

◆ Chapter 1

Dis-Info Ops and Strategies of Resistance from Another Age of Inflationary Media

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The disinformation problem we face today is not unique to the digital age or even to the age of radio and television. While the Info Ops of totalitarian regimes like Stalinism and Nazism are often part of the conversation about the origins of disinformation and its devastating consequences, we can trace the history of this type of mass manipulation, including state-sponsored disinformation operations, much further back in time, at least to the first age of inflationary media in early modern Europe. In this chapter, I will discuss a few examples of this early history of disinformation campaigns and what we can learn from the contemporary warnings of Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616), widely regarded as the inventor of modern fiction.

The spread of print culture and the corresponding increase in literacy rates in sixteenth-century Europe contributed to the “democratization” of knowledge, as the new technology allowed for the inexpensive reproduction and distribution of a wide variety of texts (both ancient and modern) outside the traditional repositories of monastic and aristocratic circles. No longer constrained by the labor-intensive logistics of manuscript culture, the expanding print market would change the culture game forever, gradually transforming what had been a minoritarian, theologically driven transmission of knowledge into a largely secular affair: a profitable, consumer-oriented industry of learning and entertainment. The new print technology provided the emerging reading public access to a vast repository of information, but it also made way for opportunists, propagandists, and demagogues, who would quickly learn to exploit the vulnerabilities of the expanding print market to their advantage. Early modern Europe would be flooded with sensationalist and scandalous material, stories of supernatural occurrences, and all manner of fake news and conspiracy theories.

The new technology played a key role in the consolidation of colonial powers, yet it also provided their critics and detractors a vehicle with which

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to reach the expanding reading public. As Tom Standage notes in *Writing on the Wall* (2013), the new media could help governments “synchronize public opinion” from the top down, but it could also work to destabilize institutions, a point he makes in discussing Luther’s use of the printing press against the Catholic Church.¹ In the Iberian Peninsula, the birth of the Spanish nation (arguably the first modern European state) is tied to the consolidation of monarchical power in the 1400s and 1500s on the back of disinformation campaigns built around fake and fraudulent historical records. Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic monarchs responsible for the administrative and religious unification of much of the Iberian Peninsula and for the expulsion of the Jews from Castile and Aragon, employed professional “chroniclers” to propagate self-serving mythologies. Their heir Charles V further invested in the office of “royal chronicler” as part of a concerted effort to promote a mythical version of Spain—a universal monarchy of ancient origins grounded in providentialist notions of manifest destiny. The chronicles that proliferated in Imperial Spain under the watch of Charles V and his son Philip effectively white-washed (or Christian-washed) the past to justify their policies of internal colonization, cultural homogenization, and territorial expansion.

The fantastical imagery fabricated by the royal chroniclers and theologians serving the Habsburg monarchy throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provided historical legitimacy to the monarchical invention of Spain as a Christian nation of ancient origins. In the increasingly paranoid environment of the Counter-Reformation, monarchical officials and Christian authorities would effectively weaponize this mythical imagery to justify discriminatory policies against racial and cultural minorities. The new Christians, known as *moriscos* (if they descended from Muslim ancestry) and *conversos* or *confesos* (descendants of local Jews), would be subjected to increased pressures to abandon all aspects of their cultural heritage, including their ancestral languages, at the same time as they were being erased from the nation’s history and excluded from positions of power and influence. Some *morisco* communities actively protested the imperial policy of cultural cleansing, going so far as to declare war on Philip II during the uprising known as the rebellion of the Alpujarras. The revolt, which lasted the better part of three years, between 1568 and 1571, would end tragically for the rebels, but the resistance of the *morisco* minority would take on different (and subtler) forms, stretching into the first decade of the seventeenth century, when Philip III would sign the infamous decree of expulsion of the *moriscos*. The controversial royal decree would condemn hundreds of thousands of new Christians of Muslim ancestry to mass exile between 1609 and 1614.

