

# The carceral appropriation of communications technology through the imaginal

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## Abstract

This article explores the effect that communications technology has on hegemonic power. The first section establishes a theoretical framework combining Foucault's carceral archipelago theory with Chiara Bottici's concept of the social imaginal describing the medium through which inter- and trans-subjective imagination occurs. The remainder employs this framework to examine how four technological innovations (print media, radio, television and Internet) impact the (re)production of discursive hegemonic ideology, integrating a variety of historical and contemporary theories on public discourse and ideological dominance. I conclude by arguing that each case demonstrates a dialectic pattern that explains the techno-social evolution of the carceral archipelago.

## Keywords

communications technology, discourse, Foucault, hegemony, ideology, imagination

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate a recurring trend in the propagation of new communications technologies that results in hegemonic social control. I begin by establishing a socio-ontological framework that combines Foucault's (1995) theory of the *carceral archipelago* with the theory of the *imaginal* (Bottici 2014). By doing so, the institutional and hegemonic structure of Western society is connected to the medium in which subjective, objective and trans-subjective imagination occurs. From this framework, I engage in a historical analysis, examining the effect of four significant breakthroughs in communications technology (print media, radio, television and Internet) on

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societal structures and institutions. I link these technological innovations with existing theories describing new developments in hegemonic social power; Habermas's (1991) *public sphere*, Gramsci's (1991) *cultural hegemony*, Herman and Chomsky's (2002) *propaganda model* and Rouvroy and Berns's (2013) *algorithmic governmentality*, among others. I argue that each of these theories describe a distinct alteration in the instrumentalized systems of disciplinary social control through the imaginal. This process ensures the internalization of hegemonic ideology, and these shifts occur in a distinctly dialectic manner.

## The imaginal

Proposed by Bottici (2014), the imaginal refers to 'that which is made of images and can therefore be the product both of an individual faculty and of the social context, as well as of a complex interaction between the two that escapes any opposition between them' (436). It emphasizes 'the centrality of the production of images, rather than the faculty or the context that produces them' and enjoys 'a primacy vis-à-vis language and argumentative thinking' that exists prior to the structuration of language (Bottici 2019: 436–7). The concept combines perspectives from the Muslim Sufi philosophical tradition, psychoanalysis and Spinozism to describe a *field of possibilities* for imagination, the *medium* through which images are (re)produced, thus avoiding ontological claims of truth or falsity inundated in terms such as 'imaginary' and 'imagination' (Bottici 2014). Especially under recent (19<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup> century) developments in communications technology and social and institutional transformations, there is a significant analytical benefit in the employment of the imaginal as an intrinsically trans-subjective ontology for socio-political analysis.

The role of imagination in the formation of ideology and identity cannot be understated. Personal identity and worldview are inherently intersubjective, emerging primarily from one's socio-cultural context through complex social interactions mediated by language. As Nietzsche argued, language has a profound effect on one's epistemology, inherently restricting the structure of one's cognition and by extension behaviour (Strong 1976). Thus, while the imaginal is a pre-conceptual medium that informs structuration through language, it is also significantly impacted by the structure of a particular language. As such, any discourse involves a bidirectional relationship through the imaginal whereby each subject attempts to transmit each other's imaginal perspective to one another, while one's own imagination is necessarily influenced by their prior social interactions and cultural milieu. That said, there is always a degree of subjective freedom within the imaginal (Bottici 2014) which allows for the rejection or synthesis of external concepts, as well as room for genuinely original imagination emerging from one's unique conditions. This imaginal freedom is vital for innovation, creativity and ingenuity; however, this often comes into conflict with ideology (re)produced by established institutions and power structures that seek to maintain order within the status quo.

Applied to politics, the imaginal explains the significance of spatial visualization in nation-states through concrete borders on maps (Bottici 2014). This contrasts with the discordant feudal oath systems of the *ancien régime*<sup>1</sup> and the vague networks of imperial

tribute endemic to geo-politics prior to the modern period. Although imagination had always had a role in politics, the consolidation of nation-states as unified entities in their own right (largely due to the standardization and distribution of vernacular language through printing – Anderson 1994, Habermas 1991) rather than merely organizational structures began to alter political relationships. Instead of a network of individual relations (culminating in absolute monarchism, exemplified by Louis XIV’s declaration of ‘l’etat c’est moi’), politics steadily developed relationships between individuals and the socio-political structures themselves, which transcended individual whims through innovations such as constitutionalism.<sup>2</sup> Finally, states and hegemonic social structures began directly influencing their denizens through the imaginal in the interest of solidifying legitimacy, maintaining order and instrumentalizing emotion and sympathy to mobilize the populace towards particular goals.

