Volume 22 Issue 42
Originally issued as C5



Global Journal of human-social science: C
Sociology & Culture
Volume 22 Issue 5 Version 1.0 Year 2022
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

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GJHSS-C Classification: *DDC Code: 306.487 LCC Code: GV1469.17*



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Digital Media and Culture Wars: The Wi Spa Case

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I. Introduction

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

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

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

This article is socially important because it deals with a joint theme that is increasingly embedded in the social fabric, with an entire generation of people being politically socialized with full immersion in digital media and the cultural disputes that are exacerbated by its multiple forums. At the academic level, it seeks to provide a synthetic basis for the debate on the relationship between media and polarization more generally, with the most relevant and properly original facet of the empirical analysis being its comparative effort between select traditional media and social media. The structure of the article is divided into two main parts, the first focusing on the theoretical review and the second on the empirical study. Both are then subdivided into sections: the first part has two, one dealing with digital media and the other with the culture wars; the second part begins with an outline of the specific case, then moves on to the particular coverage by Fox News, The Washington Post and The Guardian, and finally the general reactions and positions perceived on Twitter.

II. Digital Media and Culture Wars

As highlighted earlier, digital media is a globalizing term that serves to summarize the digital environment provided by computers and exponentially

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expanded by the Internet. While Hayles (2012) employs it in McLuhan's sense as a *medium*, thus aiming to treat it as fundamentally altering social relations that are anchored in its content (message), in this article it is employed only to refer to the essentially public space that is composed of the various forms of social media and news networks. This choice is explained by the fact that the focus of the article is not to explore the causality between both factors, although it is recognized that the changes that accompany the popularization of the Internet certainly alter the function attached to the media. In the following section, a brief exposition of the relevant topics is made, starting from social media to implications for mediated communication in general.

a) Digital Media

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

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

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

Social media and technologies such as smartphones have not only facilitated networked activities, they have constituted and matured as part of everyday social practices, with this mediated sociality becoming an essential element of the social fabric (DIJCK, 2012). What we have today is the normalization of social networks, of their culture of personal openness and masked collection of this data for commercial purposes, as demonstrated by their global acceptance and centrality in the habits of an ever-increasing number of users.[1] Any "norm" in this sense necessarily ends up being part of a larger culture, which Cohen suggests, in the same vein as Geertz,

> …is not a fixed collection of texts and practices, but rather an emergent, historically and materially contingent process through which understandings of self and society are formed and reformed [...]. The process of culture is shaped by the self-interested actions of powerful institutional actors, by the everyday practices of individuals and communities, and by ways of understanding and describing the world that have complex histories of their own. (COHEN, 2012, p.17).

As Dijck (2012) continues, social media and its culture of connectivity are guided by some characteristics: centrality of code and algorithms in human connections and interactions; from this, imposition of an economicist logic, which pressures competitiveness through rankings and the principle of popularity - followers, likes, shares; nebulous boundary between private, corporate, and public spheres, favoring the decrease of the latter in practice, even if not in appearance, since the standard conduct of platforms is to exempt themselves from responsibility over the content that circulate on them.

Thus, one can summarize the commercial structure of the web as dominated by gigantic corporations that act in a monopolistic way, with partnerships among themselves to help in the computation of all possible information about people, in order to keep users connected as long as possible, with high traffic to their platforms. The most important tool in this sense are the algorithms, which are codes to

[1] At 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).

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assimilate patterns, of outstanding utility in personalizing the content that each user will find online, facilitating their search and consumption, as well as the recommendation of news and targeted advertisements. They are like a "black box", collecting data and not revealing how they organize and use it, leading to demands for their accountability and transparency regarding the social effects caused (reiteration of biases), which vary greatly due to their high scalability and learning (PASQUALE, 2015; O'NEIL, 2016).

