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Edward Comor

*University of Western Ontario, ecomor@uwo.ca*

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# Technological Fetishism and US Foreign Policy: The Mediating Role of Digital ICTs

Edward Comor, University of Western Ontario

**Keywords:** technological fetishism, Marxism, Slavoj Žižek, digital ICTs, United States, foreign policy, Obama administration

## Abstract

This article looks back at an Obama administration foreign policy initiative called Internet freedom and discusses US responses to anti-American extremism involving digital communications technologies. It does this by using Marx's concept of the fetish to argue that technological fetishism played a constitutive and mediating role in policymaking. Through this analysis – relating international relations with political economy and Marxist theory – the empowering implications of these technologies for American state interests are shown to be also disempowering. Most US officials were likely to be aware that digital communications technologies did not have the inherent powers that their policies implied but, nevertheless, they continued to develop and apply Internet freedom and related policies as if they did. This paradox, it will be underlined, is in keeping with Marx's analysis of the complex reality whereby the fetish performs a mediating role in institutionalized ways of thinking.

This article is a (somewhat) speculative analysis of the presence and influence of technological fetishism. In it I seek to make some sense of an obviously contradictory yet omnipresent mode of thinking among US foreign policy officials employed in strategic communications, public diplomacy and, more generally, the dissemination of laws, regulations and infrastructures facilitating electronically mediated forms of commerce. As with Marx's conceptualization of commodity fetishism, herein I argue that an awareness of the technological fetish reveals relations that are simultaneously real and *unreal*.

To begin this effort to comprehend the fetish and its implications, we might do well to consider Slavoj Žižek's (2011) story about a former colleague whose wife died of cancer. Žižek and others, when visiting the colleague after her death, noticed how peculiar it was that he could talk about her with little emotion and few signs of grief. One day they realized that the colleague, while discussing his wife, would caress the couple's pet hamster. Not long after the hamster's death, their colleague tried to kill himself. Žižek concludes that everyone needs a hamster. Almost certainly, like other

people, American officials employed in strategic communications and public diplomacy have hamsters too. In this paper I argue that, for them, digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) appear to have become as soothing as the colleague's rodent.

The embrace of ICTs among US foreign policy officials, at least over the course of the Obama administration, arguably went beyond the commonplace reification of human constructions. These technologies have been fetishized and herein I address the fetish as an objective or, more accurately, inter-subjective illusion that is rooted in material relations. Referencing a US foreign policy initiative called 'Internet freedom' and, more generally, the use of ICTs in response to anti-American extremism, I suggest fetishistic conceptualizations were used during the Obama administration to frame such problems in ways that were both 'manageable' and contradictory [1].

I draw upon critical theory perspectives to assess almost eight years of policy and, more to the point, the institutionalized thinking of American officials. While what follows generally fits into a growing literature that critiques the embrace of digital ICTs amongst both progressive and status quo interests, it is unique in its application of technological *fetishism* (instead of, most obviously, technological *determinism*). Whereas technological determinism references technologies as aloof yet decisive social agents (Webster, 1995: 39), the technological fetish is here understood to itself influence and, indeed, *mediate* relationships and thus *reality*. By concentrating on fetishism rather than determinism, debates concerning the latter – sometimes falling into binary either/or-isms – can be avoided [2]. More importantly, the socialness and, thus, the complex power relations influencing (and influenced by) technologies and techniques can be more fully integrated into our analyses. As Des Freedman points out in relation to operationalizing the fetish, we might use it to illuminate “unasked questions, untabled agendas, uninvited players, and unspoken assumptions” (2015: 99).

The approach I will be taking makes a distinction between what historian R. G. Collingwood called the outside and the inside of an event. “By the outside,” Collingwood explained, “I mean everything belonging to it which can be described in terms of bodies and their movements... By the inside...I mean that in which it can only be described in terms of thought...” Our investigations, he argued, should go beyond “mere events...but actions, and an action is the unity of the outside and the inside of an event...” Through an analysis of the technological fetish in one such area of “action” – US foreign policy – my goal is to better understand what has been shaping the intellectual capacities of American officials in order, from Collingwood's perspective, to better “discern the thought[s]” of the primary agents of state policy (quoted in Cox, 1996: 80 n.2).