## The carceral archipelago

Next, a brief overview of Foucault’s theory of the development of the *carceral archipelago* (Foucault 1995) which he argues emerged following the end of the *ancien régime*. By the formation of the United States as a formally recognized sovereign political entity in the 1783 Peace of Paris, Europe, and by extension its former colonies, had begun a significant institutional transition of power and social control. Previously, the state’s monopoly on legitimate violence (Weber 1946) was reinforced and legitimated through ritualized and spectacularized public punishment, including torture and executions, since crime was viewed as a personal attack against the sovereign (Foucault 1991). By the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, this method was falling out of favor due to the Enlightenment, an emphasis on rationalism, public health and the implementation of more complex and organized hierarchical structure in the military (Gorski 1993). Regarding crime and punishment, the intentional target of illegal behaviour shifted from a personal/emotional disrespect of the individual sovereign (Hobbes 2008) to a threat to the unity and prosperity of society as a whole. As such, the goal of punishment ceased to be setting a public example through violent spectacle, and instead became rationalized rehabilitation to create an ‘ideal citizen’ and prevent future crime. Thus, the target of punishment changed from the individual to the crime itself. These imaginal shifts in bourgeoisie ideology resulted in a series of social reforms that produced what would become disciplinary societies.

This resulted in a new development in *biopolitics*, (Foucault 1991), whereby the emphasis of *biopower* (power over life) shifted from negation to addition. Sovereign biopower exercises legitimated violence against the body, prioritizing the forced deduction (extraction) from society in the form of taxation, military drafts, property seizure, etc. By contrast, disciplinary biopower became more positivist, influencing society *structurally* and less overtly through the enforced preservation and regulation of life itself,<sup>3</sup> and thus is more closely integrated into society. Disciplinary biopolitics involves an emphasis on public health, standardization of behaviour, homogenization of culture (which emerged in nation-states), the proliferation of insurance and a reimagining of architecture and urban planning.<sup>4</sup> The shift towards disciplinary biopolitics produced

disciplinary institutions and social structures, such as penitentiaries. Gradually, the efficacy of disciplinary structures impacted the public's imaginal capacity sufficiently to transition to *governmentality* (Foucault 1978), whereby there is implicit ideological consent for the existing institutions that is internalized and reinforced.

Disciplinary social structures (Foucault 1995), once only found in monasteries and then increasingly in armies and workshops (especially in Protestant states, such as Prussia and Sweden – Gorski 1993), emphasize strict regulated control of individuals with the goal of a more unified whole. Reflecting the rejuvenation of the Aristotelian proclivity for categorization and the rationalism endemic to the Enlightenment, the use of classifications and hierarchies became paramount as a means of regimenting, partitioning and ranking individuals. Furthermore, innovations in clocks and watches were utilized to establish and regulate strict timekeeping. Additional developments include an emphasis on efficiency through the imaginal unification of the body with tools, ordered standardization of physical movement and a focus on temporality and demonization of idleness. This amalgamation produced “an individuality that is not only analytical and ‘cellular’, but also natural and ‘organic’” (Foucault 1995, 156); a highly complex yet efficient and flexible mechanistic organizational structure that allows for full interchangeability of its individuals as components over time. For such structures to be sustainable, however, the strict education and control of each individual became necessary since inefficiency or failure of any part could ripple outwards and disrupt the entire process. To ensure sufficiently homogenous control and training, a *panoptic* model emerged.

The original panopticon was an architectural model for prisons designed by Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarian ethics, that involved a circular structure with a guard tower in the centre and all cells facing this central tower (Foucault 1995). The idea is that the guards can observe the entire body of prisoners without being observed themselves; thus, the prisoners are blinded as to whether or not they are *actually* being observed at any given moment. This creates the imaginal-emotional pressure of incessant surveillance, a permanent Sartrean ‘look’ (Sartre 1993) built into its very architecture that increases the efficiency of prisoner control.

