

## Architecture of the Right: Ventures in Digital Media

A Special Investigation by The Democracy Protection Project

By The Editors

**I**N THE WAKE OF REPUBLICAN LOSSES IN 2020, A CAST OF mega-rich financiers, senior figures in the Trump administration, high-ranking NSA and Pentagon intelligence officials, Wall Street pitchmen and leading Trump campaign donors began to piece together a new global disinformation apparatus intended to promote the political project of the far right.

The twin focal points of these efforts are the Trump Media and Technology Group (TMTG), which filed on February 8,

2021 as a Delaware corporation, and Rumble, the global social media platform choice of the right, based in

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Canada but with an escalating presence in the U.S.

From the start, TMTG announced plans to launch "Truth Social," a new social media platform intended as an alternative to Twitter and billed as "an open, free, and honest global conversation without discriminating against political ideology." TMTG publicly disclosed its intent to enter a partnership with Rumble last fall, and this past week Rumble reported that Truth Social had successfully migrated its website and mobile applications to Rumble's cloud infrastructure.

Trump has been largely absent from social media since the former president was permanently suspended from Twitter on January 8, 2021 for violating the social media platform's Glorification of Violence policy. Specifically, Twitter found that Trump's tweets could be interpreted as attempting to undermine a legitimate election, disrupt the orderly transfer of power, and support and encourage those who were considering violent acts at the Capitol on January 6, and in state capitols later on.

Trump's attempts to establish a technologically viable pulpit have been plagued so far with his trademark clumsiness, technical failures and regulatory missteps, providing comfort to his adversaries and those who oppose his return to power. But as indicated on the accompanying chart, it would be a mistake to underestimate the formidable array of right-wing political

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The *Washington Spectator* (ISSN 0887-428X) is published bi-monthly by the Public Concern Foundation Inc, 105 Hudson Street, Suite 407, New York, NY 10013. © 2022 in the U.S.

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forces, powerful financial interests and ex-military and political intelligence figures lined up behind the Trump/Rumble alliance.

American democracy is under siege from the far right. Among the core principles at risk are the fair and impartial administration of justice, the independence of the judiciary, the protection of rights enshrined in the constitution, the rule of law, the separation of church and state, the system of checks and balances so essential to the orderly functioning of democracy, the accountability of public office holders and the integrity of elections. And looming over all of these suddenly fragile concepts is the ferocious right-wing attack on truth.

The attached chart, the first in a series labeled “Architecture of the Right,” identifies many of the personalities and assets that have organized on the right to build a global digital communications capability. The chart was produced by the Democracy Protection Project (DPP), a joint undertaking of *The Washington Spectator* and The Public Concern Foundation.

The intent of the project is to document the anti-democratic involvements of far right political actors and their donors, allied with ideologically sympathetic factions of the intelligence community, and to report on the purpose and impact of their actions.

Our hope is to encourage further scrutiny and investigation into activities underway that threaten the survival of the democratic process. The DPP is developing several investigative articles for *the Spectator* that were suggested by the material assembled for this chart. ■

*For more information about the Democracy Protection Project and how you can help, please contact [editors@washingtonspectator.org](mailto:editors@washingtonspectator.org).*

### Guest Essay

## Inexplicable Verité: The Lessons of Trump's Unknown First TV Project

By Hugh Taylor

IS IT STILL ACCEPTABLE TO BE FIXATED ON Donald Trump's iron grip on millions of Americans? While most people seem to have moved on, I'd argue that getting to a true understanding of his appeal is still of vital interest. Indeed, people's lives may depend on it. Election officials continue to receive death threats for challenging his election lies. A large-scale violent insurrection appears plausible if he loses again in 2024.

We should not buy into simplistic explanations like “They're all racists” or “He starred in a hit reality TV show.” Something much more profound is at work. One half of the country perceives Trump to be an incompetent and psychologically troubled man of dubious achievements. The other half sees him as the only human being on the planet who could ever solve their problems. Many of these appear ready to kill and die for him.