In the first section of this article, I address the fetish in light of E. H. Carr's concept of moral sentiments as a means of relating the former to foreign policy tendencies. The second section presents a framework that situates the technological fetish as both a material development and a mediating force of history. This mediating role is further developed in the article's third section and a precise explication of this form of fetishization is provided. The fourth section assesses the fetish in terms of its mediating role within foreign policy work. I argue that although this work may be relatively autonomous from other policy actors and non-state interests, the capacities exercised in this labour are, in structural terms, akin to working in a kind of intellectual straightjacket. In the fifth section, I argue that ICT applications promoted through the American state might be constitutive of long-term problems facing US interests. This point is elaborated through an assessment of 'interpassive' modes of policymaking that occlude the presence of the fetish and remind us of an observation made by Harold Innis more than sixty years ago: “Improvements in communication make for increased difficulties of understanding” (Innis, 1951: 28).

## Raising a hamster

A useful link between Marxist theories of the fetish and US foreign policy stems from the work of international relations scholar E.H. Carr (1964) – specifically, his analysis of the foreign policy failures that contributed to the Second World War. According to Carr, institutions, rituals and legitimations associated with foreign policy and inter-state relations ought to raise suspicions because such shared ways of thinking constrain analytical capabilities. He called these ways of thinking *moral sentiments* – the tendency to ascribe to states the motives usually associated with people. Just as a ruling class in a community typically denounces or sanctions violence as a means of securing its own position, Carr argued that international war and peace are usually outcomes of powerful states working to advance their interests in the realm of international relations. Through such ‘realist’ assertions, Carr developed the concept of moral sentiments such that state actors could fully appreciate the materialist (i.e. relational) underpinnings of their own fictions. This would enable officials to, in the words of Robert Cox, “be alive to the hypocrisy with which moral sentiment cloaks egoistic intents” (Cox, 1996: 503).

By taking into account both historically produced structures and the ways in which state motivations are portrayed and interpreted in relation to them (as in Collingwood's focus on both the “outside” and “inside” of history), Carr’s work reminds us that self-reflexivity (or its absence) has important policy implications. He questioned the foreign policy official's sense of certainty – based on his/her assumptions as to the facts informing one's seemingly objective analysis. The importance of interrogating the relationship between observable facts and ways of thinking is apparent, for instance, in Carr’s sceptical depiction of a “harmony of interests” among states. This includes the notion that democracy (or economic development or technological progress) itself constitutes a self-evident, universally desirable and thus potentially stabilizing truth.

Anyone reflecting on their own fetishes would be likely to recognize the dubiousness of such moral sentiments. Nevertheless, according to Carr (1964), “we still [routinely and] subconsciously take them for granted *and see other things through them*” (96) (emphases added). Žižek (2011), unlike Carr, argues that rather than the predominance of some form of false thinking (for example, assuming that liberal democracy constitutes an objectively universal ideal), the more complex puzzle stems from *actors knowing very well the falsity of such claims yet acting as if they are true*.

In the United States, enthusiasm for what communications technologies can or will do for American or (perceived) universal interests has been part of foreign policy since at least the Marshall Plan, the establishment of UNESCO and post-1945 efforts to institutionalize what was called the free flow of information. This free flow mandate, like today’s promotion of digital technologies and neoliberal norms, was pursued as a means of supporting the power of mostly American-based corporations. The rhetoric of ‘free flow’ aligned developing nations and their citizens with Western political and economic goals as expressed through public diplomacy and propaganda (Comor, 1998; Preston Jr. et al., 1989). This is not to say that the free flow of information was an entirely strategic pursuit. It was also likely related to ideological biases associated with longstanding American interests (including sentiments regarding the rights and liberties of individuals, however defined). More than this, ICTs, over time, became seemingly autonomous forces, shaping the conceptual capacities of policymakers and influencing international and transnational relations – a development especially discernible in a range of policies implemented since 2001 (Bean and Comor, 2017; Comor and Bean, 2012; Comor, 2013).

In 2010, an umbrella policy initiative called Internet freedom was formally introduced. Heralded as a universal right – a right paralleling freedom of expression, freedom of religion and even, according to (then Secretary of State) Hillary Clinton (2010), “freedom from want” – digital ICTs were said to be “an on-ramp to modernity,” constituting a means of enabling “the peace and security that provides a foundation for global progress.” As articulated by the US Department of State in 2015,

Internet freedom is a foreign policy priority for the United States... Our goal is to ensure that any child, born anywhere in the world, has access to the global Internet as an open platform on which to innovate, learn, organize and express herself free from undue interference or censorship. ... To do so, we are supporting the efforts of Americans and committed partners worldwide to bring down the walls that are denying the people of the world connection and access to each other's ideas and services on the Internet. We do this in part because the Internet helps fuel the global economy, increases productivity and creates jobs built on the unprecedented global reach that the platform provides for our businesses and innovators. Just as importantly, we are champions of Internet freedom because the Internet serves as a powerful platform to bring information and resources to people who historically have been isolated, or their human rights repressed, so they, too, have the chance to become active, prosperous and engaged participants in the world community (United States Department of State, 2015).