In Foucault's analysis, in addition to the application of Bentham's panoptic design in prisons, hospitals, factories, etc., the panopticon offers an apt analogy for the broader functioning of disciplinary society in reducing people to isolated individuals who internalize their contextual power relations (Foucault 1995). This rationalizes and streamlines systems of social influence (especially in education and prisons, but also in the workplace and bureaucracies) by structuring the relations themselves. Thus, influence is no longer imposed externally through an overt threat of violence but through individuals policing themselves within their own pre-conscious imaginal milieu (with the implicit threat of violence remaining).

Taken together, panoptic disciplinary society forms a *carceral archipelago* (Foucault 1995), a complex dynamic network combining technology, knowledge systems, architecture and cultural developments that imaginarily permeates every level of society. Within the carceral archipelago, individuals continuously reinforce disciplinary society through intersubjective discourse (Foucault 1991). Once the panoptic disciplinary structure and hierarchy is internalized, individuals in any social relationship simultaneously function as

a guard and prisoner. Prisoner, due to being observed, influenced and molded by their peers through discursive power dynamics (including groupthink, peer pressure and the influence of authority figures<sup>5</sup>). Guard, due to simultaneously *being* the influencer of others in the same manner. As such, *any* discursive relationship subtly propagates existing power dynamics through the imaginal. This mutual linguistic regulation is proportionally intensified by power dynamics; the power relations of the past have a profound effect on the way language develops and is used, which reifies the same relations in the future. There is a constant discursive (and by extension, imaginal) negotiation and contention underlying social relationships, with equally beneficial relationships being nearly non-existent. As such, in cases such as a school playground where the authority figure is relatively detached, power relations among children still develop organically through their interactions, with deviance resulting in either social ostracization or consolidation into distinct in-groups.<sup>6</sup>

Social groups likewise engage in discursive power relations with one another, and due to their *autopoietic* nature, preserve cultural and linguistic norms and preexistent dominance relations. Autopoiesis is a neologism describing the ability of living cells to incessantly create and maintain their own boundaries, whether it be a cell wall, dermis, etc. Under Evan Thompson's (2010) enactive theory, this is the key feature of any living system. Social structures, especially fixed structures such as the bureaucracies found in governments, corporations and political parties, are created and maintained by living beings (humans). Thus, the term has value in analysis of social structures that can replace individuals while actively and continuously maintaining its imaginably bounded organizational identity (see also state autonomy theory – Skocpol 1985). As such, one can draw a loose comparison between the interactive relationships between groups and relationships between individuals, especially if we consider that interactions between groups *are* interactions between individuals belonging to each group. However, each group polices itself in a disciplinary manner, resulting in a heterogenous population of discursively interacting groups in addition to the individuals themselves (who identify with a number of groups). Thus, the carceral archipelago is not merely a binary relation between the individual and disciplinary society, but it is an organic imaginal struggle for power between dynamic panoptic social structures of all levels within overarching multiplicitous rhizomatic<sup>7</sup> networks. This constant discursive power struggle is a significant driver in the constant autopoietic (re)production and structuration of social reality, a process that myself and others have termed *meta-subjectivity* (Foertsch forthcoming).

### *1. The public sphere, print media and cultural hegemony (pre-20th century)*

Various developments in technology and social structure added additional layers of complexity and refined the disciplinary means of social influence within the carceral archipelago. While such change is dynamic and continuous, there are distinct techno-social innovations that warrant discussion. The first occurred immediately prior to, and was instrumental in the development of, the carceral archipelago. The development of the public sphere (Habermas 1991), which emerged largely due to innovations in printing and the economic rise of the bourgeois class, contributed to the collapse of the *ancien régime*

and established the conditions for the transition into disciplinary society. Under the *ancien régime*, there was no separation between public and private life as we understand today, as politics was primarily a privilege of the ruling nobility. As literacy propagated, wealthy but unlanded social elites (the bourgeoisie) who were excluded from political power began forming literary societies and organizations, such as *salons*, in public places, such as coffee houses, to discuss literature, politics, society, philosophy, etc. This allowed for a social democratization of political consciousness (especially among the upper class), which produced reformist or revolutionary sentiments culminating in the American and French Revolutions and leading to a general decline in monarchic power in Western Europe. Especially in the US and France, the end of monarchism resulted in a rapid transition towards Enlightenment-inspired socio-political structures that evolved into disciplinary society and the carceral archipelago. As such, the emergence of the public sphere and growth of literacy opened socio-political discourse in the form of organized critique of the hegemonic power structure. This produced a trend of democratization<sup>8</sup> and increased public awareness of politics in imperial states. However, it was not long before the newly established panoptic society appropriated the public sphere, incorporating it as a key means of social control within the carceral archipelago.

