p.247). Many social
167 movements succeed in their claims and support from the intelligent use of the media.

168 "Media images and messages can tap into deep divisions and feelings of injustice that are experienced by
169 individuals in the course of their day-to-day lives" (THOMPSON, 1995, p.248). This politicizing and making

4 B) CULTURE WARS

170 visible the invisible serves as a catalyst for reactions even in the most distant locations from the original event.
171 More than that, media institutions, through the distribution of information and different points of view, are
172 essential in the cultivation of diversity and pluralism, which is an essential condition for the development of
173 deliberative democracy (LOUW, 2005). Deliberation thrives on the clash of competing views, which is the
174 extreme opposite of an orchestrated chorus of opinions that does not allow for dissent. Media, including social
175 media and traditional vehicles, should serve as safe platforms on which power can be challenged and a diversity
176 of opinions can be expressed, not as unofficially sanctioned echo chambers of authorities and pompous interests,
177 taking advantage politically and economically of general incomprehension and mediation.

178 In the realm of news specifically, digital media allow for increased monitoring of audience reactions to news
179 media, whether through click-through rates to news stories, reader comments, or social media activity. In
180 addition, increased competition and economic squeezes make apprehending and understanding readers' news
181 interests -visible audience preferences even more important to newsroom selection processes. The criteria are
182 shifting from professional journalistic principles to what is best economically, which is matching the internet
183 audience's relevance structures abandonment of a clear sense of public purpose in favor of product optimization
184 (WENDELIN, ENGELMANN, NEUBARTH, 2017).

185 This alliance between journalistic flexibilization (pressures for publishing and reach) and free circulation of
186 user-generated content serves as a springboard for the infamous issue of fake news (HIMMA-KADAKAS, 2017).
187 One must define the term, which, in the context of this paper, is about intentionally manipulated news with
188 political ends supporting their action to misinform, or more neutrally, cause disruption to information. 3 3 It
189 needs to be pointed out that this definition is not a general consensus. One can cite the perspective of the
190 National Endowment for Democracy (NED), for which fake news is defined by the search for financial return
191 from advertising revenues of major platforms (JACKSON, 2018). Also, that of Michael Radutzky, who conflates
192 them by their popular appeal regardless of whether they appear false for lack of verifiable facts (LAZER et al.,
193 2018).

194 The distinction with rumors and genuine journalistic errors remains difficult to determine, however, since
195 political effects (and even more so individual reactions) are independent of authorial intentionality.

196 From this communicative environment created by digital media, the most feared result is polarization, or even
197 hyperpolarization. 4

198 4 b) Culture Wars

199 Overall, it can lead to political gridlock, tribalism, and the erosion of social capital -the escalation of culture
200 wars, social destabilization, civil unrest, and political violence itself. Hawdon et al. (2020) differentiate both
201 from their effect on social capital: hyperpolarization takes hold when inter-group social capital decreases, and
202 intra-group social capital increases, which tends to radicalize members' views. In this sense, the blame for social
203 media falls on algorithms and the increasing political bias of traditional media, which tend to distort news to fit
204 its implications into the preferred narrative (PRIOR, 2013).

205 As Blanckhorn (2018) summarizes, recent changes in social media have a pervasive effect on increasing political
206 polarization, notably, the spread of media ghettos, bubbles in which we do not challenge our opinions, but harden
207 them and make them more extreme. He traces two main causes: the abandonment of editing, fact-checking,
208 professionalization, and the privileging of institutions over individuals, which guaranteed media quality, in favor
209 of the total freedom of anyone to publish material to gather clicks, which is an atomized and leaderless non-
210 system; finally, the decline of journalistic accountability and standards in favor of poor quality content in the
211 pursuit of volume and repetition, as well as the blurring of boundaries between news and opinion, facts and
212 non-facts, and reporting and entertainment.

213 In sum, in part because of the developments in digital media highlighted here, one expects to observe
214 contemporary media transpiring: appeals to emotion and personal belief; trampling of due diligence due to
215 the viral and competitive nature of the web; individuals and groups mired in invisible bubbles or properly echo
216 chambers, demonstrating their alliance to a specific positioning in search of collective acceptance; news with
217 bombastic rhetoric, or even directly manipulated and for political ends; disparagement of experts; paranoid and
218 exaggerated narratives that use fear and moral panic as weapons of mass conflagration; aggregative reactions
219 around slogans and insults against a common enemy that is vilified; suppression of certain perspectives in favor
220 of others as an expression of the struggle to be heard or seen and to prevent others from doing so.

221 The concept of culture wars, despite its contemporary resurgence, originally designated the 4 This differentia-
222 tion is important if one accepts the argument that the former is potentially beneficial for democracy because
223 it simplifies electoral choices and incites greater political engagement by citizens (MC COY, RAHMAN, SOMER,
224 2018). conflict between the German states and the Roman Catholic Church in the second half of the 19th century,
225 in the so-called kulturkampf. The dispute was animated by the liberal aim of secularization, while the church
226 wanted to maintain its influence on the issues of family, marriage, and especially education. In addition to the
227 effort to separate religion from the state definitively, the division between Protestants and Catholics deepened
228 with unification, as did the distrust of the Vatican. 5 The result was pamphlet campaigns in the newspapers,
229 articles slinging mud at the opposing side, and conflagration with the political disputes of the time, namely
230 Bismarck's intention to deflate the (Catholic) Center Party and the liberal desire to uproot all Catholic ideology
231 from society (complete the Reformation). Thus, unlike its current counterpart, the state took direct part in