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

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

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

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

In this sense, for example, Baldi (2018) focuses on populist reactions to ideas of a cosmopolitan culture - collaborative, based on the intelligence of crowds and with transparent mediation - that take the form of political propaganda (fake news) to take advantage of the disintermediation and apparent horizontality of the internet. She thus identifies a constant search for aggregative reactions around slogans and insults, exposing those involved with these common goals as carrying social bonds of pure conviction in counterposing targets that do not align with the same vision, in this case experts, traditional media, and authorities.[2] Despite the author's specific target, it is expected that these conduct traits are not exclusive to this "conservative" portion of the political dispute, but should also be perceived in progressive opponents - proponents of this cosmopolitan culture - through our empirical study.

Going back a bit, one should note the importance of liberal democracies for the expansion of media outlets and their placement at the center of the political process, since television-mediated public image management of authorities was the main mode of contact with potential voters and distant audiences. As John Thompson puts it, since print media and even more so with electronic media, "struggles for recognition have increasingly become constituted as struggles for visibility within the non-localized space of mediated publicness. The struggle to make oneself heard or seen (and to prevent others from doing so) is not a peripheral aspect of the social and political upheavals of the

[2] On 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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modern world; on the contrary, it is central to them" (THOMPSON, 1995, p.247). Many social movements succeed in their claims and support from the intelligent use of the media.

"Media images and messages can tap into deep divisions and feelings of injustice that are experienced by individuals in the course of their day-to-day lives" (THOMPSON, 1995, p.248). This politicizing and making visible the invisible serves as a catalyst for reactions even in the most distant locations from the original event. More than that, media institutions, through the distribution of information and different points of view, are essential in the cultivation of diversity and pluralism, which is an essential condition for the development of deliberative democracy (LOUW, 2005). Deliberation thrives on the clash of competing views, which is the extreme opposite of an orchestrated chorus of opinions that does not allow for dissent. Media, including social media and traditional vehicles, should serve as safe platforms on which power can be challenged and a diversity of opinions can be expressed, not as unofficially sanctioned echo chambers of authorities and pompous interests, taking advantage politically and economically of general incomprehension and mediation.

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

This alliance between journalistic flexibilization (pressures for publishing and reach) and free circulation of user-generated content serves as a springboard for the infamous issue of fake news (HIMMA-KADAKAS, 2017). One must define the term, which, in the context of this paper, is about intentionally manipulated news with political ends supporting their action to misinform, or more neutrally, cause disruption to information.[3] The distinction with rumors and genuine journalistic errors remains difficult to determine, however, since political effects (and even more so individual reactions) are independent of authorial intentionality.

From this communicative environment created by digital media, the most feared result is polarization, or even hyperpolarization.[4] Overall, it can lead to political gridlock, tribalism, and the erosion of social capital - the escalation of culture wars, social destabilization, civil unrest, and political violence itself. Hawdon et al. (2020) differentiate both from their effect on social capital: hyperpolarization takes hold when inter-group social capital decreases, and intra-group social capital increases, which tends to radicalize members' views. In this sense, the blame for social media falls on algorithms and the increasing political bias of traditional media, which tend to distort news to fit its implications into the preferred narrative (PRIOR, 2013).

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

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

b) Culture Wars

The concept of culture wars, despite its contemporary resurgence, originally designated the

[3] It needs to be pointed out that this definition is not a general consensus. One can cite the perspective of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), for which fake news is defined by the search for financial return from advertising revenues of major platforms (JACKSON, 2018). Also, that of Michael Radutzky, who conflates them by their popular appeal regardless of whether they appear false for lack of verifiable facts (LAZER et al., 2018).

[4] This differentiation is important if one accepts the argument that the former is potentially beneficial for democracy because it simplifies electoral choices and incites greater political engagement by citizens (McCOY, RAHMAN, SOMER, 2018).