To maintain internal power through the minimization of unrest and protest opened by the public sphere, the carceral system gradually began employing what Gramsci calls *cultural hegemony* (Gramsci 1991). Cultural hegemony utilizes *traditional intellectuals*, members of the intelligentsia whose work aligns with the dominant ideology of the state, to propagate and popularize the notion that the status-quo is both natural and ideal. This ideological bedrock is established imaginally in early disciplinary education and perpetually reinforced by print media with the goal of providing a prevailing narrative that simultaneously reinforces state dogma and provides a pervasive counter to progressive or reformist thought. It manifests in myriad ways within the carceral archipelago, encompassing especially popular print media such as journalism, poetry, fiction<sup>9</sup> and formal academia, but also appearing in immediately imaginal forms such as visual art and political cartoons whose reach extended to the illiterate as well.

## 2. Radio media, state ideology and propaganda (early 20th century)

The next significant shift occurred during the World Wars due to the propagation of radio technology and the culmination of state ideology. Radios expanded imaginal creativity through the rapid spread of information and news, both domestically and internationally, and allowed the illiterate, who had less access to newspapers and books, to engage with more information generated within the public sphere. Meanwhile, the Entente's victory in the Great War firmly re-established an imperial liberal democratic world order, especially evident in the League of Nations, pioneered by Woodrow Wilson yet abandoned by the US due to a renewed isolationist sentiment. This (among multitudinous factors) inspired the widespread materialization of anti-imperialist communist movements and socialist reform movements in the interwar period (likely emboldened by the shocking success of the Russian Revolution) as well as the rise of fascism as a reactionary response.<sup>10</sup> These ideological tensions, intensified by the Great Depression, saw a crystallization of culture

into ideology. This resulted in three distinct international factions by the outbreak of the Second World War in 1937<sup>11</sup>: the Allied Powers, representing the conservative defence of the imperial liberal democratic order led by the UK, France and later the US; the tripartite Axis powers, encompassing the reactionary expansionism of Germany, Italy, Japan and their allies, and the Communist International, led by the USSR.

The importance of state ideology in the Second World War, paired with the innovations of radio broadcasting and motion-pictures, saw the widespread use of state propaganda which significantly increased the importance of symbolism within the imaginal. Particularly in the US and German Reich, such propaganda was highly efficacious due to the use of films, which utilized entertainment and allowed a greater degree of imaginal influence through the direct presentation of symbolic and allegorical images. This restricted opportunities for individual variability in imagination that could occur from merely written or oral sources, which left room for visual interpretation. For example, consider an individual who had never seen a Japanese person in real life being exposed to anti-Japanese propaganda cartoons – willing or not, the individual's imagination becomes permanently inundated with the malevolently stereotypical images.

Under the policies of the US Roosevelt Administration, the Federal bureaucracy was massively expanded, and the government entered the everyday lives of private individuals in an unprecedentedly direct manner.<sup>12</sup> This resulted in a new era of 'big government' founded due to the total mobilization of the civilian population during the war (Sparrow 2011). Within the US at this time, the undivided attention of the government was firmly fixed on the war, which diffused into the imaginal milieu of its citizens. From a Foucauldian perspective, this development made the carceral archipelago even more efficient. The bureaucratic expansion of the period propagated and reinforced existing social institutions and saw an increase in cooperation between private corporations and the state. Furthermore, the nearly omnipresent wartime propaganda inspired hyper-nationalism, helped shift the public's attitude from isolationism to global interventionism, normalized the immediate presence of the national government and emanated a source of cultural hegemony from directly within the individual's home.