232 the conflict, and, through numerous laws and regulations, effectively ended up being the central actor in the
233 conflict process rather than the groups (STEINHOFF, 2008; GROSS, 2004). 6 The importance of this historical
234 review is precisely in allowing us to draw parallels with the contemporary vision of the concept and the disputes
235 at the practical level, even if global considerations about the phenomenon are beyond the scope of this article.
236 To make the counterpoint, then, we move on to the resurrection of the term with Hunter (1991), who defines
237 culture wars as a conflict to define American public life between a progressive and an orthodox -or conservative
238 -ideology. 7 5 Specifically, the number of Catholics rose due to the unification with the southern states such as
239 Bavaria, which had a Catholic majority. It was also common for villages to be religiously homogeneous, with
240 people of different beliefs not mixing. As for the Vatican, the doctrine of papal infallibility proclaimed in 1870
241 and the quest for more control of the bishops was not looked upon favorably (ARLINGHAUS, 1942). 6 From
242 an expository and completeness end, from 1871 to 1876, a number of laws were passed assuring the supremacy
243 of the State over the Catholic Church, including modifications in the structure of its operations in Germany.
244 From 1878 the liberal impetus lost strength and allowed more pragmatic positions to dominate the reconciliation
245 between the Holy See and the German parliament (GROSS, 2004). 7 The original focus of this distinction is to
246 reflect the Christian religious and sometimes evangelical inspiration of the positions held on the orthodox side,
247 and the growing atheism of progressivism (HARTMAN, 2015).

248 They protagonize a polarized realignment from distinct moral understanding systems, the former with an
249 evolutionary and contextual moral truth and the latter with a static and universal moral truth. This anchor
250 informs their positioning on controversial issues of values, beliefs, and lifestyle, prominently including feminism,
251 drugs, gun liberation, homosexuality, race relations, religion, curriculum structures, climate change, etc. The
252 main fronts of this confrontation end up taking place in the various institutional entities touched by a cultural
253 praxis, such as communication and teaching, although the cleavages are apparent in sections that should transpire
254 pragmatism, such as governments and businesses.

255 From this we come across some points for discussion, starting with the basis of the conflict, which is the
256 formation of two alliances identified with diametrically opposed worldviews. Pointing to specific causes for
257 this alignment is fruitless for this debate, 8 This connects directly with Durkheim's (1997) common/collective
258 consciousness, which animates (but does not determine!) individuals to support the position, especially in moral
259 terms, that most directly reinforces the bond they have with those in their reference group.

260 only being important to point out that the polarization that the concept implies is necessarily an intergroup
261 collective process, with people radicalizing themselves as part of a group and through their socially constructed
262 "reality", their particular filter for understanding objective reality, which is too complex to grasp in a lone view.
263 When groups become polarized, a strict distinction between "us" and "them" evolves; both groups claim that
264 what "we" represent is threatened by "them"; tribute is paid to the symbols and values of the group identities
265 are reinforced -and the outsider is derogated (VAN STEKELENBURG, KLANDERMANS, 2010; GITHENS-
266 MAZER, 2012). 9 8 The main reason for this is because determining this causality does not impact the occurrence
267 of the phenomenon within the parameters of the article -it continues to exist even if we do not know why. The
268 omission of this is also justified because the literature points to multiple causes. Citing just one, Jensen, Seate,
269 and James (2020) explore how the perception of crisis (such as that growing in several areas) by collectivities
270 is a critical incentive for greater solidarity and political radicalization, assisted by psychological and emotional
271 motivators such as individual powerlessness (wanting to feel empowered) and tribalistic groupthink. 9 As Jacoby
272 (2014) addresses, there is always the element of the individual abstracting the values and conceptions of his
273 cultural milieu and coming to his own conclusion -of course, marked by culture -of desirable end states to human
274 life. Problems arise when mutually exclusive differences in these end states develop between groups in society,
275 which can, but do not necessarily, generate cultural conflict.

276 We seek to cement the connection with our cultural groups and reinforce our definition of ourselves, maintain
277 consistent beliefs by giving greater weight to the evidence and arguments that support them rather than spending
278 energy disproportionately trying to refute opinions or arguments contrary to our expectations. It is more
279 comfortable to learn what our reference group believes and integrate those beliefs into our viewpoint than to
280 investigate complex issues (HOFFMAN, 2012). Thus, it can be seen that the connection to a larger consciousness
281 is not only moral, with group identities also directly influencing how people perceive the social world by providing
282 norms and values that distinguish the group from other social categories and provide clues about how to think and
283 act in particular communities or social situations (TAJFEL, TURNER, 1986). In particular, culture wars happen
284 after the increase in group cohesion that produces dangerous biases, such as polarization, radicalization with
285 groupthink (conformity of opinions without critical evaluation), externalization of social prejudices, avoidance of
286 responsibility for choices, etc. (DELLA PORTA, 1995; McCUALEY, 1989).

287 This polarization results in a total ignorance of the other, with groups that oppose each other too exaltedly
288 tending to coincide, as they reduce their distinctions to generic abstractions of their constitutive historical
289 processes (BALDI, 2018). The sides of this conflict demand that people actively show their position and mobilize
290 against their opponents, with the movements dictating beforehand how these should be perceived. 10 That is,
291 the interpretation of the meanings and possibilities of reading the content in dispute is vetoed, which are already
292 given and do not change among situations if not by varied formats of representation (SOUZA, AZEVEDO, 2018).
293 In other words, there is no dialogue, there is binary thinking, absolutization of preferences, selectivity of points,
294 and, at a more baseline level, a generalized failure to disagree peacefully, to show empathy, to take into account

295 the perspective of others (BLANKEHORN, 2018; NEISSE, 2006). 11 Moving to the basis of the difference
296 (and thus conflict) between these groups, it has been said to stem from incompatible moral understandings,
297 especially stemming from religious views on the one hand and secular views on the other (HUNTER, 1991).
298 Overall, since the 1990s, this division of diametrically opposed worldviews and principles has grown, escaping
299 the perspective that political litigation in the USA reserves itself to widely acceptable discursive boundaries. ??2
300 10 This tribalistic chasm that is triggered by a prolonged social divide is in great danger of degenerating into
301 a "logical schism," as Hoffman (2012) calls it, which is a breakdown in debate in which the opposing sides are
302 incomprehensible to the other because they start from completely different cultural foundations (of one's own
303 way of thinking). 11 In this issue of public dialogue, Neisser (2006) denounces mainly the proliferation of a false
304 dialogue by the media, which tends to exclude important perspectives from the conversation, or else pressure
305 and shame participants into agreeing with preconceived conclusions. The quest for attention through social
306 media also undermines the primary function of the public sphere, which is to give visibility to the contradictions
307 and disputes that arise from the coexistence of issues from many publics, which should outweigh the normative
308 goal of consensus -therefore, to disagree peacefully (PFETSCH, 2020). Overall, the manipulation comes from
309 representatives across the political spectrum, often not being conscious attempts to deceive, which only indicates
310 the anemic state of the dynamics of conversation and reception of disagreement, which come to require adherence
311 to what are considered "legitimate" opinions of a given issue. 12 This discussion goes back as far as Tocqueville,
312 through Devine and Dahl, who describe American political culture as liberalism tempered by democracy, with a
313 general consensus on fundamental orientations. Baker (2005) and Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006), however,
314 argue that the reality is much more complex and inconsistent, with combinations of traditions and values, and
315 conflicting visions of how to order social life characterizing the country, but not necessarily meaning a culture
316 war.