In the 1590s, just a few years prior to the official adoption of the policy of expulsion known contemporaneously as the “final solution,” a group of

morisco intellectuals from the “new Christian” town of Granada came up with an ingenious scheme to promote a counter-mythology of their own in a desperate attempt to fight fire with fire, or, rather, disinformation with disinformation. For nearly a decade, these crafty *moriscos* would busy themselves manufacturing historical fakes and fraudulent archeological artifacts meant to promote a multicultural view of Spain anchored in an alternative (Muslim-friendly) version of historical destiny. The opening salvo would come in 1592 with the publication of *Historia verdadera del rey don Rodrigo* (*True History of King Don Rodrigo*) by *morisco* doctor Miguel de Luna, who hides his authorship behind a supposed Arabic original he claims to be translating. *Historia verdadera* paints a fantastical version of the fall of the Christian Visigoth kingdom at the hands of God’s Muslim soldiers in the year 711 as a pre-ordained development, part of a chain of events consistent with the historical fulfillment of providential designs.²

While *True History* signposted the birth of the modern Spanish nation at the precise historical juncture at which Christian chronicles had marked the “fall of Spain” at the hands of Muslim invaders, a different historical project on which Luna worked on for years in collaboration with other members of the *morisco* community would advance an alternative version of the origins of Christianity in the Iberian Peninsula. If in *Historia verdadera*, God had entrusted Luna’s Muslim ancestors with the modern destiny of His chosen nation, the archeological forgeries known as the Libros Plúmbeos, or Lead Books of Granada, would allow Luna and his collaborators to piece together a long “history” of Christian and Muslim syncretism of ancient roots as an act of “translation” of originals written in a mixture of Latin and Arabic characters. Their historical genealogy, whose validity they could now attribute to the archeological record, would place their own Arab ancestors at the historical origins of Christian Spain. According to this version, the ancestors of the *morisco* community of Granada would have to be counted among the ancient apostolic leaders responsible for the Christianization of Iberia.

The fraudulent archeological findings of Granada, also known as the Platos del Sacromonte (Plates of the Sacred Mountain), which included a combination of seemingly ancient artifacts and human remains, would fuel fierce theological debates over the origins of Christianity and the place of Muslim culture in Spanish history for years to come. While the Sacromonte Plates are among the most spectacular instances of countercultural dis-info ops in early modern Europe, they were by no means unique. Indeed, historian Mercedes García Arenal has linked the controversial Lead Books of Granada to a long chain of fraudulent schemes, falsifications and distortions of historical memory involving various sites in Italy, Portugal, and Spain.³ In 1590, five years prior to the discoveries associated with the Lead Books of Granada, a

remarkably similar archeological forgery known as the Miracle of Ourique had been unearthed in the Portuguese town of Alcobaça. As in the case of the Sacromonte Plates, the fraudulent archeological findings associated with the Miracle of Ourique would serve to strengthen the case of revolutionaries against monarchical policies.

García Arenal is among the researchers who have traced this string of forgeries in early modern Europe to the work of Annius of Viterbo (1437–1502), a Dominican friar celebrated by his contemporaries for his notorious translations of ancient Semitic and Etruscan documents (which would turn out to be wholesale fabrications) and for his highly publicized archeological dig of Viterbo, which yielded a series of spectacular discoveries, including several marble statues, later exposed as fakes artificially aged through a “salting” process. In the case of Spain, García Arenal and Pablo Fernández Albadalejo point to the foundational fabrications of royal chronicler Florián de Ocampo (1499–1558), particularly the five volumes of his *Crónica general de España* (*General Chronicle of Spain*) published between 1543 and 1553, and the work of his successor Ambrosio de Morales (1513–1591).