### *3. Television, the Cold War and the propaganda model (late 20th century)*

The Cold War, a natural continuation of the ideology- and propaganda-driven socio-political milieu of the Second World War,<sup>13</sup> offered a rationale for the perpetuation of the warfare-oriented state in the US,<sup>14</sup> though in a less conspicuous and more consumer-oriented manner. While the public celebrated the Allied victory and enjoyed a post-war economic boom,<sup>15</sup> the stark ideological differences between NATO and the Warsaw Pact<sup>16</sup> led to an indirect conflict between the two factions throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the US state propaganda machine of WW2 diminished its scope significantly, it remained active. It merely transferred its aim from the (often overtly racist) demonization of Imperial Japan and to a lesser extent Nazi Germany (Sparrow 2011) to the internal and external threat of communist expansion, supported in varying degrees by both the USSR and Maoist China. The entry of television into most American homes by the 1950s and over 90% of homes by the 1960s made the explicit imaginal cultural hegemony once only



found in movie theaters nearly omnipresent in American life. This galvanized the consumer and entertainment culture (and ideology) of the US, which diffused outwards into much of the rest of the world, especially NATO countries.

One consequence of the prevalence of television, however, is it allowed Americans to witness real images of the horrors of the Vietnam War, where investigative journalists had access to the front lines and were slightly more critical of US involvement. This, along with the draft, contributed to widespread protests and the 'counter-culture' of the 60s resulting in stricter limitations on war correspondents. This allowed the state to limit what aspects of the war could be revealed to the general public. Additionally, the US military began refusing to loan military equipment to filmmakers whose scripts portrayed the military in a negative light. For example, the 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*, a retelling of the novel *Heart of Darkness* set in the Vietnam War, was forced to borrow much of its equipment from the Philippine military due to its more calloused portrayal of the conflict. This is acutely contrasted with films such as *Top Gun* (1986) which had full cooperation from the US military due to its highly favorable portrayal of the US Navy.

The steady consolidation of media (and corporations more generally) in the 1980s onward privatized and streamlined cultural hegemony. As local news stations were increasingly bought by media conglomerates, the news became standardized, reducing local coverage variability and diversity significantly. This even further reduced the ability of localities and individual subjectives to create imaginal alternatives to cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1991). This culminated into what Herman and Chomsky (2002) describe as the *propaganda model* in which private special interests gained influence in politics through lobbying, political action committees, donations, etc., and utilized the media to propagandize the general public's opinion on key issues. This privatization and centralization further reduced the opportunities for independent imaginal counterbalances to the corporate-state's cultural hegemony since special interests hold a disproportionate presence in the state and public sphere.

*The 'War on Terror', spectacle and the Internet (late 20th to early 21st century).* Military interests, especially due to the symbiotic relationship forged with industry in WWII and reinforced in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, naturally align with corporate special interests. Many of the conflicts the US participated in had direct ties to private interests, especially concerning oil. This alliance of special interests and military publicity is exemplified by the first Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm, 1990–1991), which involved strategic media coverage during the conflict and documentaries released by CNN and Time Warner remarkably soon after the conflict had ended. Baudrillard (1995) argued in three articles that rather than being a legitimate conventional war, the entire conflict was a one-sided atrocity in the form of a bombing campaign,<sup>17</sup> the public perception of which was carefully crafted virtual propaganda. He further argues that such propaganda serves as a new form of tactical deterrence, a Cold War strategy designed to prevent conflict by demonstrating a show of force. Indeed, the media coverage of Desert Storm highlighted the use of advanced new technology such as 'smart bombs' and stealth aircraft, as well as demonstrating the full might of the US Airforce and Navy against comparatively defenceless hostiles.



This corresponds with the steadily increasing role of the spectacle (Debord 1992) in imaginal representationalism in US (and Western) politics and society beginning in the 1960s and rapidly increasing in the 1990s (Bottici 2014). Spectacularized deterrence produced two effects, both benefiting the image of the US military. Domestically (and among US allies), it reinforced the ideological notions of the US's post-WW2 military and moral superiority as 'defenders of freedom' (in this case Kuwait) within the public imagination. Internationally, it served as a new form of pre-disciplinary spectacularization of violence, firmly establishing the US as the sole global sovereign in the wake of the collapse of the USSR. In this way, we see a decidedly new development, the combination of disciplinary cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1991) and a resurrection of the *ancien régime's* use of violent spectacle to establish legitimacy through power.