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conflict between the German states and the Roman Catholic Church in the second half of the 19th century, in the so-called *kulturkampf*. The dispute was animated by the liberal aim of secularization, while the church wanted to maintain its influence on the issues of family, marriage, and especially education. In addition to the effort to separate religion from the state definitively, the division between Protestants and Catholics deepened with unification, as did the distrust of the Vatican.[5] The result was pamphlet campaigns in the newspapers, articles slinging mud at the opposing side, and conflagration with the political disputes of the time, namely Bismarck's intention to deflate the (Catholic) Center Party and the liberal desire to uproot all Catholic ideology from society (complete the Reformation). Thus, unlike its current counterpart, the state took direct part in the conflict, and, through numerous laws and regulations, effectively ended up being the central actor in the conflict process rather than the groups (STEINHOFF, 2008; GROSS, 2004).[6]

The importance of this historical review is precisely in allowing us to draw parallels with the contemporary vision of the concept and the disputes at the practical level, even if global considerations about the phenomenon are beyond the scope of this article. To make the counterpoint, then, we move on to the resurrection of the term with Hunter (1991), who defines culture wars as a conflict to define American public life between a progressive and an orthodox - or conservative - ideology.[7] They protagonize a polarized realignment from distinct moral understanding systems, the former with an evolutionary and contextual moral truth and the latter with a static and universal moral truth. This anchor informs their positioning on controversial issues of values, beliefs, and lifestyle, prominently including feminism, drugs, gun liberation, homosexuality, race relations, religion, curriculum structures, climate change, etc. The main fronts of this confrontation end up taking place in the various institutional entities touched by a cultural praxis, such as communication and teaching, although the cleavages are apparent in sections that should transpire pragmatism, such as governments and businesses.

From this we come across some points for discussion, starting with the basis of the conflict, which is the formation of two alliances identified with diametrically opposed worldviews. Pointing to specific causes for this alignment is fruitless for this debate,[8] only being important to point out that the polarization that the concept implies is necessarily an intergroup collective process, with people radicalizing themselves as part of a group and through their socially constructed "reality", their particular filter for understanding objective reality, which is too complex to grasp in a lone view. When groups become polarized, a strict distinction between "us" and "them" evolves; both groups claim that what "we" represent is threatened by "them"; tribute is paid to the symbols and values of the group - identities are reinforced - and the outsider is derogated (VAN STEKELENBURG, KLANDERMANS, 2010; GITHENS-MAZER, 2012).

This connects directly with Durkheim's (1997) common/collective consciousness, which animates (but does not determine!) individuals to support the position, especially in moral terms, that most directly reinforces the bond they have with those in their reference group.[9] We seek to cement the connection with our cultural groups and reinforce our definition of ourselves, maintain consistent beliefs by giving greater weight to the evidence and arguments that support them rather than spending energy disproportionately trying to refute opinions or arguments contrary to our expectations. It is more comfortable to learn what our reference group believes and integrate those beliefs into our viewpoint than to investigate complex issues (HOFFMAN, 2012). Thus, it can be seen that the connection to a larger consciousness is not only moral, with group identities also directly influencing how people perceive the social world by providing norms and values that distinguish the group from other social categories and provide clues about how to think and act in particular communities or social situations (TAJFEL, TURNER, 1986). In particular, culture wars happen after the increase in group cohesion that produces dangerous biases, such as polarization, radicalization with groupthink (conformity of opinions without critical evaluation), externalization of

[5] Specifically, the number of Catholics rose due to the unification with the southern states such as Bavaria, which had a Catholic majority. It was also common for villages to be religiously homogeneous, with people of different beliefs not mixing. As for the Vatican, the doctrine of papal infallibility proclaimed in 1870 and the quest for more control of the bishops was not looked upon favorably (ARLINGHAUS, 1942).

[6] From an expository and completeness end, from 1871 to 1876, a number of laws were passed assuring the supremacy of the State over the Catholic Church, including modifications in the structure of its operations in Germany. From 1878 the liberal impetus lost strength and allowed more pragmatic positions to dominate the reconciliation between the Holy See and the German parliament (GROSS, 2004).

[7] The original focus of this distinction is to reflect the Christian religious and sometimes evangelical inspiration of the positions held on the orthodox side, and the growing atheism of progressivism (HARTMAN, 2015).

[8] The main reason for this is because determining this causality does not impact the occurrence of the phenomenon within the parameters of the article - it continues to exist even if we do not know why. The omission of this is also justified because the literature points to multiple causes. Citing just one, Jensen, Seate, and James (2020) explore how the perception of crisis (such as that growing in several areas) by collectivities is a critical incentive for greater solidarity and political radicalization, assisted by psychological and emotional motivators such as individual powerlessness (wanting to feel empowered) and tribalistic groupthink.