To understand this astonishing perceptual divide, we need to revisit what we think we know about television as a medium. When we talk about reality TV, we owe it to ourselves to investigate our conceptions of “reality” and “TV,” both of which have evolved significantly in the last decade or so. Trump's impact on television audiences is related to profound changes in the medium itself. These changes have occurred slowly enough to escape serious notice by people who want to understand how a talented performer like Trump can gain such influence over people. While television is not the only factor that explains Trump's grip on his supporters, it is arguably the most important, especially when assessing his early popularity with voters.

The roots of today's competing realities lie in the evolution of reality television itself and its effects on viewers' brains. This is a story that starts in the early 1960s; a story I participated in as my career progressed from producing made-for-TV movies to serving as Social Software Evangelist at IBM.

In the summer of 1960, the French filmmaker Jean Rouch, who had spent the previous decade making documentaries about African tribes, took his portable Éclair Cameflex 16-millimeter movie camera out onto the streets of Paris to interview real people in their daily lives. The resulting film, *Chronique d'un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*) was both a technical and artistic breakthrough. The

equipment was revolutionary. No sound camera had ever been so portable. Also revolutionary was the idea of making a movie about regular people just casually talking about the issues of the day, such as the French colonial war in Algeria. It was one of the first cinema verité films.

The whole purpose of cinema verité was to be real. The filmmaker would always have a point of view, and there is no such thing as true objectivity, but the goal was to record reality as it was, with as little interference as possible.

This “cinema of truth” or “observational cinema” existed mostly in the realms of public television and art house documentaries, with a few breakouts like Michael Wadleigh’s *Woodstock* and PBS’s *An American Family* achieving popular success. At the same time, the verité technique was establishing itself in the mind of the audience as a window onto reality. The effect emerged mostly from the use of the verité style in television news, with portable cameras bringing us “film at 11.” This perception, that informal filming of real people reflected reality, would have major implications for television as a medium—and also, as we would later discover, politics.

My involvement with verité came 25 years after Jean Rouch hit the streets of Paris with his Éclair camera. After studying with some of cinema verité’s most celebrated practitioners, I took a job in primetime television. My mentor was Edgar Scherick, the fiery-tempered former president of ABC. In the 1950s, Edgar had created *The Wide World of Sports*. He went on to produce dozens of television movies and feature films like *The Stepford Wives* and *The Taking of Pelham 1-2-3*. Later, he’d brought an unknown 19-year-old New York casting director named Scott Rudin to Hollywood.

By 1988, when I joined his production company as a cigar-fetching assistant, Scherick’s main gig was dramatizing true stories as made-for-TV movies. This was a format that, in retrospect, was a bridge between traditional, completely fictitious television and what we now consider reality TV.

Though now extinct, the true crime movie of the week was a reliable source of high ratings in the 1980s and early ’90s. Every network made it a staple of their programming schedules. No one could adequately explain why the audience was so hungry for true crime docudramas. One theory, which I am skeptical of, was that people tended to feel guilty about watching TV, so they rationalized consuming endless gore and dramatizations of depraved

behavior with the excuse that they were informing themselves about the news of the world.

I suspect audiences were actually getting trained to view docudramas as inherently true. The barrier between reality and fiction, what I would call the “fifth wall” of onscreen programming, was beginning to crumble. Most films and TV shows respect the “three walls” of the stage set, with the “fourth wall” functioning as an invisible barrier between the camera and the action. Sometimes, an actor will “break the fourth wall” and speak directly to the camera. This is common in reality TV, but more and more, as time went on, the fifth wall also began to deteriorate.

Probably the first serious erosion of the fifth wall came in 1989 as the cinema verité genre enjoyed its first major primetime hit with *Cops*, on the Fox Network. Scherick worked on a project with the producers of *Cops*. It was in this context that I learned *Cops* was betraying cinema verité’s most sacred rule of not interfering in the subject’s life.

This bothered me, though it’s hilarious in retrospect that I was upset that *Cops* was staging confrontations between real people to get tape of entertaining arguments. What did I expect? This was hardly the Cinémathèque Française. This was TV, produced for commercial entertainment and beholden to no rules about telling the truth.