The development of the Internet and personal computers resulted in an unprecedented communications revolution that allowed near-instantaneous discourse across the globe. Initially, the imaginal potentiality and the endless diversity of possible interpersonal networking produced an acutely optimistic outlook prior to the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>18</sup> among both the general public as well as the new corporations that pioneered the technology. The 9/11 attacks, however, had a profound collective effect, especially in the US but also beyond. Acutely aware of the renewed efficacy of spectacle (Debord 1992) in geo-politics, Al-Qaeda utilized a new tactic in terrorism, using civilian aircraft to target the World Trade Center and Pentagon as symbolic representations of the neoliberal imperial hegemony enforced by NATO. The political and media response was swift and forceful; footage (both real and repurposed from entertainment – Bottici 2014) of the attack propagated rapidly, and both the public and congress demanded an immediate military response, which culminated in a 'War on Terror'.

This use of a *concept* as the enemy was imaginably effective in invoking a return to a warfare state of mind. This additionally provided convenient legitimacy for a barrage of disciplinary responses that followed, including the formation of the Department of Homeland Security, the inception of mass surveillance under the Patriot Act (which introduced a literal panoptic aspect) and military interventionism that continues to this day. The US also deliberately sustains the trauma from the attacks in the public imagination. The day itself<sup>19</sup> is sanctified, the architectural design of the 9/11 memorial emphasizes two 'voids' as a negation of the buildings' monumentality, and the museum below 'provides a performance of traumatic memory' through endless images of the attack and the prominent display of the wreckage<sup>20</sup> (Poole 2020).

*Social media and algorithmic governmentality (21st century).* This ongoing 'war' again renewed the importance of public ideology post-USSR collapse only a decade prior to the attacks. Islamic movements such as Al-Qaeda, Arab Spring<sup>21</sup> and later ISIS used the Internet, especially social media, to propagate their counter-ideology far and wide allowing rapid recruitment across the globe, including from within Western states. Later, social media proved instrumental in the 2008 US presidential election, which saw an acute discrepancy in online political engagement between Obama and McCain voters (Smith 2020) that correlated with Obama's decisive victory. Since then, social media has taken an increasingly active role in the imaginal. It shapes ideology, with memes (images with text

rapidly shared online that often employ humor) having an influential role in both establishing opinions and providing a catalyst for political discourse. For instance, several grassroots reform movements, including Occupy Wall Street and Anonymous, as well as radical political organizations such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers heavily utilized social media. However, the relative anonymity provided by the physical distance of being online as well as the ability to join or leave exclusive groups produces a trend (intentional or not) of reducing one's discursive network to a self-reifying echo-chamber. This strongly correlates with and exacerbates the trend of political polarization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

States have increasingly begun using such platforms to propagate various ideological perspectives, such as Russia spreading misinformation through fake accounts or groups to foster internal instability (Lardieri 2021). Additionally, a study by researchers at the University of Adelaide found that an estimated 60–80% of tweets in the first 2 weeks of the Ukraine conflict (over five million) containing hashtags supporting Russia, Putin, Ukraine and/or Zelensky were produced by 'bot' accounts, over 90% of which were pro-Ukraine (Smart et al. 2022). This has resulted in an increase in censorship, with many suspected 'bot' accounts being suspended or removed. Furthermore, many sources that contradict the dominant narrative or portray the hegemonic neoliberal order in a negative light are labelled as 'Russian state media', which serves to inject doubt in the source as well as imply that Russia is the sole source of misinformation.