[9] As Jacoby (2014) addresses, there is always the element of the individual abstracting the values and conceptions of his cultural milieu and coming to his own conclusion - of course, marked by culture - of desirable end states to human life. Problems arise when mutually exclusive differences in these end states develop between groups in society, which can, but do not necessarily, generate cultural conflict.

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social prejudices, avoidance of responsibility for choices, etc. (DELLA PORTA, 1995; McCAULEY, 1989).

This polarization results in a total ignorance of the other, with groups that oppose each other too exaltedly tending to coincide, as they reduce their distinctions to generic abstractions of their constitutive historical processes (BALDI, 2018). The sides of this conflict demand that people actively show their position and mobilize against their opponents, with the movements dictating beforehand how these should be perceived.[10] That is, the interpretation of the meanings and possibilities of reading the content in dispute is vetoed, which are already given and do not change among situations if not by varied formats of representation (SOUZA, AZEVEDO, 2018). In other words, there is no dialogue, there is binary thinking, absolutization of preferences, selectivity of points, and, at a more baseline level, a generalized failure to disagree peacefully, to show empathy, to take into account the perspective of others (BLANKEHORN, 2018; NEISSER, 2006).[11]

Moving to the basis of the difference (and thus conflict) between these groups, it has been said to stem from incompatible moral understandings, especially stemming from religious views on the one hand and secular views on the other (HUNTER, 1991). Overall, since the 1990s, this division of diametrically opposed worldviews and principles has grown, escaping the perspective that political litigation in the USA reserves itself to widely acceptable discursive boundaries.[12] Recently, Jacoby (2014) finds that this divide in values has deepened to become a general ideological dispute, regardless of aspects such as religion, income, race, or gender. This conflict remains widely distributed along partisan and religious lines, however, as Castle's study finds (2018).

Distinctly, too, there is now a recognition that culture is a larger battleground in which diverse symbologies (identities, religions, commodities, rights) present themselves and vie for primacy in the processes of resignifying how one knows and perceives social reality, which was extremely incipient in the liberals of the *kulturkampf*. In other words, the culture wars are not just about contention on isolated issues, but conflicts that address the cultural root that symbols and meanings constitute.[13] What is sought is to increase the symbolic capital of the group and to impose their worldviews, emplacing them in Bourdieu's socially and institutionally authorized language, which is recognized by the collectivity, and therefore lends legitimacy and power to represent and speak officially (BALDI, 2018).

One must frame the culture wars in the culturalist view that human beings swim in a sea of meanings that is the result of a process of semiosis. We are born into pre-constituted seas and internalize them as we are socialized and learn to communicate.[14] Communication itself emerged with groupings or structures of meanings and coding that congregated over time, taking on identifiable forms in societies or cultures (LOUW, 2001). As Schutz's (1973) view of phenomenology addresses, meanings arise from communication between people, which is possible because of the "idealizations" of the interchangeability of viewpoints and the congruence of hierarchies of importance. This reciprocity, this detachment of meaning from specific social situations is what leads to the apprehension of objects and their aspects by me and others as the knowledge of all, thus being conceived as anonymous and objective and facilitating social interactions. With a view to the culture wars, it must be emphasized that this objectivity is necessarily provisional, since the activity of constructing meanings is continuous, and it can be argued, as sociological ethnomethodology does, that there is no such thing as a culture - a commonly accepted set of conventions -

[10] This tribalistic chasm that is triggered by a prolonged social divide is in great danger of degenerating into a "logical schism," as Hoffman (2012) calls it, which is a breakdown in debate in which the opposing sides are incomprehensible to the other because they start from completely different cultural foundations (of one's own way of thinking).