As with the free flow of information, I think it is reasonable to interpret such statements as at least partially promotional. Certainly the policy is a response to human rights violations involving access to information and freedom of speech, but it is also a direct or indirect means of packaging and promoting the power-laden interests of both corporations and the American state [3]. After all, the many instances of the United States using digital ICTs to suppress freedoms contradicts the core, publicly-stated goal of Internet freedom: to bring freedoms of all kinds to people around the world. Indeed, US officials have used online technologies for surveillance, psychological operations and cyber-attacks on other countries (Powers and Jablonski, 2015).

Other contradictions are more abstract. In societies, such as the United States, in which linear, deterministic thinking is commonplace, officials are compelled to frame and promote such initiatives in simplified, cause-and-effect ways. Promotional portrayals regarding the efficacy of ICTs implies more than the influence of powerful vested interests concerned with the reproduction of an international neoliberal order and inter-related strategic relations (the most powerful interests here are those of globalization-oriented ICT corporations). This, in turn, makes the task of translating promotional efforts into substantive and palatable policies more manageable. Over time, countless public and private iterations of such simplifications contribute to their transformation into common sense realities. From a more qualitative perspective, this move from promotion to the realm of inter-subjective truth – a move that occludes underlying interests while also representing ICTs as powerful agents – suggests that something even more remarkable is going on.

## **Reification, technological fetishism, refracted policymaking**

Generally, we might postulate that what is ‘going on’ involves the universal process of reification. When something is experienced as an ‘in itself’ instead of the outcome of social agency, it becomes a seemingly independent fact of life. This thinking stems from the very socialness of human reality; by our creation, organization and use of the things and structures we construct. Once these mediate our lives they, prospectively, also shape existential realities. Reified technologies thus come to be

encountered and utilized as objective taken-for-granted facticities (Berger and Pullberg, 1965: 198-203; Lukács, 1968: 83-87).

Beyond this tendency, things, such as technologies, can also be invested with powers they do not possess inherently. As a technology or technique is registered and lived with – because it is used, thought of and treated as if it is powerful – it *in effect* exercises power. Comprehending this condition is not reducible to some kind of real/unreal assessment. In Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, for example, the notion that commodities have autonomous powers is not treated simplistically as some kind of twisted condition of the mind. Instead, *it is an experiential outcome of social life itself*. Not only, according to Marx, does “the social character of men's labour” appear to have “an objective character [...] the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour.” Marx is arguing that it is “*a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things*” (Marx, 1977: 77, 321) (emphases added).

Fetishization is more than just reification. The latter concerns the taken-for-grantedness of human creations and the erasure of a conscious history about them. With the fetish, however, a dual reality is at play. Marx was well aware, for example, that the ever-calculating utilitarian (indeed, ‘rational’) bourgeois individual recognized that commodities and money are not inherently powerful yet in his/her social activity such an individual conveyed something very different [4]. To repeat, people have the capacity to know that a fetish is ‘false’ but, through the material conditions of one's relations, most *act* as if it is true. Indeed (at least when using the tools of positivism), the truth of the fetish is empirically verifiable: the positivist records and interprets what he/she can observe and measure and, as such, what people *do* is foundational for what constitutes knowable reality [5].

The conditions and relations necessary for fetishistic thinking are pervasive in capitalist societies where the mind, instead of inverting reality, typically conveys a real inversion – an inversion that is predominant in everyday relations. Specifically, in capitalism, the abstract products of social relations (institutions, laws, money, etc.) seemingly *and actually* control (concrete) human labour. Relations, phenomenally, appear to be symmetrical but, as with the production of surplus value through the exploitation of waged labour, experiential realities are more complex. This general association between capitalist political economies and fetishistic thinking should be kept in mind as it enables us to better comprehend how and why US officials represent and conceptualize digital ICTs as they commonly do. In this regard, I want to advance the following claim: policymaking and the fetish constitute distinct yet inseparable components of a complex whole. Rather than conceptualizing American foreign policy as the direct outcome of powerful interests (reflected in the fetishization of ICTs), we should recognize the relative autonomy of such policies and their conceptualization.