Private interests likewise have extended the propaganda model (Herman and Chomsky 2002) to social media, either operating with dedicated official accounts representing the organization or through advertising. Both make use of memes and often employ tactics designed to mimic the kinds of posts commonly produced by individuals to mask their origin and have a more immediate imaginal impact. Increasingly, however, AI and algorithms are taking a more prominent role in determining what people are exposed to on social media and the Internet more broadly. This has been described by Rouvroy and Berns (2013, 5–10) as *algorithmic governmentality* (AG), which is the '(a)normative or (a)political rationality founded on the automated collection, aggregation and analysis of big data so as to model, anticipate, and pre-emptively affect possible behaviours' resulting in a 'colonization of public space by a hypertrophied private sphere'. Thus, rather than tailoring commodities to individuals, AG uses behavioural predictions based on aggregate algorithmically deduced correlations to develop marketing strategies that induce consumerism. As such, rather than merely recording reality, AG actively creates it, utilizing its methodology to directly influence, for example, which posts are shown to an individual as they 'scroll' in real-time.<sup>22</sup> In this way, it has an even more direct imaginal influence than radio or television media due to the omnipresence of screens as transmitters of images. AG is international, transcending states (thus Foucault's (1978) 'governmentality' rather than 'governance'), transindividual, emphasizing relations and relations *between* relations, and occurs rhizomatically (Deleuze and Guattari 2013) in real-time. Therefore, the present stage of techno-social development in the carceral archipelago is the refinement of the propaganda model (Herman and Chomsky 2002). Its telos is the direct influence over the public imaginal through algorithmic automation of ideological cultural hegemony (Foucault 1995, Rouvroy and Berns 2013, Gramsci 1991).

#### 4. “AI” Chatbots (21st century and beyond)

More recently, the rise of algorithmic “AI” chat-bots, such as ChatGPT, has magnified the effect of AG. ChatGPT is already fundamentally changing society, from students using it on assignments to a Columbian Judge utilizing the tool in his official ruling ([Gutiérrez 2023](#)). While most seem to view such tools in a positive light due to their impressive abilities that at times exceeds that of many humans (passing the bar exam in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile – [Weiss 2023](#), and making accurate medical diagnoses), this development in the carceral archipelago is highly concerning. Data collection can never accurately represent reality due to research bias, response bias, limitations in methodology, and the necessity of extrapolation. For example, AIs developed in the US have an acute western bias, since the data utilized in AI training is collected by and from western sources, which naturally emphasizes majoritarian perspectives within those sources. AIs thus exist within the carceral archipelago and are influenced by existing ideological inclinations and institutional structures. What is most problematic is that AI lacks the capacity for critical thinking – it is unable to question the source of its information and its ideological underpinnings, and it cannot recognize human-originated errors within the data.

The Chat functionality exacerbates AG by making it much more accessible. Increasingly, AI is being integrated into search engines and online forums, providing automated answers to nearly any question. While this may seem convenient, for controversial or debatable subjects it can only provide a single solution, which inhibits the role of discourse and reduces the flexibility of knowledge production. One can easily imagine someone with a problem in their relationship asking ChatGPT for advice instead of their friends, family, or even discussing the situation with anonymous strangers online. This reduces the dynamism of such interactions, which previously would expose someone to a variety of viewpoints and force the individual to seriously weigh the merits of several possible approaches. Naturally, those who are trained to think critically can circumvent some of these issues, but this takes active, conscious effort, and the overwhelming majority of people prefer simplicity and convenience over authenticity and careful contemplation. In short, the most significant danger posed by AI chat bots such as ChatGPT is that individuals will subsume their will to it, legitimizing an implicit ideological hegemony that is so pervasive and efficient that disciplinary systems will no longer be necessary. Humanity might voluntarily surrender much of its imaginal freedom in the interest of convenience and simplicity, and people may quite literally stop thinking for themselves.

#### Analysis and conclusion

Combining the theories of the carceral archipelago ([Foucault 1995](#)) with the imaginal ([Bottici 2014](#)), I argued that disciplinary society hegemonically influences its denizens by discursively manipulating the imaginal public sphere ([Habermas 1991](#)). Each of the four shifts in communications technology (print media, radio, television and Internet) affected society in profound ways, necessitating modifications in the existing disciplinary social structures ([Foucault 1995](#)). These shifts resulted in 1. the formation of the public sphere

(Habermas 1991) which paved the way for the carceral archipelago (Foucault 1995), 2. the development of cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1991), 3. the emergence of ideological propaganda machines (Sparrow 2011), 4. the consolidation of media and privatization of cultural hegemony through the propaganda model (Herman and Chomsky 2002) and 5. the automation of the above processes through algorithmic governmentality (Rouvroy and Berns 2013). Thus, as new technology introduces new layers of complexity into communication and discourse, disciplinary society (Foucault 1995) adapts in the same manner.