The *General Chronicle of Spain* had no doubt been intended as a propagandistic tool that would lend credibility to the monarchical fantasy of an ancient Christian Spain. Yet, Ocampo’s officially sanctioned dis-info ops would become a source of inspiration for the mobilization of “rogue” mythologies and alternative historical genealogies all over Iberia. Fernández Albadalejo speaks of a copycat tradition of regional fabrications in northern Spain, a “mountain historiography” he calls it, which would include the work of Basque author Andrés de Poza in defense of the notion of a Basque nobility of heroic ancient origins, along with the “discoveries” of Cantabrian author Juan de Castañeda, which were intended to lend credence to a string of local legends and self-glorifying regional myths.⁴ Fernández Albadalejo links the *morisco* Lead Books of Granada to this “indigenous” chain of fraudulent historical genealogies that follow the playbook of officially sanctioned chronicles. Ricardo García Cárcel has made a similar argument. He offers a useful summary of the state of the question ahead of the mass exile of *moriscos* decreed by Philip III. His brief but comprehensive account focuses on the commonalities between Christian and *morisco* currents of historical manipulation in sixteenth-century Spain, particularly their reliance on archeological fakes for the re-construction of the past to fit their ideological needs. He underscores the mutually reinforcing effect of crypto-Muslim and Christian mythologies in the culturally complex context of the “new Christian” town of Granada:

Indigenist memory, memory of the invaded within which Christian and Muslim indigenist narratives would come together. Behind the Lead Books of Granada would be the crypto-Muslim or pro-morisco community, which tries to influence public opinion in its favor . . . but also the Christian indigenism of long historical reach, which explains the ambivalence of the ideological message of the Lead Books. The falsifications established a common historical origin for Spanish Christians and Muslims and presented an interpretation of Christianity very close to Islam, thus avoiding talking about the Trinity, the divine nature of Christ, or the cult of images. The crypto-Muslims argued that the Lead Plates were made in the first century, with its writings originating in Jerusalem, and they presented them as evidence that the first settlers of Roman Hispania had been Arabs arriving in Granada at the time of the Apostles . . . which would invalidate the very concept of the new Christian. The moriscos would in fact be the oldest Christians. The morisco narratives would thus intertwine themselves around preexisting Christian accounts of the arrival of the apostle Saint James, and the pre-eminence of the Church of Granada. Both indigenist traditions could be mutually reinforcing in their defense of cultural syncretism and the kind of historical miscegenation evident in the Lead Books.⁵

While García Cárcel sees the 1609–1614 expulsion of the *moriscos* as evidence of the ultimate failure of the syncretism promoted by the indigenist traditions that had emerged in the culturally muddled landscape of Granada, the continuing campaigns of historical cleansing by monarchical officials and their urgent calls to forget, to literally bury the past, suggest that the concerns over cultural miscegenation remain at the center of Spain’s political scene throughout the 1600s.

The mid-century writings of royal theologian Cristóbal Lozano (1609–1667) are among the most telling illustrations of the “vigilant” attitude promoted by monarchical and Christian authorities, even decades after the mass exile of the *moriscos*. Lozano refurbishes and actualizes biblical stories and motifs, combining them with the historical fabrications of preexisting chronicles and local legends in sensationalist (often lewd and horrific) narratives framed as moral lessons and urgent warnings to keep watch over the past to prevent the dreaded return of the ancient enemies of Spain. Lozano makes this point most explicitly in “La cueva de Hércules” (The Cave of Hercules), which deals with the culturally muddled history of Toledo with an expressionistic richness

reminiscent of the aesthetics of gothic horror. As I argued in *Baroque Horrors* (2010), the compulsion to reenact the foundational act of exclusion of the cultural others is signified in “La cueva de Hércules” by the multiple locks that are placed on the door that separates the City of Light (Christian Toledo at the time of Lozano’s writing) from its own haunted (and haunting) past. Toledo’s archeological record is thus literally refigured as demonic underground space inhabited by racial others and ancient phantoms. This is the kind of fictional reworking of the past that would become the staple of modern horror fiction in the tradition of Sheridan Le Fanu’s “Green Tea” and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. The central lesson of these texts is that the remnants or phantoms of the past must forever remain under lock and key. As Lozano writes, we must follow the guidance of the original Christian monarchs who made sure the door to the cave “remains shut [and] reinforced with an iron gate full of locks.”⁶ Ironically, the cave’s main access is located inside the ancient Church of San Ginés or Saint Genesius, a Christian temple erected in memory of a Roman actor who had renounced his own pagan past to embrace the Christian faith, only to die as a martyr. Indeed, the ironies abound here when we consider that the city’s own website suggests that Toledo’s cavernous underground was used by Inquisition officials to administer procedural torture.⁷