The problem was that *Cops* looked like pure, unaltered real life. The audience got to ride along in cop cars and see the police at home with their families. The audience learned that an exciting TV show could be about real people, taped living their everyday lives. The show was trading on the belief that unposed, poorly lit and seemingly unscripted video reflected real life. It had the “film at

11” look, so it had to be true, right?

I don’t mean to imply that TV viewers are so ignorant that they can’t tell the difference between fiction and reality. Subsequent reality programming has been transparently fake, with ordinary people set in highly contrived and obviously scripted scenarios. It’s called scripted reality programming, an oxymoron that bothers no one. The audience today knows it is watching real people staging fake scenes. At the level of brain function, however, the distinction has been blurred.

This insight is critical if you want to understand Trump’s power over his audience, especially early in his rise. If you’ve ever felt dizzy watching a car chase scene, you’ll understand that our brains tend to process events on a screen as if they were really happening to us. This is a well-documented neurological phenomenon.

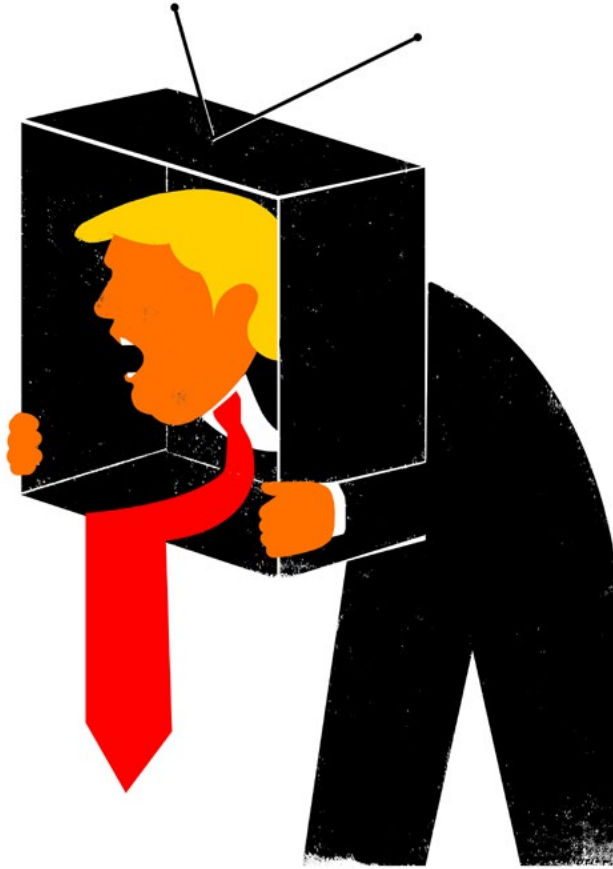


Illustration by Edel Rodriguez

Jean Rouch called it the “ciné trance” a state of mind where your brain is in the scene you’re watching. You really are there, walking with him on the streets of Paris in 1960.

The verité trend in reality television also eroded the boundaries of exploitation and voyeurism in the medium. Watching dramatizations of true crime stories whetted the audience’s appetite for voyeuristic glimpses through the curtains of their unfortunate neighbors. The reality TV movement served the main dish: a voyeuristic spectacle of sadism. Americans might have once felt guilty about enjoying a show like *The Apprentice*, which reveled in humiliating people, or *American Idol*, which glamorized the abuse of the weak. As the reality trend wore on, audiences were given permission to enjoy others’ misery as entertainment and protagonists like Trump were given a pass for being ruthless and denigrating. Trump is a true master of this art form.

Rouch’s ciné trance is a naïve notion compared with the immersion in manufactured reality that American TV audiences experience today. News channels are designed to entertain. They’re bracketed by hours of scripted reality on the programming schedule, and it’s all punctuated by commercials that feature unreal effects like talking batteries. The ciné trance has morphed into a permanent TV trance—a state of mental suspension in which the action on screen is perceived as reality, and therefore true, even if the conscious mind is aware that it’s fiction—made up and manipulative.