Comparing each of these cases reveals a Hegelian Dialectical pattern (Fichte 1982).<sup>23</sup> The existing hegemonic narrative is a thesis, forming the dominant foundational status-quo ideology (re)produced within the imaginal. The emergence and propagation of a new communications technology broaden the public sphere (Habermas 1991) and introduce antitheses, whereby the populace experiences a greater degree of discursive and imaginal (Bottici 2014) freedom. Finally, the new technology is appropriated by the carceral archipelago (Foucault 1995), resulting in the synthesis of a new cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1991) that combines elements from the original immediate system with new innovations from the process of mediation. This results in the instrumentalization of technological advancements by disciplinary society (Foucault 1995), which increases the external influence over the subjective imaginal. This culmination of this trend is societies rich in images and steeped in spectacle, yet devoid of imagination (Bottici 2014). Through systems and institutions, the imaginal is used to deliberately suppress counterhegemonic ideology within contemporary society, preserving the present at the expense of the future.

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## Notes

1. Term for the socio-political structure of pre-Revolution France, here expanded to more broadly refer to the feudal monarchic society that emphasized power through sovereignty which predated (and was replaced by) disciplinary social institutions and democratic governance.
2. Though, naturally, the individuals within such systems representing ‘the people’ remain subject to personal partiality and desires.
3. Highly relevant today in the abortion debate.
4. This is evident in many cities founded in the 13 colonies, such as Philadelphia, which, inspired by enlightenment principles, was organized in a rational and methodic grid system designed to maximize efficiency and simplicity.
5. As famously demonstrated in the 1961 Milgram Experiment (Milgram 1963).
6. A common example in the US being the phenomena of high school ‘cliques’.
7. Another biological term, this time referring to plants or fungi who have complex interlocking root systems. Deleuze and Guattari (2013) applied the term to social philosophy, arguing that

society, rather than being organized hierarchically or narratively, is instead a network of interlocking individuals, practices, etc., that lacks any clear origin or direction.

8. Particularly in France, the US with the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1870 and the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1920, and the UK's voting expansions in 1832, 1867, 1918 and 1928.
9. See Rudyard Kipling's 'White Man's Burden' and *Jungle Book*.
10. Such as the first 'red scare' in the US from 1917 to 1920 and the 'Biennio Rosso' in Italy from 1919 to 1920.
11. Beginning of the Sino-Japanese war.
12. Famously embodied in FDR's 'fireside chats'.
13. After all, while fascism as a direct expansionist threat to imperial Liberal democracy was vanquished, the Communist International, though essential in the Allied victory in the war, remained an active ideological and geo-political threat to the new Liberal world order established by the United Nations.
14. The US has and remains engaged in nearly constant military actions, including wars, 'police actions', bombing campaigns and coups, for the overwhelming majority of post-WW2 history and the present.
15. Heavily impacted by being the only great power that participated in the war that was not occupied or significantly bombed throughout the majority of the 6–8 year conflict, thus maintaining its military–industrial complex and infrastructure fully intact and not fully converted to commercial civilian use while also enjoying the lowest estimated military and civilian deaths (The National WWII Museum) among the same powers.
16. Which joined the UN reluctantly, abstaining from the 1950 UN Security Council vote on intervention in Korea in protest.
17. Supposedly more high explosives were deployed by the US in Desert Storm than the entirety of the WW2.
18. With the Y2K fears being a notable exception.
19. Note that even non-Americans who use the day–month convention refer to the event as 9/11, not 11/9.
20. As well as the military jacket of the soldier who killed Osama Bin-Laden proudly displayed like the jersey of a respected athlete.
21. It is worth noting that many of the movements grouped under the umbrella term 'Arab Spring' were peaceful protests that were significantly less militant than Al-Qaeda and ISIS.
22. As a personal anecdote, I once 'favorited' a group on Instagram dedicated to anti-imperialism, which, despite decisively condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, was labeled as 'Russian State Media'. Within seconds of doing so, my Instagram feed became saturated with posts emphasizing neoliberal capitalist ideology, such as posts discussing the development of mindsets for upward social mobility, advice on investing in the stock market and brief lectures by popular neoliberal pundits.
23. The thesis–antithesis–synthesis triad was used by Hegel but first clearly and specifically formulated in social philosophy by Fichte. The term *Hegelian Dialectic* is more commonly used, but Fichte's formulation is more relevant here.

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