At a macro-historical level, capitalist world order relations (which are by no means homogeneous or uncontested) contextualize and are influenced by perceived American interests. These interests shape and are influenced by fetishistic policies concerning ICTs. In terms of causality, these relatively autonomous levels can be conceptualized as *refractions* (rather than reflections or reflexes) of one another (Roberts, 2002). ‘Reflection’ implies a split between an objective material reality and how it appears or is represented. Given that the objective material world is itself a social process (not a reified object), references to reflections (or reflexes) can gloss over the processes through which this world is interrelated to its conceptualization (Williams, 1977: 95-97). Furthermore, if mediators such as the fetish are not carefully addressed, base-superstructure relations may be cast in a mechanistic light or referenced wholly in metaphorical terms.

'Refraction', instead, implies an indirect rather than immediate connection, and this directly entails some kind of mediation. Marxists have tended to treat such mediations in terms of their distorting or disguising implications (as with some kind of 'false consciousness' emerging through mass media or, more abstractly, contract relations). However, others such as Raymond Williams (1977), have recognized that "all active relations between different kinds of beings and consciousness are inevitably mediated, and this process is not a separable agency..." (98). Refraction, unlike reflection, therefore, impels an interest in mediation as an active and, indeed, constitutive dynamic in the process of not just policymaking but, also, consciousness and intellectual capacities.

To quote John Michael Roberts (2002), "much of the activity of everyday life operates beyond the immediate confines of the capitalist mode of production and instead becomes enmeshed within the confines of capitalist social relations wherein diverse arrays of social forms permeate one another" (100). In policymaking, then, the fetish constitutes a mediating 'real abstraction' – mediating what are often refracted interactions and conceptualizations [6].

### **Technological fetishism as an inter-subjective illusion**

Before we can apply the fetish directly to an assessment of American policies concerning digital ICTs, more specificity is needed as to the particular kind of fetish: namely, *technological* fetishism. To begin, it is worth consulting a definition provided by David Harvey (2003). Technological fetishism, he writes, is "the habit humans have of endowing real or imagined objects or entities with self-contained, mysterious and even magical powers to move and shape the world in distinctive ways. The technological changes that we see all around us are, of course, very real. *They are a constitutive feature of how we live our daily lives*" (3) (emphases added).

This focus on fetishized relations in daily life as constitutive is important for what follows. The individual – whether he/she is a foreign policy official or a worker at Walmart – may not believe that ICTs truly have the intrinsic power to prescribe or impel their actions. Yet, because others work and act as if this is indeed the case, the idea that ICTs have intrinsic power becomes a form of *common sense*, as understood by Antonio Gramsci (1971). This is a way of thinking that serves as a shared and often useful guide in people's lives despite its empirical and logical shortcomings. As with the fetish, this usefulness involves the fact that others also act as if it makes sense. Gramsci contrasts common sense to what he calls *good sense* which, instead, entails a conscious understanding of the complexities, dualisms and even the fetishisms that pervade everyday life (332-335, 419-425) [7].

As almost everyone goes about their daily business (increasingly) online, the freedom and convenience commonly associated with digital ICTs now constitutes a shared common sense. However, when asked to exercise good sense on the matter, most understand that, among other factors, these freedoms and conveniences are outcomes of the experiential impracticality of maintaining relationships in their absence (Davis, 2013). To reiterate, the fetish is not a delusion, nor is it just a way of thinking that can be eradicated through critical reflection (as with the application of good sense). The fetish, including technological fetishism, constitutes an inter-subjective illusion that is inseparable from material relations [8].

Following Marx, what I am underlining here is that, unlike technological determinism, the technological fetish is not (somehow and simplistically) a result of the predominance of rational technique and the reification of things in modern society. Nor is it just some kind of superstructural phenomenon. Instead, in capitalist political economies – societies in which the commodity form pervades everyday interactions – human relations appear to be relations between things because,

structurally-speaking, things in capitalism do, in fact, mediate human relations (Eagleton, 1991: 85). US policymakers, of course, live and think in such a society. This implies the predominance of relations that really are mediated by things. Fundamental to these relations are businesses and other interests that are systemically driven to implement more efficient ways to produce, distribute and sell commodities, while people are compelled to develop and sell their labouring capabilities for a wage. For both the capitalist and worker this entails ways of living, relating and thinking that are atomizing: social relations that tend to be individualistic, competitive and, explicitly or implicitly, dominated by exchange values.

In these conditions, the fetish constitutes both a lived *and* ideational expression of everyday ‘thingified’ relations. The possession of things – including the commodified capacity to labour (‘labour power’) – becomes a condition for (and directly influences) the nature of one’s participation. Mediating things, including technologies, have no independent existence: rather, they reflect or refract other social forms (for example, political economic interests, community ideals and ideologies – including the liberal values associated with Internet freedom).