Lozano’s sensationalist narratives added fresh material to the early historical fabrications commissioned by the Habsburgs. The echoes of these sixteenth and seventeenth-century mythologies would continue to reverberate in fundamentalist circles, feeding into modern nationalist fantasies, including the fascist dis-info ops that would help consolidate Franco’s regime in the twentieth century and the anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric of right wing politicians today. The widely publicized speech of Spanish ex-president José María Aznar at Georgetown University in the aftermath of the Madrid bombing of March 11, 2004, illustrates the staying power of this historical mythology in modern conservative circles: “The problem Spain has with Al Qaeda and Islamic terrorism . . . has nothing to do with government decisions. You must go back no less than 1,300 years, to the early eighth century, when a Spanish nation recently invaded by the Moors, refused to become just another piece of the Islamic world and began a long battle to recover its identity.”⁸ The core of Aznar’s “American speech” (this is how some Spanish sources referred to it at the time) is that Al Qaeda’s terrorist attacks must be understood as part of an ancestral war between Christian civilization and Muslim barbarism. Nearly two decades later, the myth of an essential Christian Spain that must be defended against transhistorical racial and cultural enemies continues to feed into right wing ideologies, including neofascist movements in Spain. But this is not just a “Spanish problem.” The fundamentalist fantasy of a war between Christianity and Muslim barbarism finds resonance in the United States as well, often in connection with Old Testament motifs.

Hence, Lozano's seventeenth-century explanation of "the fall" of the Christian nation at the hands of Muslim barbarians is echoed in the twenty-first-century voices of evangelical fundamentalists in the United States. Here is a passage that provides a clear sense of what is behind Lozano's appropriation of the Old Testament motif of divine punishment, his denunciation of attitudes and behavior that do not conform to Christian norms: "To have irritated God . . . with their disobedience and to have offended the land with such wickedness: this is what caused the loss of Spain [at the hands of Muslim invaders]." Notice the uncanny similarities between the language of this seventeenth-century theologian and the explanation for the September 11 tragedy offered by evangelical leaders Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson on the "700 Club," the flagship television program of the Christian Broadcasting Network. In Falwell's words: "The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this [the September 11 attack], because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face."¹⁰ Despite the vast historical distance between these statements, I would argue that Lozano and Falwell rehearse similar appropriations of the biblical motif of God's righteous punishment of His people, ruthlessly sharpened for their ideological needs and the culture wars of their day.

The neofascist, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic proclamations of Christian nationalists that we hear today in the aftermath of the January 6 insurrection are grounded in a genuinely American tradition with historical ties to conservative thinktanks like the Heritage Foundation, radicalized by the MAGA disinformation machine. But it is important to note that the Christian nationalist worldview behind this "American tradition" is rooted in a much larger and longer history going back to the dis-info ops of imperial powers in the age of colonization. With regards to anti-Muslim sentiments in right wing America, we need go no further than televangelist Rod Parsley's explanation of what he takes to be the historical roots of the American dream in his 2005 book *Silent No More*. Parsley explicitly links the very concept of America, its foundational essence, to what he says is Columbus's commitment to the destruction of Islam: "I do not believe our country can truly fulfill its divine purpose until we understand our historical conflict with Islam . . . It was to defeat Islam, among other dreams that Christopher Columbus sailed to the New World in 1492 . . . Columbus dreamed of defeating the armies of Islam with the armies of Europe made mighty by the wealth of the New World. It was this dream that, in part, began America."¹¹

In an age plagued by all sorts of political disinformation and MAGA demagoguery powered by right wing firebrands (think Steve Bannon, Alex Jones, Sean Hannity, Tucker Carson . . .), it is not enough to fight falsehoods with evidentiary knowledge. Journalism professor Matt Laslo has explained the disinformation problem in our media environment in this way: “the modern media landscape allows countless conspiracies, falsehoods and lies to be presented to readers in the same way, and with the same gravitas and imprimatur, as facts.”¹² Former government official and managing editor of *Time* magazine Richard Stengel puts the problem in perspective in *Information Wars*: “I had always believed in the notion that the best ideas triumph in what Justice William O. Douglas called ‘the market of ideas’ . . . that a rational audience would ultimately see the truth. I think we all know now that this is a pipedream . . . It’s not enough to fight falsehood with truth; the truth does not always win.”¹³