317 Recently, Jacoby (2014) finds that this divide in values has deepened to become a general ideological dispute,
318 regardless of aspects such as religion, income, race, or gender. This conflict remains widely distributed along
319 partisan and religious lines, however, as Castle's study finds (2018).

320 Distinctly, too, there is now a recognition that culture is a larger battleground in which diverse symbolologies
321 (identities, religions, commodities, rights) present themselves and vie for primacy in the processes of resignifying
322 how one knows and perceives social reality, which was extremely incipient in the liberals of the kulturkampf.
323 In other words, the culture wars are not just about contention on isolated issues, but conflicts that address the
324 cultural root that symbols and meanings constitute. 13 One must frame the culture wars in the culturalist view
325 that human beings swim in a sea of meanings that is the result of a process of semiosis. We are born into
326 pre-constituted seas and internalize them as we are socialized and learn to communicate.

327 What is sought is to increase the symbolic capital of the group and to impose their worldviews, emplacing
328 them in Bourdieu's socially and institutionally authorized language, which is recognized by the collectivity, and
329 therefore lends legitimacy and power to represent and speak officially (BALDI, 2018). 14 13 As the frankfurtians
330 have already put it, efforts to counteract the dehumanization promoted by the repressive society must address the
331 mind of individuals, which is "the place of entrance, there where the false consciousness takes form (or rather: is
332 systematically formed) -it must begin with stopping the words and images which feed this consciousness. To be
333 sure, this is censorship, even precensorship, but openly directed against the more or less hidden censorship that
334 permeate the free media." (MARCUSE, 1965, p.111, emphasis added). 14 As Geertz (1973) describes, everyone
335 encounters meaningful symbols when they are born, which remain latent and take root, even with some additions,
336 subtractions, and partial alterations. They are employed spontaneously for the purpose of erecting a construction
337 on the events experienced and providing guidance for the things experienced.

338 Communication itself emerged with groupings or structures of meanings and coding that congregated over time,
339 taking on identifiable forms in societies or cultures (LOUW, 2001). As Schutz's (1973) view of phenomenology
340 addresses, meanings arise from communication between people, which is possible because of the "idealizations"
341 of the interchangeability of viewpoints and the congruence of hierarchies of importance. This reciprocity, this
342 detachment of meaning from specific social situations is what leads to the apprehension of objects and their aspects
343 by me and others as the knowledge of all, thus being conceived as anonymous and objective and facilitating social
344 interactions. With a view to the culture wars, it must be emphasized that this objectivity is necessarily provisional,
345 since the activity of constructing meanings is continuous, and it can be argued, as sociological ethnomethodology
346 does, that there is no such thing as a culture -a commonly accepted set of conventions -since symbols are
347 continuously (re)constructed in individual social encounters. 15 All individuals participate in the process of
348 changing meanings, since all communication depends on the context (space-time and relational), although those
349 with greater poweraccess to media and circulation systems -have a greater role to play. 16 As Welch (2013)
350 addresses this question, adapting to the discursive environment is like adapting to the economic one, meaning that
351 we integrate ourselves into salient inequalities in a space in which we possess little ability to influence. Following
352 the analogy, discursive meanings (symbols) end up being the currency of human communication, distributing the
353 values that allow the exchange and circulation of speech and writing. Thus, it should be noted that the influence
354 of discourse on behavior is not direct, with symbols altering conscious attitudes, underlying values or internalized
355 rules, but indirect through the construction, transmission and transformation of meanings. 17,18 This leaves
356 us at the doorstep of the points of greatest cultural contention, which are divided into those where discourses
357 are produced (newsrooms, studios, parliaments, courts, universities) and where they are distributed (schools,