[11] In this issue of public dialogue, Neisser (2006) denounces mainly the proliferation of a false dialogue by the media, which tends to exclude important perspectives from the conversation, or else pressure and shame participants into agreeing with preconceived conclusions. The quest for attention through social media also undermines the primary function of the public sphere, which is to give visibility to the contradictions and disputes that arise from the coexistence of issues from many publics, which should outweigh the normative goal of consensus - therefore, to disagree peacefully (PFETSCH, 2020). Overall, the manipulation comes from representatives across the political spectrum, often not being conscious attempts to deceive, which only indicates the anemic state of the dynamics of conversation and reception of disagreement, which come to require adherence to what are considered "legitimate" opinions of a given issue.

[12] This discussion goes back as far as Tocqueville, through Devine and Dahl, who describe American political culture as liberalism tempered by democracy, with a general consensus on fundamental orientations. Baker (2005) and Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006), however, argue that the reality is much more complex and inconsistent, with combinations of traditions and values, and conflicting visions of how to order social life characterizing the country, but not necessarily meaning a culture war.

[13] As the frankfurtians have already put it, efforts to counteract the dehumanization promoted by the repressive society must address the mind of individuals, which is "the place of entrance, there where the false consciousness takes form (or rather: is systematically formed) - it must begin with stopping the *words* and *images* which feed this consciousness. To be sure, this is censorship, even precensorship, but openly directed against the more or less hidden censorship that permeate the free media." (MARCUSE, 1965, p.111, emphasis added).

[14] As Geertz (1973) describes, everyone encounters meaningful symbols when they are born, which remain latent and take root, even with some additions, subtractions, and partial alterations. They are employed spontaneously for the purpose of erecting a construction on the events experienced and providing guidance for the things experienced.

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since symbols are continuously (re)constructed in individual social encounters.[15] All individuals participate in the process of changing meanings, since all communication depends on the context (space-time and relational), although those with greater power - access to media and circulation systems - have a greater role to play.[16]

As Welch (2013) addresses this question, adapting to the discursive environment is like adapting to the economic one, meaning that we integrate ourselves into salient inequalities in a space in which we possess little ability to influence. Following the analogy, discursive meanings (symbols) end up being the currency of human communication, distributing the values that allow the exchange and circulation of speech and writing. Thus, it should be noted that the influence of discourse on behavior is not direct, with symbols altering conscious attitudes, underlying values or internalized rules, but indirect through the construction, transmission and transformation of meanings.[17, 18]

This leaves us at the doorstep of the points of greatest cultural contention, which are divided into those where discourses are produced (newsrooms, studios, parliaments, courts, universities) and where they are distributed (schools, media, churches). There is a constant struggle to control access to and the functioning of such places. Through them pass sets of meaning that are always in flux, as the very result of this constant conflict rooted in contextual relations - efforts both for and against the hegemony of different meanings. It is from the encodings, hybridizations, and syntheses generated here that cultures are constructed and reimagined, with globalization making possible overflows from other cultures even more frequent (TOMASELLI, 1987). This influence of foreign cultures is historically significant, and, in the case of the culture wars, seems to take on a worldwide scale, especially in countries of closer cultural matrix.[19]

Distinguishing these sites of conflict, two views leap into prominence for their interpretation, lending different importance to their control. From a structuralist, Marxist, or Foucauldian perspective, meanings are effectively controlled from the ideology and sanctioned discourses of each circumstance, and it is thus essential to control the structures of production and distribution.[20] On the other hand, there is the view that meaning is not controllable because the recipients always actively read, interpret, and decode meanings for themselves, and are not simply naive recipients of manipulation. In the absence of further practical examination, the important point to note is that regardless of which side of this spectrum reality tends - total control of structures or total independence of the individual - cultural warriors do not risk being guided by the second position; quite the contrary, they believe that over time they will be altering accepted meanings, and that this requires efforts at the structural level.

Of great interest here as well, conflicts over discourse mean that different interest groups are simultaneously engaged, with their discursive positions taking on liberal or restrictive features depending on the context (LOUW, 2001). For example, feminist discourse can be used both to challenge restrictive (patriarchal) social relations and to curtail debate about power relations (offhand, no woman can abuse power). On the other side, the conservative discourse can serve both to preserve institutions that have proven to be adequate (democratic, republican) and to obstruct inclusive reforms because they are not in line with prevailing interests. Note that in these examples the restrictive format is not inherent to the values of these ideals, but radicalizations, denials to dialogue that end up happening in practical political contention.