The experience of watching TV has also fused with reinforcing technology habits such as Twitter and Facebook. Audience members continuously trigger addictive centers in their minds with integrated loops of television programming and follow-on tweets and social media posts. YouTube and Instagram’s ubiquitous mobile phone videos compound the effect. We’re addicted to media stars we know are fake but neurochemically perceive to be real.

Trump was a force in this trend, as well as one of its main beneficiaries, as are Oprah, The Rock, and other fantasy presidential candidates who present fictional projections of themselves in the media. By 1990, Trump had become interested in being on television. Having gone bankrupt from the failure of his Atlantic City casinos, with creditors and law enforcement nipping at his heels, he needed a new way to make money. It was time for him to become rich by being famous, as he could no longer get famous from being rich.

Trump’s attorneys reached out to Scherick, then one of the highest-profile “go to” people in the industry, and struck a deal for one of Donald Trump’s first TV projects. It was to be called *Trump Tower*, a nighttime soap opera on NBC pitched as “Dynasty meets

the Algonquin Round Table.”

We hired Clare Labine, co-creator of *Ryan’s Hope*, to write the pilot, which would take the form of a four-hour miniseries. The idea was to present a byzantine melodrama among sophisticated New Yorkers who lived in Trump Tower: major artists, prominent authors, tycoons . . . all sleeping with each other while hatching diabolical plots of sadistic revenge and schadenfreude for past betrayals.

In the background would be Donald Trump, playing a fictitious character named Donald Trump. He would be Donald Trump, the well-known real estate magnate, but with his lines written for him. He was envisioned as a sort of quiet Machiavellian character, moving the chess pieces of people’s lives around without their knowing it.

After the project began, Scherick got another call from Trump’s lawyers. There was an actress named Marla Maples who would need to have a role in the series. “The mistress,” Edgar had murmured... The lawyers hadn’t said it out loud, but their intent was clear.

The show never got on the air, but from the perspective of 2022, it’s an informative missing link in Trump’s biography. He later landed a hit with *The Apprentice*, which again featured him playing a fictional version of himself. This characterization of Donald Trump was of a powerful, decisive, and competent leader, a father figure who always knew the right thing to do—demonstrably the opposite of his true nature.

This is the Donald Trump his supporters admire. His characterization on *The Apprentice* differentiates him from other political figures who perform well on TV but simply cannot muster the audience buy-in that Trump easily commands. It’s entirely a false persona, but

the audience was never fully clued in on how much of the show was fabricated versus how much of it was real. And given the TV trance that had taken effect, it apparently didn’t matter. People loved the show. They loved Trump and the tough, can-do character he played. Whatever their rational minds might have told them, their brain chemistry had them solidly believing he was the resolute, infallible master of their collective destiny. He was real, in their brains, even if they knew he was not. And he delivered the delicious helpings of sadistic voyeurism the audience so craved.

We know what happened next. Today, the country confronts a politician whose base thinks he can do no wrong. I suspect that they are to a large degree in the grip of the TV trance. Their deep brain functions are convinced that Donald Trump, the fictional TV character, is a real person with immense, unique powers, despite what observable reality might tell them.



Illustration by Edel Rodriguez

As to what should happen now, I don't have any clever ideas. I do think that if there is to be any effective movement against Trump, it should consider the brain connection he has with his television audiences. Screaming "you're a racist" at his followers is not the answer. Instead, it might be more useful to engage and explore why they feel he's real in their hearts while they know he's not real in their heads. Such an approach would at least be moving along a path to the truth and to deconstructing the paradox of Trump's verité. ■

*Hugh Taylor is a technology analyst and author of the book [Digital Downfall: Technology, Cyberattacks and the End of the American Republic](#). Prior to working in the tech field, Hugh was a script development executive in primetime television. He studied filmmaking at Harvard University.*

## Will Inflation Crush the Biden Presidency?

By Steven Pressman

**I**NFLATION HAS REACHED ITS HIGHEST LEVEL IN 40 YEARS—7 percent in 2021 and still rising. Concurrently, President Biden's approval rating has dropped from 53 percent on Inauguration Day to 40 percent in late February before Russia invaded Ukraine. (By late March, it was 42 percent, and it has remained at this level through the first half of April.)