358 media, churches). There is a constant struggle to control access to and the functioning of such places. Through
359 them pass sets of meaning that are always in flux, as the very result of this constant conflict rooted in contextual
360 relations -efforts both for and against the hegemony of different meanings. It is from the encodings, hybridizations,
361 and syntheses generated here that cultures are constructed and reimagined, with globalization making possible
362 overflows from other cultures even more frequent (TOMASELLI, 1987). This influence of foreign cultures is
363 historically significant, and, in the case of the culture wars, seems to take on a worldwide scale, especially in
364 countries of closer cultural matrix. 19 15 In other words, one can take the symbolic interactionist view of Blumer
365 (1969), which illuminates this exposition from three central propositions: that people act on the basis of the
366 meanings they have toward things and other people; that these meanings are derived from social interaction with
367 others; and that these meanings are managed and transformed through an interpretive process that people use
368 to make sense of and deal with the objects that constitute their social world. 16 This is a rather mild way of
369 partially embracing the Marxist view broached by Volosinov (1973) of a semiotic dispute, in which the dispute
370 over meanings and material resources influence each other. 17 This is why systematic cultural change is easier to
371 detect in symbolic forms and their modes of production and circulation in the social world than in broad changes
372 in values and beliefs, attitudes and orientations, which apprehended through surveys show a slower curve of
373 change. 18 Pulling Volosinov (1973) again, he is the one who concretizes the view that the causal relationship
374 between base and superstructure in Marxism is not a mechanical causality of a positive natural science, but an
375 indirect causality that occurs through language, and more narrowly, meanings. ??9 Of course, this is just a
376 conjecture beyond the scope of this paper, but in what has been discussed here seems to be easily seen in the
377 Distinguishing these sites of conflict, two views leap into prominence for their interpretation, lending different
378 importance to their control. From a structuralist, Marxist, or Foucauldian perspective, meanings are effectively
379 controlled from the ideology and sanctioned discourses of each circumstance, and it is thus essential to control
380 the structures of production and distribution. 20 In conclusion, then, this phenomenon is not new to the political
381 field, though it differs from the kultkampf in the greater appreciation and awareness of those engaged in seeking
382 to shape cultural terms, with this competition for symbolic dominance becoming more evident to society as a
383 whole, as well as taking center stage in the discursive clashes themselves (THOMSON, 2010). As with its current
384 counterpart, the discussion of values, beliefs, and habits takes a back seat to the confrontation apparent in the
385 media and other social institutions. Despite this similarity, kultkampf points to the state's mediation of the
386 actors On the other hand, there is the view that meaning is not controllable because the recipients always actively
387 read, interpret, and decode meanings for themselves, and are not simply naive recipients of manipulation. In
388 the absence of further practical examination, the important point to note is that regardless of which side of this
389 spectrum reality tends -total control of structures or total independence of the individual -cultural warriors do
390 not risk being guided by the second position; quite the contrary, they believe that over time they will be altering
391 accepted meanings, and that this requires efforts at the structural level.

392 Of great interest here as well, conflicts over discourse mean that different interest groups are simultaneously
393 engaged, with their discursive positions taking on liberal or restrictive features depending on the context (LOUW,
394 2001). For example, feminist discourse can be used both to challenge restrictive (patriarchal) social relations and
395 to curtail debate about power relations (offhand, no woman can abuse power). On the other side, the conservative
396 discourse can serve both to preserve institutions that have proven to be adequate (democratic, republican) and to
397 obstruct inclusive reforms because they are not in line with prevailing interests. Note that in these examples the
398 restrictive format is not inherent to the values of these ideals, but radicalizations, denials to dialogue that end up
399 happening in practical political contention. distinction of cultural positions between the religious (Catholics and
400 Evangelicals) and non-religious (atheists and agnostics) in the Western world and its larger sphere of influence
401 (Latin America). 20 Again with an example from Marcuse (1965, p.100-1, emphasis added), he is categorical
402 that, after the revolution against the conservatives, "the restoration of freedom of thought may necessitate new
403 and rigid restrictions on teachings and practices in the educational institutions which, by their very methods and
404 concepts, serve to enclose the mind within the established universe of discourse and behavior".

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407 and their causes as the most likely way to ameliorate the conflict, which the nature of contemporary culture
408 wars does not allow, since agency is much more diffuse, issues are more global and unified, and social division is
409 extremely more pervasive and deep. In the end, the direction of public opinion is the key point of the concept,
410 that is, the framing of citizens' way of thinking by the meanings and understandings enunciated by identity
411 movements through the media, which direct debates and public opinion towards one of the antagonistic view
412 poles.

413 Thus, in conjunction with the items highlighted in the first section, it is expected to observe contemporary
414 media transpiring: analyses biased by its own cultural environment (moral and partisan); presentation of a
415 reality that can only be apprehended through the group filter; marked distinction between "us" and "them",
416 with misrepresentations of the other side; groupthink; evasion of responsibility for choices; false dialogue and
417 selectivity of points; resignification of social reality with the transformation of symbols, whether that be language,
418 historical characters, works of art, entertainment or scientific, etc.

419 III. Culture Wars as Captured on the WI Spa Case ??2021) What I refer to as the Wi Spa case was a

420 controversy over the exposure of male genitalia by a trans woman in the women's section of the spa, involving as
421 well the ensuing protests that happened on July 3 and July 17 of 2021, which hosted parties for and against the
422 right of trans people to be in their selfidentified gender areas on nudity allowed spaces, like the Wi Spa. 21 As a
423 whole, the case proves important as it provides a clear picture of the media and underlying discourse dynamics of
424 a typical culture war battle. Before going through each media coverage of the incident itself, this initial section
425 will lay out purely the events that happened, taking as factual evidence the videos and declarations from the
426 parties involved, 22 The episode gained traction from a viral Instagram video, which showed a woman filming
427 herself confronting Wi Spa staff about seeing a "man" naked in with the aim to simply relay the story without
428 any imbued interpretations. The usefulness of this reconstruction lies in providing a neutral basis for comparison
429 with what each broadcaster will centralize in its own narrative. 21 Specifically, Wi Spa has a separate floor for
430 men and women, where their policies mandate that swimwear not be worn by the patron (cf. WI SPA, 2021).
431 22 Unifying the evidence, the original video was stored by Hill (2021); extra information was fetched by Lansing
432 (2021); footage from the protests were reviewed from multiple sources, including: CBS (2021), FOX 11 (2021a),
433 Singh (2021a; 2021b; 2021c), Guardian News (2021) and Mackay (2021); Los Angeles police report on the second
434 encounter is available through LAPD (2021).

435 front of women and underaged girls in the women's section of the facility: "There are girls down there, other
436 women who are highly offended for what they just saw, and you did nothing, absolutely nothing." The staff at Wi
437 Spa defends itself against the woman's accusation citing they had to comply with the law and not discriminate
438 based on gender identity, or precisely, "sexual orientation". 23 Either way, Cubana's video made the rounds
439 online, especially on right-wing media outlets, sparking demonstrations to take place nearby Wi Spa. The first
440 occurred on the morning of July 3, with multiple videos showcasing the involvement of three large groups, one
441 in defense of trans rights, one against, and then the LAPD. Specifically, the defense was composed of LGBTQ+
442 activists and black bloc SoCal antifa members, while opposing them were QAnon, Proud Boys, Trans-exclusionary
443 feminists (TERFs) and Christian conservatives such as Cure America Action, which gave Cubana Angel a political
444 platform.