For scholars of early modern Spain familiar with the writings of Miguel de Cervantes, the sobering notion that “the truth does not always win” will likely resonate as a key lesson of his brand of fiction. His novels *Don Quixote* and *Persiles* offer countless illustrations of the power of myths to effectively color or construct our reality. In the case of *Persiles* (a parody of the Christian romance tradition that was published posthumously in 1617), the vision that drives much of the narrative is precisely the myth of Spain as an essentially Catholic nation, the luminary of Christian civilization destined to erase barbarism from every corner of the world. This is the myth that seemingly drives the protagonists’ pilgrimage from their native “barbaric island” of the North to the “promised land” of Iberia. In characteristic Cervantine fashion, the mythical image of Spain as a holy nation is exposed as a sham in multiple passages that foreground violence and corruption involving religious authorities and public officials. Cervantes’s signature strategy against this mythology may be best described as “excessive orthodoxy,” a form of satire exemplified in our day by the political comedy of Stephen Colbert. I am thinking of the right wing pundit persona channeled in *The Colbert Report* and in his satirical books *I am America (And So Can You!)* (2007) and *America Again: Re-Becoming the Greatness We Never Weren’t* (2012). Colbert satirizes the providentialist vision of America promoted by the likes of Jerry Falwell and Rod Parsley in *America Again*:

Ronald Reagan said it first . . . paraphrasing Jesus, ‘America is the shining city upon a hill.’ And no matter how dark our days, or how low we sink, we will always be shiny and hilly. Reagan also said, ‘I have always believed that there was some divine plan that placed this great continent between two oceans to be sought out by those who were possessed of an

abiding love of freedom and a special kind of courage' . . . He is right, America was put here by God for us to find. America was like the sculpture existing inside the block of marble, waiting for the artist to chip away a few Cherokee to find it.¹⁴

I have elsewhere argued at some length that Colbert, Sacha Baron Cohen, and Cervantes use similar strategies against the political mythologies of their day.¹⁵ For our purposes here, I'll reproduce a few illustrations from Cervantes's works. As I mentioned earlier, Spain's reputation or "fama" (fame) as the holiest of nations is seemingly proclaimed in key passages of *Persiles*: "This is the land that pays abundant holy tributes to the Heavens . . . the promised land . . . the most peaceful and holy region of Earth."¹⁶ All the while, we witness instances of violence and extortion by public officials, often from the perspective of their victims, including *moriscos* who speak movingly of their persecution at the hands of Inquisition officials, while seemingly justifying their own victimization in statements that parrot Inquisitorial language. Thus, Spanish Zenotia (this is how the narrator refers to this exiled *morisca* in what could be read as an act of symbolic restitution) describes the tragic circumstances of her forced "tearing from the fatherland" in the midst of a first-person account that incongruously includes racist stereotypes, in particular the association of *morisco* heritage with dark powers: "Just ask, and in a twinkling I'll make the brightness of the day turn to darkest night; or if by chance you'd like to see the land tremble, the winds quarrel with each other, the sea rise in anger."¹⁷ One of the more effective instances of Cervantes's deployment of "excessive orthodoxy" as a weapon of political satire comes up near the conclusion of *Persiles*, when the pilgrims (and the readers) are treated to a seemingly straightforward defense of the royal decree of expulsion by a *morisco* character known as Jadraque: "Oh invincible King . . . leave us a pure Spain, cleansed and cleared of this evil cast of mine that darkens and defiles it . . . Let the seas be filled with your galleys loaded with the useless weight of the descendants of Hagar . . . weeds hindering the growth of Christian fertility . . . Expel them, expel them, my lord, . . . so your kingdom may shine like the sun and become as beautiful as heaven."¹⁸