In conclusion, then, this phenomenon is not new to the political field, though it differs from the *kulturkampf* in the greater appreciation and awareness of those engaged in seeking to shape cultural terms, with this competition for symbolic dominance becoming more evident to society as a whole, as well as taking center stage in the discursive clashes themselves (THOMSON, 2010). As with its current counterpart, the discussion of values, beliefs, and habits takes a back seat to the confrontation apparent in the media and other social institutions. Despite this similarity, *kulturkampf* points to the state's mediation of the actors

[15] In other words, one can take the symbolic interactionist view of Blumer (1969), which illuminates this exposition from three central propositions: that people act on the basis of the meanings they have toward things and other people; that these meanings are derived from social interaction with others; and that these meanings are managed and transformed through an interpretive process that people use to make sense of and deal with the objects that constitute their social world.

[16] This is a rather mild way of partially embracing the Marxist view broached by Volosinov (1973) of a semiotic dispute, in which the dispute over meanings and material resources influence each other.

[17] This is why systematic cultural change is easier to detect in symbolic forms and their modes of production and circulation in the social world than in broad changes in values and beliefs, attitudes and orientations, which apprehended through surveys show a slower curve of change.

[18] Pulling Volosinov (1973) again, he is the one who concretizes the view that the causal relationship between base and superstructure in Marxism is not a mechanical causality of a positive natural science, but an indirect causality that occurs through language, and more narrowly, meanings.

[19] Of course, this is just a conjecture beyond the scope of this paper, but in what has been discussed here seems to be easily seen in the distinction of cultural positions between the religious (Catholics and Evangelicals) and non-religious (atheists and agnostics) in the Western world and its larger sphere of influence (Latin America).

[20] Again with an example from Marcuse (1965, p.100-1, emphasis added), he is categorical that, after the revolution against the conservatives, "the restoration of freedom of thought may necessitate new and rigid restrictions on teachings and practices in the *educational institutions* which, by their very methods and concepts, serve to enclose the mind within the established universe of discourse and behavior".

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

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

III. Culture Wars as Captured on the Wi Spa Case (2021)

What I refer to as the Wi Spa case was a controversy over the exposure of male genitalia by a trans woman in the women's section of the spa, involving as well the ensuing protests that happened on July 3 and July 17 of 2021, which hosted parties for and against the right of trans people to be in their self-identified gender areas on nudity allowed spaces, like the Wi Spa.[21] As a whole, the case proves important as it provides a clear picture of the media and underlying discourse dynamics of a typical culture war battle. Before going through each media coverage of the incident itself, this initial section will lay out purely the events that happened, taking as factual evidence the videos and declarations from the parties involved,[22] with the aim to simply relay the story without any imbued interpretations. The usefulness of this reconstruction lies in providing a neutral basis for comparison with what each broadcaster will centralize in its own narrative.

The episode gained traction from a viral Instagram video, which showed a woman filming herself confronting Wi Spa staff about seeing a "man" naked in front of women and underaged girls in the women's section of the facility: "There are girls down there, other women who are highly offended for what they just saw, and you did nothing, absolutely nothing." The staff at Wi Spa defends itself against the woman's accusation citing they had to comply with the law and not discriminate based on gender identity, or precisely, "sexual orientation".[23] Another patron suggested the individual might be a "transgender person", with the woman filming, which identifies herself as "Cubana Angel", responding that "there is no such thing as transgender [...] I'm a woman who knows how to stand up and speak up for my right [...] As a woman I have a right to feel comfortable without a man exposing himself". At least three other women are seen siding with her view of the events (cf. HILL, 2021).

No more substantiated evidence was found that could verify the woman's account, with the Los Angeles Blade newspaper reporting that anonymous sources from Wi Spa staff and from the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) were doubtful any transgender clients were present in the spa on the day of the incident, which would make the whole story a hoax (LANSING, 2021). Factual or not, the LAPD effectively pressed five charges of indecent exposure against a 52-year-old person called Darren Merager, whose gender identity remains uncertain, but is a repeated sex offender since 2002 (QUEALLY, CHABRIA, 2021).