Higher inflation is not the only reason for the president's declining popularity. The resurgent coronavirus has hurt. So has failing to pass Build Back Better, Biden's signature economic plan. For voters, however, inflation is the primary concern. A January CBS-YouGov poll gave the president his worst results on inflation: 58 percent of those surveyed blame Biden for the problem.

This raises two questions—why is inflation rising, and what can the president do about it?

Inflation measures the price change for goods and services bought by a typical family. An annual inflation rate of 7 percent means that people are forking over 7 percent more money to buy the same things they bought a year ago; or they can buy 7 percent less, this year, with last year's income.

But incomes are not fixed. Wages rose 4.7 percent in 2021; with 7 percent inflation, an average wage was able to purchase 2.3 percent less at the end of 2021, as compared to the end of 2020.

Income is also more than just wages. Two legislative bills boosted 2021 incomes. In late December 2020, President Trump signed a \$900 billion Covid relief act, providing \$600-per-person stimulus checks, among other things. In March 2021, President

Biden signed the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, sending \$1,400 checks to most Americans. It also provided families with six child tax credit payments of \$250 or \$300 per child (see my [July 2021 article](#) in the *The Washington Spectator*).

For a median earner (making around \$52,000), the two checks totaling \$2,000 more than countered the lost purchasing power of wages due to inflation. The child tax credit ensured that families with children came out significantly ahead.

Yet Republicans talk of "Bidenflation," conveniently ignoring President Trump's Covid relief bill, as well as the fact that most Americans were better off in 2021 than in 2020. Many recite talking points that U.S. inflation exceeds that of other developed countries. While this claim is true, the difference has not been that great. Inflation in the European Union was 5 percent last year. In the U.K., it was 5.4 percent; in Canada 4.8 percent. None of these nations employed the aggressive Covid relief policies that we did. Inflation was around 2 percent in the United States and most other developed nations before 2021. Of the five-percentage-point rise in American inflation last year, we can attribute two points to U.S. policies; the other three points stem from global forces.

It's worth noting that the trade sanctions imposed on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine at the end of February 2022 have led to converging inflation rates throughout the developed world, as Russia's main export—energy—has become the most significant inflationary pressure in the world economy.

For 2021, the higher U.S. inflation, compared to other developed nations', was due to U.S. policies that resulted in more spending. But these policies also created more jobs. Unemployment in the United States was 3.8 percent in February 2022, much lower than the 6.2 percent in Europe. The lower unemployment rate in the United States gave us four million additional jobs but also two percentage points of higher inflation.

Still, no one likes inflation. Workers believe they deserve their higher pay and that inflation robs them of their hard-earned gains. There is also a political cost to inflation—everyone suffers from inflation, while only a small fraction of the population experiences unemployment. This is why the president's approval rating has fallen and why inflation understandably worries Democrats.

I remain skeptical that we face a future of rising inflation.

As noted earlier, the government put a good deal of money into the hands of households in 2021. These inflationary pressures have abated. The last stimulus checks went out a year ago. Expanded unemployment benefits ended last September. And the Federal Reserve began raising interest rates in March; it plans to continue raising rates throughout 2022. All this will reduce spending and exert downward pressure on prices.

This still leaves several global supply problems (which were responsible for more than half the increase in inflation in the United States last year), a health pandemic, higher energy prices, and climate change.

The coronavirus has created labor shortages. Some people

**Yet Republicans talk of "Bidenflation," conveniently ignoring President Trump's Covid relief bill, as well as the fact that most Americans were better off in 2021 than in 2020.**

retired sooner due to Covid fears. Some adults face Covid-related health problems or childcare needs that reduce their ability to work. With fewer workers, wages will rise and higher production costs will get passed on to consumers as higher prices. Two labor shortages in the United States are noteworthy, as they impact the price of many goods. Due to retirement, high quit rates, and industry growth, the United States is short 90,000 truckers. Trucks move 72 percent of parts to producers and goods to consumers. Longshoremen, who unload goods shipped from abroad, are also in short supply, leading to transportation delays, shortages of goods, and higher prices.