We find a similar passage in *Don Quixote II*, in which Sancho's *morisco* neighbor defends the monarchical policy of expulsion while praising the official in charge of carrying it out for his dedication to the purification of the Spanish nation. I would argue that these impassioned defenses of the "final solution" incongruously attributed to victimized *moriscos* are as effective as Colbert's ironic parroting of right wing ideology in his signature Colbert Report. But it is in his short theatrical piece "El retablo de las maravillas" where Cervantes builds his most devastating critique of the racist myths that justify and rationalize the discriminatory laws of blood purity (*estatutos de limpieza*

de sangre), which excluded the members of the “other races” (descendants of Muslims and Jews), from a range of professions and public offices. Here, Cervantes makes use of a wide array of satirical tools (including the strategy I have been calling “excessive orthodoxy”) to mock the widespread belief in the essential superiority of Christian genealogy and expose the manipulative cynicism of its propagandists. This ingenious metatheatrical artifice reads as a devastating critique of the honor system of seventeenth-century Spain (with its misogynistic and racist trappings) and, more importantly for our purposes, as an anti-disinformation playbook, a sort of “prebunking,” how-to manual we may use as a pedagogical toolkit for our own day.

The central character of “El retablo” is Chanfalla, a grifter posing as a theater producer who has figured out how to manipulate country bumpkins using their own racial biases to exploit them. He and his collaborators sell a nothing spectacle (an empty stage) with a simple lie that confirms the biases of their prospective spectators, the fantastical notions they have accepted about the superiority of their pure Christian blood: *No one will ever see the figures of the tableau—I am paraphrasing Chanfalla here—if their genealogy is tainted in any way or they have a single drop of Jewish blood in their veins.* While the proud Christians who think of themselves as members of the true Spanish race will not actually see the “never seen wonders” of the tableau (because of course there’s nothing to see), they all act as witnesses of its truth on account of the racial biases they have internalized as part of their very identity. By contrast, the readers’ backstage knowledge of the manipulative plans of the conmen allows them an oblique or “marginal position” analogous to that of the Jewish converts who would not be *required to see* on account of their presumed “blindness.”

In this way, Cervantes makes his “lectores avisados” (forewarned readers) aware of the true nature of the fantasies that anchor their social identity. These fantasies work not because they are in any way true, but because we act as if they are true. As Slavoj Žižek argues apropos of the Marxian–Lacanian invention of the symptom, the power of ideology is not a matter of *subjective belief* but of *objective performance*.¹⁹ Indeed, no one in the audience sees the wonders described by the lead theater producer, but everyone understands that they must show themselves as “seers” and “believers” to preserve their social status as *cristianos viejos* (old Christians) of sufficiently pure genealogy, or *sangre limpia* (untainted blood). As the governor confesses in an aside, which only we (the readers) can “hear”: “habré de decir que lo veo, por la negra honrilla” (I will have to say that I see it for the sake of my bloody honor).²⁰

As I have argued elsewhere, most recently in *Un-Deceptions*, we may read Cervantes’s fictional strategy of ideological critique as an illustration of the truth behind disinformation campaigns that use our own biases as hooks to

manipulate us. To get to that truth, it would not be enough to insist that *Jewish people are not really blind* or that *Mexican immigrants are not really rapist hordes of bad hombres*. The truth that Cervantes is getting at in his “Retablo,” the deeper un-deception here has to do with the manipulative power of demagogues and conmen who trade in racist fantasies. At the most basic level, it does not really matter whether we truly believe the lie. Public lies maintain their power when we act as if we believe them or simply fail to confront them. This is precisely the point that columnist Thomas Edsall made in a *New York Times* piece published on January 19, 2022, about the big public lie that continues to be promoted by legions of present-day demagogues and grifters in the aftermath of the 2020 election, the poisonous big lie that powered the insurrection of January 6, 2021, and is still threatening our democracy: “The unwillingness of Republican leaders to challenge Trump’s relentless lies, for whatever reason—for political survival, for mobilization of whites opposed to minorities, to curry favor, to feign populist sympathies—is as consequential as or more so than actually believing the lie.”²¹