Either way, Cubana's video made the rounds online, especially on right-wing media outlets, sparking demonstrations to take place nearby Wi Spa. The first occurred on the morning of July 3, with multiple videos showcasing the involvement of three large groups, one in defense of trans rights, one against, and then the LAPD. Specifically, the defense was composed of LGBTQ+ activists and black bloc SoCal antifa members, while opposing them were QAnon, Proud Boys, Trans-exclusionary feminists (TERFs) and Christian conservatives such as Cure America Action, which gave Cubana Angel a political platform.[24] A myriad of violent occurrences ensued: an against man with a bullhorn speaking that the crowd would go to hell was beaten up by 6 black bloc people; another against man was hit with a skateboard on the head; an antifa guy was hit with a chain bead by a shirtless man; persons in black clads, masks and headgear set a dumpster on fire while police was trying to disperse the crowds off the street after they declared the whole

[21] Specifically, Wi Spa has a separate floor for men and women, where their policies mandate that swimwear not be worn by the patron (cf. WI SPA, 2021).

[22] Unifying the evidence, the original video was stored by Hill (2021); extra information was fetched by Lansing (2021); footage from the protests were reviewed from multiple sources, including: CBS (2021), FOX 11 (2021a), Singh (2021a; 2021b; 2021c), Guardian News (2021) and Mackay (2021); Los Angeles police report on the second encounter is available through LAPD (2021).

[23] The referred law from California can be found on California State Legislature (2015), which states that regardless of multiple differences, all persons "are entitled to the full and equal accommodations, advantages, facilities, privileges, or services in all business establishments of every kind whatsoever."

[24] They restated her account and political drive on July 7 (cf. CURE, 2021).

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gathering an unlawful assembly; chantings of "save our children" are heard while police pushes pro-trans people rights back; an against man with a lead pipe hits the back of the head of a press labeled person; two against men feature a gun and out "something to shoot you with"; one against man gets angry over filming by trans press reporter and is backed out by police; one police officer intimidates a pro-trans cammer aiming his shotgun point blank; at last, two stabbings occur by a right-wing protester, one against a pro-trans and another against his own fellow activist (cf. CBS, 2021; FOX 11, 2021a; SINGH, 2021a; 2021b).

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

a) Fox News' Coverage

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

b) The Washington Post's Coverage

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

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

c) The Guardian's Coverage

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

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

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

The last publication continues pretty much in the same vein, bringing up some comments: Gaye Chapman, a gender-criticital feminist that was protesting on July 3, said "I just feel sad about the whole thing [...]. This is not a good way to present arguments we have." Precious Child said she feared the news may "support a narrative that trans people are sex offender demons that take advantage of systems that are put in place to protect people". Jamie Penn, a trans woman who had joined the counter-protests, also said she was worried "what the far-right disinformation machine is going to turn this one into". The article's existence is due to the felony charges pushed by the LAPD, with the remaining uncertainty over the target's gender identity being highlighted. While recalling Cubana's claims and political drive, the piece cites one study that shows no evidence of increased safety risks related to trans-inclusive policies. A law professor is quoted on the police charges, stating that there needs to be malicious intentionality to the nude and that at the end of the day it's an "individual's conduct, not about a class of people" (BECKETT, LEVIN, 2021b).

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

d) Reactions and general Positionings on Twitter

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

Original Incident

Mallory Moore (1.775): "Days after it has been right across Fox News' news cycle and the whole internet, noone has found the alleged trans woman, despite many of us not being hard to find. I don't buy the Wi Spa story. I think it's cis mischief."

ripx4nutmeg (1.720): "Video: A group of women complain to staff at Wi Spa in Los Angeles that a 'man' entered their changing room and flashed at them & children. Staff ignore the complaint as a male customer

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accuses them of bigotry, because the flasher claims to be transgender"

Paul Joseph Watson (967): "Staff at Wi Spa in Los Angeles dismissed a woman's complaint that a man was exposing his penis to little girls in the women's area by insisting that the individual had a right to be there due to his 'sexual orientation.'"

tonyagjprince (412): "Now you have to really search through articles that don't paint that Black woman at Wi Spa as 'hateful' because she didn't want to see a male member during her self-care time. AND did what BW always do, stood up for someone else, a young girl. Self-care. Minding her own biz."