445 Another patron suggested the individual might be a "transgender person", with the woman filming, which
446 identifies herself as "Cubana Angel", responding that "there is no such thing as transgender [...] I'm a woman
447 who knows how to stand up and speak up for my right [...] As a woman I have a right to feel comfortable without
448 a man exposing himself". At least three other women are seen siding with her view of the events (cf. HILL,
449 2021).

450 No more substantiated evidence was found that could verify the woman's account, with the Los Angeles Blade
451 newspaper reporting that anonymous sources from Wi Spa staff and from the Los Angeles Police Department
452 (LAPD) were doubtful any transgender clients were present in the spa on the day of the incident, which would
453 make the whole story a hoax (LANSING, 2021). Factual or not, the LAPD effectively pressed five charges of
454 indecent exposure against a 52year-old person called Darren Merager, whose gender identity remains uncertain,
455 but is a repeated sex offender since 2002 (QUEALLY, CHABRIA, 2021). 24 23 The referred law from California
456 can be found on California State Legislature (2015), which states that regardless of multiple differences, all
457 persons "are entitled to the full and equal accommodations, advantages, facilities, privileges, or services in all
458 business establishments of every kind whatsoever." 24 They restated her account and political drive on July 7
459 (cf. CURE, 2021).

460 A myriad of violent occurrences ensued: an against man with a bullhorn speaking that the crowd would go to
461 hell was beaten up by 6 black bloc people; another against man was hit with a skateboard on the head; an antifa
462 guy was hit with a chain bead by a shirtless man; persons in black clads, masks and headgear set a dumpster
463 on fire while police was trying to disperse the crowds off the street after they declared the whole children" are
464 heard while police pushes pro-trans people rights back; an against man with a lead pipe hits the back of the head
465 of a press labeled person; two against men feature a gun and out "something to shoot you with"; one against
466 man gets angry over filming by trans press reporter and is backed out by police; one police officer intimidates
467 a pro-trans cammer aiming his shotgun point blank; at last, two stabbings occur by a right-wing protester, one
468 against a pro-trans and another against his own fellow activist (cf. CBS, 2021; FOX 11, 2021a; SINGH, 2021a;
469 2021b).

470 The second protest took place on July 17. This time the LAPD was better prepared and in greater numbers
471 to enforce the status quo. Multiple video evidence show more episodes of violent behavior, mostly by the police
472 itself: a standing still woman yelling "don't shoot" was shot point blank by a police officer with less-lethal bean
473 bag rounds; "save our children" chanting occurs again; police assaults pro-trans activists with batons, breaking
474 a press person's hand; another left-wing protester is shot after flinging a paper string; police forces the pro-trans
475 activists into a kettle; more shots happen aimed at their general location, and smoke bombs are deployed; a
476 right-wing woman yells with opposing protesters until she is taken back by police; journalist is harassed by group
477 of people wearing anti-communist t-shirts (cf. GUARDIAN NEWS, 2021; MACKEY, 2021; SINGH, 2021c).
478 Opposite to the first, in this instance the LAPD made arrests, 38 to be exact. The police attitude was deemed
479 too violent and one-sided against the pro-trans activists, leading to attorneys launching a lawsuit against the
480 LAPD -full announcement can be found on FOX 11 (2021b). The LAPD (2021) defended itself citing the violent
481 turnout of the first encounter, the antifa graffiti that appeared on public buildings, the carrying of knives and
482 sprays by the pro-trans group and throwing of frozen water bottles, with both sides supporting a clashing intent.

483 6 a) Fox News' Coverage

484 Fox News' first publication regarding the incident came out on June 28, 2021, with the title being: "LGBTQ
485 community 'appalled' after transgender person exposes male genitalia in front of young girls at LA spa". The
486 original story is restated while emphasising the presence of young girls and the lack of response from Wi Spa
487 staff due to the individual's "sexual orientation" and the state's legal requirements. The main line is following
488 the reaction of Tammy Bruce, a member of the LGBT community that was appalled, recalling the difficulty
489 of changing gender and the political use of their issues: "the transgender community has got to tell that the
490 gay political leadership to stop using us as this weapon to try to keep people divided". The pedophilia worry
491 is brought up again: "That is a jerk who goes and does that. That is not someone who was looking at their
492 identity and handling situations appropriately". The aired section of the news is even clearer, with Tucker Carlson
493 highlighting that a "biological male walked into the female kid's section of the spa with his genitals exposed".
494 Cubana's viral video is reproduced, while she's elevated as being a courageous woman for fighting off the obvious
495 (HALON, 2021).

496 Overall, the publication tries to avoid directly confronting the trans rights issue, using the term "biological
497 male" to frame the story as an example of how gender identity can mask pedophilia intents, which is of simpler
498 bashing. The LGBT name is appropriated and hastily attributed the 'appalled' reaction to emphasize this
499 discourse, with an emotional justification through the acknowledgment of how difficult it is to change one's
500 gender. No fact-checking is made to conclude if the story really happened, making clear the usage of it as an
501 attempt to politically unite against pedophiles, even though it was unsubstantiated.

502 The second publication covers the first protest on July 3, stating it was sparked by an allegedly exposing
503 of transgender woman, with "both sides of the transgender rights movement clash[ing] at the scene." Violent
504 occurrences are described without assigning blame. The original story is restated as seen in the viral video, and
505 the first article by Halon is referenced. A 10 minute-long video without commentary shows the protest while
506 still a peaceful gathering (RUIZ, 2021). In general then, no narrative is discernible, even though the LGBT
507 endorsement of the other piece is brought up at the end.

508 As January (2021) recollects, between the latter and the former publications there were other two mentions of
509 the story on Fox News Primetime. The first has guest Mollie Hemingway admit that the episode could have been
510 "some sort of stunt", but while also emphasising its "horrific consequences for the entire civilization". The second
511 has guest Abigail Shrier, who attributes a beard to the alleged perpetrator, using the occurrence as an example
512 to oppose a bill that would grant "any male who identifies as female an all-access pass to women's rights and
513 protective spaces." Both pieces show clear uses of hyperbole and emotional manipulation aiming for an aggregate
514 response of repudiation against the case.