This brings us to the key difference between the workings of “The Wondrous Tableau” and similar treatments of the theme of deception by social pressure, including the familiar story of “The Emperor’s New Clothes” and the medieval version “Lo que sucedió a un rey con los burladores que hicieron el paño” (What happened to a king with the deceivers who made the cloth), which appeared in the compilation known as *El conde Lucanor* (1335). While these other versions reinforce the notion that once publicly revealed the truth will prevail, this is not at all what happens in “El Retablo de las maravillas.” The truth of the wondrous tableau will indeed be publicly revealed by a latecomer, a quartermaster who commands the townsfolk to prepare their houses for the imminent arrival of a group of soldiers stationed outside of town. The quartermaster is of course unaware of the “magical nature” of the show and the peculiar qualities or conditions (“condiciones” in the original) required of its audience. Crucially though, the simple truth revealed by the newcomer (that the stage is empty) is not only rejected but used against him in what amounts to a self-interested exploitation of the tableau’s big lie by the victims themselves. The fact that the quartermaster fails to perform the belief demanded by the spectacle allows the commoners to single him out as one of tainted blood: *He is one of them, he is one of them, for he can’t see!* Again, this is nothing more than a cynical embracing of Chanfalla’s big lie by the commoners, for, even if they didn’t before, they all surely know by now that the wondrous tableau is nothing but an elaborate deception. Yet, it may be a deception they can leverage for personal gain (or so they think).

Unlike in “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” the deception of Chanfalla’s wondrous tableau is as safe as Trump’s conspiracy theories, because once

the conmen have succeeded in capturing the attention of their audiences and in stirring their sense of grievance, those audiences will be ready to buy into their confirmation-bias blame games hook, line, and sinker. As for the producers of the magical spectacle, they know very well that the publicity generated by the public scandal their deception sparks (including actual violence) will in fact attract wider audiences. *Scandals are good for business* is essentially the lesson we learn from Chanfalla's asides, a sentiment after Trump's own heart if we believe his "personal confessions" in *The Art of the Deal*: "One thing I've learned . . . is that they are always hungry for a good story, and the more sensational the better . . . I don't mind controversy [and] got a lot of attention, and that alone creates value."²²

When Trump railed against Fox News for having forgotten about "the Golden Goose" as the channel first accepted the results of the 2020 election, his words revealed the trappings of our (news) media market. Trump's never-ending string of scandals and his media circus ensure higher ratings for the news networks and increased volume of user traffic for his favorite social media platforms. From this perspective, we could ask ourselves, what should we make of the fact that the algorithms we trust to deliver information in our digital age are optimized to a commercial definition of success? As the data scientist Cathy O'Neil argues in *Weapons of Math Destruction* (2016), the consequences of our trust in algorithms as arbiters of truth can be devastating: "These algorithms are opaque, unquestioned, and unaccountable, and they operate at scale to sort, target, or 'optimize' millions of people. By confusing their findings with on-the-ground reality, most of them create pernicious WMD [Weapons of Math Destruction] feedback loops . . . The trouble is that profits end up serving as a stand-in, or proxy, for truth."²³

When we navigate search engines like Google, it is important to keep in mind that the results of our searches are likely to vary depending on the information their algorithms have collected about our interests and preferences. As former Google engineer Justin Rosenstein cautions: "When you go to Google and type 'climate change is,' you are going to see different results depending on where you live, [including] an autocomplete with 'climate change is a hoax' . . . and that's a function, not of what the truth is about climate change, but about where you happen to be googling from and the particular things that Google knows about your interests."²⁴ The danger here is that we may be operating on different "sets of facts" depending on how our media feed may have been curated to reflect the "information" that fits our worldview. This is why, as Egginton and I argued in *Medialogies* and more recently in *What Would Cervantes Do?* (2022), "reality on demand" may turn out to be the most dangerous product of our market society.