Rising oil prices have a number of different causes, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine and people choosing to drive rather than take mass transportation because of Covid-19 concerns. Russian oil, which provided 10 percent of the world's oil supply, is now largely off the world market. Another huge factor is OPEC output restrictions, which have reduced the global supply of oil by nearly three million barrels a day compared to pre-pandemic levels. Less oil production means higher energy and gas prices, which then impact the cost of transporting parts to manufacturers and finished goods to markets.

A final problem stems from climate change. Problems producing computer chips have contributed to the increased prices of cars, appliances, and many other goods requiring chips. Taiwan, which manufacturers 90 percent of advanced chips, still has a drought problem that experts attribute to climate change (see [my article](#) in the July/August 2021 *Washington Spectator*). This is a problem for chip production, which requires large quantities of water, and Taiwan has been rationing. The good news is that this situation has been improving recently.

Lumber is another example of how climate problems impact overall inflation. Most lumber that is used to build American homes comes from British Columbia, where the cold weather strengthens trees. Over several years, climate-related fires have destroyed forests in British Columbia, and the mountain pine beetle has destroyed additional trees as more beetles survive warmer winters. U.S. building codes require strong lumber that will bend but not break. Lacking this lumber, over the past decade new housing construction is down around six million units (relative to new household formation), according to the National Association of Realtors. Along with the Covid-related demand for more space by people working from home, home prices have soared. This price rise reverberates through the entire housing market, as people who can't buy homes must rent, causing rents to rise.

In the months ahead, higher interest rates and the end of Covid relief policies should lead to reduced U.S. inflation. Also, Covid-induced inflation will fall as the worldwide coronavirus pandemic wanes. When this will occur remains uncertain.

The Biden administration has made a good start dealing with supply-side inflationary pressures. It has encouraged ports to maintain longer hours to reduce transportation costs for goods

entering the United States from abroad and has reduced waiting times to obtain a truck driver's license. In November, the president released oil from the strategic petroleum reserve in order to constrain gas price increases. In March, he announced that more oil would be released from U.S. reserves to counter the loss of oil from Russia and that he had persuaded other nations to release oil from their reserves. In April, President Biden announced that gasoline could be sold with a higher ethanol content, which should cut the cost of a gallon of gasoline by 10 cents.

Still, the Biden administration can and should do more. Eliminating the Trump tariffs (which the president can do without Congress) and other tariffs (President Biden, for example, has *increased* the Trump tariffs on Canadian lumber) would lower the cost of imports. Reducing other trade restrictions, except for sanctions on Russia (which sells little to the United States besides oil), would increase competition and lower prices. Since housing is such a large part of consumer expenditures, a temporary limit on rent increases would help reduce overall inflation, as would the elimination of tariffs on Canadian lumber.

Also, Democrats can push legislation allowing Medicare to negotiate prescription drug prices, something supported by more than 80 percent of the public and contained in the Build Back Better bill passed by the House of Representatives last year. The president should channel his inner Harry Truman and dare Senate Republicans to filibuster this. Finally, the president

could announce a temporary holiday on the gas tax (currently 18.4 cents a gallon) as some Democrats have suggested. One downside of this last policy prescription is that it would contribute to the climate problems noted above that are contributing to rising prices.

Regrettably, these initiatives will have only a small impact on inflation. Much of the global supply-side inflation is beyond the power of the president to control and, as noted above, several forces will push inflation down in the months ahead without any action from the White House. Still, the president needs to pursue what he can to defeat inflationary pressures. Just as he has been blamed for rising inflation, the president will want to be able to take credit for falling inflation come November. ■

*Steven Pressman is professor emeritus of economics and finance at Monmouth University and author of Fifty Major Economists, 3rd edition (Routledge, 2013).*