July 3

Andy Ngô (27.641): "An Asian man wearing a 'Rooftop Korean' shirt near the Wi Spa protest where antifa have been beating people was assaulted on camera. He uses a bottle to defend himself from the assailant, who then runs away."

Andy Ngô (9.513): "A Hispanic couple had their signs torn away & were threatened by antifa outside the Wi Spa in Los Angeles. "We come in peace," the woman said while they surrounded her and her partner."

Andy Ngô (7.563): "Antifa assault street preachers who tried to attend the Wi Spa protest in Los Angeles. Several people have been assaulted today but police don't appear to be responding at all."

Rita Panahi (6.553): "To be clear Antifa (aka modern day fascists) are assaulting people (incl women) peacefully protesting a spa that allowed a man (identifying as a woman) to expose his penis to women and children in female only space. When a woman complained they told her not to come back."

Abigail Shrier (5.563): "Watch how this woman is treated, in broad daylight, in Los Angeles - for standing up for women's rights and exercising her right to peaceful protest."

Vishal P. Singh (2.283): "Here is more clear video of this far right anti-trans extremist who was wielding a huge knife. He was seen fighting alongside Proud Boys. Right wing media is misconstruing this demonstration as peaceful, but anti-trans demonstrators were prepared to seriously maim or kill."

James Barry (1.733): "Man gets cock out in women's section of LA spa in front of two kids. Woman objects; told to shut up: video goes viral. Women have peaceful protest. Women are assaulted, shoved, physically bullied, intimidated; teenage boy swarmed by kicking mob, saved by his mum. This is insane."

July 17

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

Talia Lavin (6.571): "As the far-right anti-trans demonstration at a spa in Los Angeles shows today, transphobia, white supremacy and far-right extremism are all intimately linked"

Jackson Lanzing (5.905): "Just blocks from my house, Proud Boys siege a local spa over manufactured trans panic. Counter protestors gather to stand for trans lives across the street. LAPD opens fire on the unarmed counter-protestors/journalists - and fires on them as they try to flee. Indefensible."

Read Wobblies and Zapatistas (5.773): "The security forces, known locally as "LAPD" are chasing anti-fascist demonstrators through the streets of the city near the Wi Spa conflict point. Widespread international condemnation expect to ensue."

Andy Ngô (4.137): "[...] An angry group of antifa confront & harass videographer Villain Report at their violent protest in Los Angeles over the weekend."

Sam Levin (3.847): "Pay attention to the severe violence in LA today by a far-right crowd, anti-trans protesters, and LAPD. Pro-trans demonstrators have been targeted, along with journalists, including my amazing colleague @loisbeckett."

CajunBlueAZ™ (3.043): "When you watch a woman get shot by the police with a plastic bullet at 10' for participating at a protest, you realize you live in a shithole country."

Jules Gill-Peterson (2.450): "Okay we're at the stage where violent transphobes get to protest something they entirely made up and the police enforce their political vision through beatings and rubber bullets."

This gives a general sense of how people have positioned themselves on Twitter over the case's unfolding, with right-wing sympathetics being the majority early on and highlighting the naked body perversity and antifa's violence, while left-wing individuals dominated the space on the second protests, stressing the lack of proof of the allegations and the LAPD and far-right activists' violence. The moral basis of the discussion about nudity between the differing biological sexes is not perceived in this slice of the confrontation, but is made clear on January's (2021) article which hosts a Matt Walsh tweet that reads: "A man 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 you watch this video and find yourself siding with the man, please realize that you are not only insane but evil". It exhibits a clear defense of this question being treated on the grounds of pedophilia alone, coming from the conservative matrix and contrasting most sharply with The Post's progressive view, which seeks the normalization of different bodies being under a single gender.

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

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

IV. Conclusion

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

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

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