With regards to social media platforms, it is not just that we may accidentally fall into pernicious rabbit holes but that the algorithms that run these platforms are literally setting traps for us. Former engineer for YouTube Guillaume Chaslot

explains how these platforms exploit polarizing conspiracy theories to attract attention and maximize profits: “polarization is extremely efficient at keeping people online [which is why] the algorithm is actually trying to find which rabbit hole is the closest to your interests.”²⁵ From Flat-Earth to Pizza Gate to QAnon rabbit holes, search engines volunteer sensationalist content and “popular” conspiracy theories in their menus of options to people who may have never even searched for them. Given this state of affairs, we shouldn’t be particularly surprised to hear from former Google insider Tristan Harris that we’ve created an attention-grabbing media market that works on “a disinformation for profit business model.”²⁶ Harris wonders how people will be able to wake up from the simulation if they don’t know they are inside it. *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show* are among the examples of films and works of literature mentioned in *The Social Dilemma* in the context of a dramatization meant to refocus our attention from the distractions of the social media illusion to the form of the illusion itself.

Isn’t this precisely what Cervantes is doing in his “Retablo de las maravillas”? As a professional of illusion in his own right, the inventor of modern fiction redirects our gaze from the deception to the *form of the deception* in a way that helps train readers and spectators to see through the ideological illusions spread by the mass media of his time and ours. This is what Egginton and I have called *reality literacy*: the critical understanding of the multiple ways our medialogy frames, edits, constructs reality. As for the big lie and its consequences, I would suggest we keep in mind the violent ending of “The Wondrous Tableau,” as the late-arriving quartermaster draws his sword against the commoners in response to their verbal attack. When we act as if we believe in the public lies of demagogues (whether we actually do or not) or simply fail to confront them, thinking we may be able to rip some benefit (as Edsall suggests many of our public officials are doing today), we would do well to remember the Cervantine warning. The spectators of Chanfalla’s magical show may have thought they could harness the deception to their advantage, but for all their public demonstration of patriotic racial purity, when push came to shove (quite literally), they did not stand a chance against the raw power of the sword.

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Notes

1. Quoted in David Castillo and William Egginton, *Medialogies: Reading Reality in the Age of Inflationary Media* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 5.
2. See my discussion of *Historia verdadera del rey don Rodrigo* in David Castillo, *Baroque Horrors: Roots of the Fantastic in the Age of Curiosities* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2010), 151–57.
3. Mercedes García Arenal, “El entorno de los Plomos: historiografía y linaje,” in *Los Plomos de Sacromonte. Invención y tesoro*, eds. Manuel Barrios Aguilera and Mercedes García Arenal (Valencia: Universidad de Valencia, Universidad de Granada, Universidad de Zaragoza, 2006), 51–78.
4. Pablo Fernández Albadalejo, *Historia de España* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2007).
5. Ricardo García Cárcel, “La memoria histórica sobre la expulsión de los moriscos,” *eHumanista/Conversos* 2 (2014): 128. All English translations of Spanish original texts included in this chapter are my own.
6. Cristóbal Lozano, “La cueva de Hércules,” *Historias y Leyendas* (Madrid: Espasa–Calpe, 1955), 209–12.
7. See Castillo, *Baroque Horrors*, 151.
8. Quoted in Castillo, *Baroque Horrors*, 137.
9. Cristóbal Lozano, *Historias y Leyendas* (Madrid: Espasa–Calpe, 1955), 52.
10. John Harris, “God Gave U.S. ‘What We Deserve’, Falwell says,” *Washington Post*, September 14, 2001, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/life-style/2001/09/14/god-gave-us-what-we-deserve-falwell-says/ef3e322e-03e0-453e-b8ea-b8bc592a6479/>.
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15. David Castillo, “Don Quixote and Political Satire: Cervantine Lessons from Sacha Baron Cohen and Stephen Colbert,” in *Approaches to Teaching Cervantes's Don Quixote*, ed. James Parr and Lisa Vollendorf (New York: Modern Languages Association of America, 2015), 171–77.
16. Miguel de Cervantes, *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1997), 431–60.
17. *Ibid.*, 329.
18. *Ibid.*, 558–60.
19. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).
20. Miguel de Cervantes, “El retablo de las maravillas,” *Entremeses* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1982), 229.
21. Thomas Edsall, “Why Millions Think It Is Trump Who Cannot Tell a Lie,” *New York Times*, January 19, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/19/opinion/trump-big-lie.html>.
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24. *The Social Dilemma*, dir. Jeff Orlowski (Netflix, 2020).
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*

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