515 On July 17 came the third article, covering the corresponding protest. It announces directly on the headline
516 that it was Antifa violently clashing with the police, citing video snippets on multiple Twitter posts. The
517 publication then highlights a flyer posted online by the Youth Liberation Front, which encouraged a gathering to
518 "SMASH TRANSPHOBIA" and fascism, as a "ROUND TWO MOTHER F*". The nude allegation and Spa's
519 defence are restated at the end (BEST, 2021). Considering the main focus of the July 17 confrontation was
520 between police and pro-trans activists, this piece takes the latter party as the aggressors, even though the footage
521 goes both ways.

522 Year 2022 C gathering an unlawful assembly; chantings of "save our At last, after the pushing of charges
523 by the LAPD, Carlson (2021) hosts a small segment dealing with the case again, where he recalls the original
524 episode and restates the story as a biological male disrobing on the women's section. He brings Andy Ngo as a
525 guest, remarking him as telling "the truth under all circumstances". Ngo speaks of the charges against Merager
526 as vindicating the validity of the case against claims by "establishment press" that it was a transphobic hoax.
527 He reached out to Merager, who asserted she was a victim of transphobic harassment. This apparent closure
528 leads to direct analogies framing the left as hypocrites, since they didn't outright believe, but campaigned against
529 Cubana, who's a "black lady", going against what the "believe all women" mantra dictates.

530 In sum, through their coverage, Fox News' appeared conforming to right-wing talking points on digital media,
531 particularly with the shifting of the discussion towards pedophilia and its detestable consequences for society,
532 and the finger pointing towards antifa violence while police and against trans protesters were not accounted for
533 on the overall clashing picture. The positioning on the ressignificance front was to defend a condemnatory view
534 of the nude body and the street brawling.

535 So, in conclusion, Fox News' coverage encompasses highlighted aspects in relation to both (1) digital media
536 and (2) culture wars: (1) due diligence and fact-checking of the original episode aren't done, with the possibility
537 of it being a hoax de-emphasized; appeals to emotion and perhaps paranoia, with the former occurring first in a
538 manner to bond with the LGBT community and the latter in a fear mongering about the future of civilization such
539 occurrences be normalized; the channel avoids the direct manipulation of news and vilification of trans people,
540 though; (2) the analysis is markedly situated in the prevailing conflictual cultural environment prevalent of the
541 internet and US national politics, advancing a mostly right-wing perspective of the events, whose understanding
542 requires the grasp of the conservative moral that underlies it; the distinction between "us" family defenders and
543 "them" child groomers is very clear; there is some level of uncritical conformity and point selectivity (avoidance);
544 the defense of the taboo significance of the naked body is anchored in the conservative moral matrix, without a

545 deeper explanation, which also applies to why street violence is condemned, and in the case of the second protest,
546 entirely laid upon antifa participants.

547 7 b) The Washington Post's Coverage

548 The Washington Post made only one publication regarding the incident, which came out on July 5, 2021 with
549 the following title: "A trans woman undressed in a spa. Customers said they were 'traumatized,' and a protest
550 ensued". The article focuses on the "apparent disrobing" and ensuing viral video as the latest battle over
551 transgender rights, defending gender-inclusive public facilities citing a study on the matter. The presence of a
552 transgender woman only "reportedly" happened, but even if it did, the significance of the exposed genitalia is
553 downplayed as not been automatically inappropriate. The opinion of one member of the LGBTQ community is
554 brought up to argue this point, which is that women-only spaces should be protected, but people must recognize
555 not all women have the same genitals. After finishing recalling the original video, the piece moves on to cover
556 the July 3 protest, centering only on the "children's rights" protesters violence, such as the gun flashing and pipe
557 backsmack, highlighting homophobic slogans and QAnon involvement. Fox News' stint with the story is cited.
558 Finally, in juxtaposition to the quote of them possibly being "an impostor" "faking to be a woman", transgender
559 women receiving death threats online is covered, emphasising their fear of assault, especially when they're unable
560 to use the public space of their choice, according to a study (ANDERS, 2021).

561 Even though The Washington Post only published this lonely piece, it makes patently clear the outlet's left
562 leaning position. It doesn't eschew due diligence, but it chooses to focus on the pro-trans perspective, whose
563 understanding requires grasp of progressivism's moral underpinnings. The article also elucidates the crux of the
564 re-significance debate of this case, which focuses on the nude body and how it actually is normal for women to
565 not all have the same genitals, instead of it being a pathology in Durkheim's sense. Street violence is not directly
566 re-signified, but the one-sided nature of the coverage skews readers opinion formation. The juxtaposition of trans
567 women being "impostors" has a similar but this time also emotional effect, with the reference to studies working
568 to strengthen the Post's discourse. All this means that the Post is tangled up in culture wars and digital media
569 struggles as much as Fox News, although they seem less explicitly aiming at this result.

570 8 c) The Guardian's Coverage

571 The Guardian's first publication regarding the incident came out on July 18, 2021, stating that Wi Spa became
572 the target of a rightwing media storm because of its trans-inclusive policy. The article starts directly confronting
573 the issue of whether trans women in women spaces endanger cis women or cause pedophilia, which was an implicit
574 claim of anti-transgender activists. It then proceeds to single out the participation of QAnon and MassResistance,
575 two anti-LGBT organizations. Police action to disperse the gathering was treated fairly, although one participant's
576 quotation casts criticism: "the people who talk about law and order are against the laws that protect trans people".
577 The bigger focus of the piece then is to frame this episode as the newest right-

578 9 C

579 wing anti-LGBTQ campaign, highlighting Fox News' run of the story, while bringing up the lack of evidence
580 of the original incident, as brought up by Lansing (2020). The final section restates Wi Spa's response, and
581 then emphasizes Southern California as "a center of rightwing extremism" and the LAPD response as aggressive
582 (BECKETT, LEVIN, 2021a). Compared to previous coverages, this first publication is very balanced on the
583 relaying of the original incident, although it explicitly aims to detract anti-trans protesters, with no mention of
584 opposite instances of violence even though it mentions the presence of "anti-fascists".

585 The second article chronologically is the main story put forth by The Guardian, coming out with the title
586 "'A nightmare scenario': how an anti-trans Instagram post led to violence in the streets". It begins by stating
587 that the original allegations are unsubstantiated and were caulkily reverberated by rightwing media, resulting
588 in "chaotic rallies" in an example of how "viral misinformation" can lead to violence. The focus lies on showing
589 the impact of the episode on trans individuals, which still appear as prime targets of harassment. After retelling
590 the incident's origins with the spa's response and highlighting its lingering uncertainty, the article inquires about
591 Cubana's political motivation and Christian affiliations, the mutating of the unverified story through right-wing
592 accounts and Fox News segments, and the pedophilia scare that seems like a contemporary "moral panic". The
593 anti-trans activists are equated to an online mob constantly running the "save our children" and "women are
594 being traumatized" tactic. Especially reported was Precious Child, a trans woman, suffering from accusations and
595 harassment over being mistaken as the alleged perpetrator of the incident. The first street brawl was of difficult
596 accountability due to the lack of arrests, with the piece retelling some pro-trans demonstrators perspectives,
597 while also recalling right-wing putting the blame on antifascist activists. The final remarks sum up the message:
598 "When you're just trying to belong in society, and then you hear someone else is complaining that you are in a
599 public space, just because of who you are, it's really traumatizing." (LEVIN, BECKETT, 2021).

600 The last publication continues pretty much in the same vein, bringing up some comments: Gaye Chapman, a
601 gender-critical feminist that was protesting on July 3, said "I just feel sad about the whole thing [...]. This is
602 not a good way to present arguments we have." Precious Child said she feared the news may "support a narrative
603 that trans people are sex offender demons that take advantage of systems that are put in place to protect people".

604 Jamie Penn, a trans woman who had joined the counter-protests, also said she was worried "what the far-right
605 disinformation machine is going to turn this one into". The article's existence is due to the felony charges pushed
606 by the LAPD, with the remaining uncertainty over the target's gender identity being highlighted. While recalling
607 Cuban's claims and political drive, the piece cites one study that shows no evidence of increased safety risks
608 related to transinclusive policies. A law professor is quoted on the police charges, stating that there needs to be
609 malicious intentionality to the nude and that at the end of the day it's an "individual's conduct, not about a
610 class of people" (BECKETT, LEVIN, 2021b).

611 In conclusion, The Guardian's coverage also goes through highlighted aspects in relation to both (1) digital
612 media and (2) culture wars: (1) overall, it painted a pretty balanced picture of the whole episode, dealing directly
613 with both perspectives, not appealing to personal emotions, manipulating, instilling panic or vilifying; (2) the
614 coverage is informed by the larger cultural conflict though, since the case fundamentally demonstrates a struggle
615 for change that requires cultural adaptations, not exclusively political ones; the analysis is clearly left-leaning and
616 pushes for the normalization of this worldview with regards to the naked trans body, although less explicitly than
617 The Washington Post, but nonetheless impetuously, seeing how they confront the right's diversion of the story
618 to the grounds of pedophilia; the distinction between "us" and "them" is not overly pronounced, even though
619 the anti-trans' violence is highlighted.

620 **10 d) Reactions and general Positionings on Twitter**

621 The story began circulating through social media, specifically Instagram, when the account "cubanaangel" posted
622 the video confronting the spa worker about the incident. Taking into account that the episode happened in 2021,
623 the recollection of tweets was made through the platform's own search mechanism, which was done using the
624 following filters: "(wi spa OR trans) min_faves:100 lang:en until:2021-07-2 since:2021-06-26"; "(wi OR spa OR
625 protest OR trans) min_faves:100 lang:en until:2021-07-6 since:2021-07-1"; "(wi OR spa OR protest OR trans)
626 min_faves:100 lang:en until:2021-07-20 since:2021-07-17". A few tweets that were quite representative of the
627 sentiment on Twitter on both sides of the dispute were highlighted below, covering the three largest phases of
628 the whole case (the numbers in parentheses are engagementsum of responses, retweets and likes; all tweets were
629 retrieved on July 8, 2022):

630 **11 Original Incident**

631 Mallory Moore (1.775): "Days after it has been right across Fox News' news cycle and the whole internet, noone
632 has found the alleged trans woman, despite many of us not being hard to find. I don't buy the Wi Spa story.
633 I think it's cis mischief." ripx4nutmeg (1.720): "Video: A group of women complain to staff at Wi Spa in Los
634 Angeles that a 'man' entered their changing room and flashed at them & children. Staff ignore the complaint as
635 a male customer Year 2022 C accuses them of bigotry, because the flasher claims to be transgender" Paul Joseph
636 Watson (967): "Staff at Wi Spa in Los Angeles dismissed a woman's complaint that a man was exposing his
637 penis to little girls in the women's area by insisting that the individual had a right to be there due to his 'sexual
638 orientation.'" tonyagjprince (412): "Now you have to really search through articles that don't paint that Black
639 woman at Wi Spa as 'hateful' because she didn't want to see a male member during her self-care time. AND did
640 what BW always do, stood up for someone else, a young girl. Self-care. Minding her own biz." July 3

641 Andy Ngô (27.641): "An Asian man wearing a 'Rooftop Korean' shirt near the Wi Spa protest where antifa
642 have been beating people was assaulted on camera. He uses a bottle to defend himself from the assailant, who
643 then runs away." Andy Ngô (9.513): "A Hispanic couple had their signs torn away & were threatened by antifa
644 outside the Wi Spa in Los Angeles. "We come in peace," the woman said while they surrounded her and her
645 partner." Andy Ngô (7.563): "Antifa assault street preachers who tried to attend the Wi Spa protest in Los
646 Angeles. Several people have been assaulted today but police don't appear to be responding at all." Rita Panahi
647 (6.553): "To be clear Antifa (aka modern day fascists) are assaulting people (incl women) peacefully protesting
648 a spa that allowed a man (identifying as a woman) to expose his penis to women and children in female only
649 space. When a woman complained they told her not to come back."

650 Abigail Shrier (5.563): "Watch how this woman is treated, in broad daylight, in Los Angeles -for standing up
651 for women's rights and exercising her right to peaceful protest." Vishal P. Singh (2.283): "Here is more clear video
652 of this far right anti-trans extremist who was wielding a huge knife. He was seen fighting alongside Proud Boys.
653 Right wing media is misconstruing this demonstration as peaceful, but anti-trans demonstrators were prepared
654 to seriously maim or kill." James Barry (1.733): "Man gets cock out in women's section of LA spa in front of two
655 kids. Woman objects; told to shut up: video goes viral. Women have peaceful protest. Women are assaulted,
656 shoved, physically bullied, intimidated; teenage boy swarmed by kicking mob, saved by his mum. This is insane."
657 July 17

658 Vishal P. Singh (13.926): "People want to say this wasn't a demonstration about transgender rights? Here's
659 @LAPDHQ, after defending transphobes, destroying a transgender flag. Anybody who reports on Wi Spa without
660 mentioning the transphobia at play by the far right & LAPD are disingenuous."

661 Talia Lavin (6.571): "As the far-right anti-trans demonstration at a spa in Los Angeles shows today,
662 transphobia, white supremacy and far-right extremism are all intimately linked" Jackson Lanzing (5.905): "Just
663 blocks from my house, Proud Boys siege a local spa over manufactured trans panic. Counter protestors gather

12 CONCLUSION

664 to stand for trans lives across the street. LAPD opens fire on the unarmed counter-protestors/journalists -and
665 fires on them as they try to flee. Indefensible.”

666 Read Wobblies and Zapatistas (5. This gives a general sense of how people have positioned themselves on
667 Twitter over the case’s unfolding, with right-wing sympathetics being the majority early on and highlighting
668 the naked body perversity and antifa’s violence, while left-wing individuals dominated the space on the second
669 protests, stressing the lack of proof of the allegations and the LAPD and far-right activists’ violence. The moral
670 basis of the discussion about nudity between the differing biological sexes is not perceived in this slice of the
671 confrontation, but is made clear on January’s (2021) article which hosts a Matt Walsh tweet that reads: ”A man
672 flashed his penis in front of little girls at a spa and was allowed to do it because he claimed to be a woman. If
673 you watch this video and find yourself siding with the man, please realize that you are not only insane but evil”.
674 It exhibits a clear defense of this question being treated on the grounds of pedophilia alone, coming from the
675 conservative matrix and contrasting most sharply with The Post’s progressive view, which seeks the normalization
676 of different bodies being under a single gender.

677 Overall then, the narrative dispute was the most scathing on Twitter, with representatives from each side
678 upholding their idoneity and the other complicity on hateful displays of intolerance. There doesn’t appear to be
679 a disintermediation effect between what’s on show in this platform and the traditional media though, since the
680 latter portrayal seems more reliant on internal decisions rather than being pressured by social media, which only
681 seemed to host the internet users debate (HATJE, 2022?).

682 Thus, in relation to emphasized aspects of (1) digital media and (2) culture wars, we can summarize about
683 the reactions on the Twitter platform: (1) subtle appeals to emotion and personal experiences, absence of fact-
684 checking, aggregative positions over targeted ”hateful” groups (e.g., antifa, Proud Boys), which are vilified; (2)
685 continence to one’s own cultural ideology, which informs their interpretation of reality -muted dialogue and slight
686 groupthink; marked division between the gentle ”us” in a superior moral position and the rash and rageful ”them”.

687 12 Conclusion

688 In this way, we can conclude that the role played by digital media in this episode of the culture wars was to
689 intermediate social communication, serving as the technical vehicle that enables a constant battling under the
690 aegis of a greater cultural conflict, which in this case involves reference especially to moral understandings. Here,
691 the incident in question focused on the discursive question of whether a trans woman had exposed herself to other
692 women and girls and what that said about trans people rights and pedophilia, with the focus of resignification
693 having been the exposed nude body and, to a lesser extent, the street violence. From there, the traditional media
694 -Fox News and The Washington Post -took different stances: Fox News followed a right-wing viewpoint, holding
695 a taboo significance of the naked body and diverting the crux of the question to possible pedophilia implications;
696 The Washington Post also showed signs of bias, this time to the left, being the most explicit about defending a
697 resignification of the naked body -women don’t all have the same genitalia; at last, The Guardian was the most
698 balanced facing directly the challenges of trans people which weren’t considered by Fox, and lightly by The Post.

699 Altogether, this episode demonstrates the immense hardship of the pursuit to reach an agreement, a middle
700 ground or consensus between people who identify as conservative and progressive. It restates the regrettable view
701 that these sides maintain of each other, with both seeing the other perspective as extreme and possibly ”world
702 ending”. It must be stressed that in this case the conservatives showed far greater levels of paranoia, though,
703 avoiding the humanistic tint of the trans question to put in its place the pedophilia concern. Looking at social
704 media such as Twitter, there wasn’t much in the way of public debate, but an echo chamber where each side
705 followed its own opposite interpretation of the events. The greatest risk is of a complete breakdown of dialogue
706 and enclausuration due to incomprehensible moral underpinnings, seeing as though no real exchange on the core
707 issues happened, with the exception of some contents on the more traditional outlets. Even when accounting
708 for it all, some level of peaceful disagreement remained, although the space for politics, the compromise between
709 extreme callings and claimings, was only secondary to the surface confrontational dynamic of a cultural war.¹
710 ² ³

¹At the very least, one can cite that about 62.5% of the world population uses the Internet, with social networks having around 4.62 billion users by 2022 (cf. DIGITAL REPORT, 2022).

²(³)

³On the whole, Baldi (2018) debits these phenomena to digital media, through the dismantling of hierarchies, immediate access to any information, ease in the production of content (comments, videos, photos), etc., which have revealed a social fabric permeated with rancor and prejudice.

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