Structurally, culturally and logistically, then, human relations take place through the mediation of things and, today, a seemingly endless number of these relations directly involve *technological* means – relations involving supervision, coordination, decision-making, socializing and even intimacy. As Val Burris (1988) puts it, social arrangements “once visibly the product of human agency now appear as technological imperatives... As technology acquires a particular social form, human behavior is made to ‘personify’ (i.e. accommodate itself to) patterns of social organization compatible with the accumulated mass of technology” (6). This focus on mediations facilitates a nuanced understanding of both Marx’s materialism and the fetish. Rather than a dichotomy in which material relations are prioritized over a somehow secondary ideational level (as in Marx’s *camera obscura* metaphor), atomized social relations entail mediations that are institutionally constitutive of capitalist relations [9].

## Digital ICTs and Internet freedom

The worldwide private and public sector application of digital ICTs has been supported by the American state at least since the 1990s when the Clinton administration promoted the building of what it called a global information infrastructure (Schiller, 1996). After September 11, 2001, the strategic importance of this was affirmed through its use in a range of intelligence and military activities, particularly those aiming to prevent or combat extremism. These activities included the monitoring of enemies, coordinating multi-front military campaigns and, eventually, generating more ‘advanced’ means of preventing or responding to anti-Americanism (Deibert, 2013; Winseck, 2008). A more recent and ambitious expression of these efforts was the Obama administration’s promotion of Internet freedom. The institutionalization of an open (i.e. liberal) exchange of information and opinions entailed an explicit intention to engage people in dialogues which would enable moderate politics to interact in a kind of information marketplace. Officials promoting Internet freedom thus understood that what they were doing involved the building and maintenance of communications technologies as environments (or ‘cyber-spaces’ or ‘public spheres’) within which the *experience* of dialogue itself was thought to be affecting (Comor, 2013).

In this conceptualization, the Internet is treated as a tool or variable that impels new patterns of social (including international) relations. Somehow, the outcome of its use will be the universalization of liberal democratic ideals that will facilitate more moderate (and thus compliant) societies



(McCarthy, 2015). Such views parallel a raft of writings that variously articulate such technology-facilitated outcomes in terms of a new international or transnational system democratized or even de-territorialized through ICTs. This is seen to enable political transparency and an unprecedented state of social-economic justice [10].

As argued elsewhere (Bean and Comor, 2017; Comor and Bean, 2012; Comor, 2013; Morozov, 2013), the formulation of technology-mediated solutions to the problem of anti-Americanism (and anti-Westernism or, for that matter, anti-neoliberalism) appears to delimit consideration of the historical and structural conditions that underlie such resistance. To manage not just the problem (especially its extremist forms) but to conceptualize it in ‘actionable’ terms, official policymakers tend to frame the parameters of what they are addressing in particular ways. Posing ‘reasonable’ questions that might ‘realistically’ address a problem in itself entails a narrowness of conceptual and technological resources arising from entrenched political, economic and social structures. In the context of a political economy that has spent hundreds of billions of dollars developing and applying digital ICTs (and the mobilization of largely unquantifiable political, military and cultural resources), it is reasonable to infer that perspectives among officials regarding ‘the problem’ and its ‘solutions’ are refractions of these underlying conditions.

The rapid development of ICT capabilities over the past quarter-century has coincided with the ascent of the information and service sectors. These components of Western political economies and security regimes mesh with complementary developments such as the vast elaboration of property rights, the de-regulation of the international financial sector and the more recent explosion of online commerce. The accompanying dominance of more ideational considerations, such as neoclassical economics and neoliberal policy perspectives, demonstrates what Innis called the “mechanization of knowledge” (Innis, 1951: 190-195). Writing more than sixty years ago, Innis argued that beyond the power of dominant economic interests, the precision of mathematics (and its use in fetishizing the price system, exchange value relations and positivist social science) implied a widening and deepening of (unreflective) common sense thinking. The same process arises from perceptual realism attainable through the use of advanced ICTs (especially those stressing a ‘seeing is believing’ mindset). Quite possibly, structural conditions and mediated relations have normalized a now pervasive inter-subjective bias: that technology/technique-enabled observation and measurement inherently yield objectively better and more useful forms of knowledge (Innis, 1946).

However, the scale, precision and speed of information processing that ICTs enable (a core underpinning of the common sense related to their use) is contradictory. Again, following Innis, one can argue that such technology-mediated relations facilitate the ascent of more fragmented, specialized forms of knowledge in the policymaking process, rather than general insight. Reflective, holistic thinking becomes not just inefficient; it’s simply not how things are done. In Marxist terms, there is rarely a straightforward relation between policy officials and the class interests they represent, even if such interests are objectively discernible (Comor, 2008). The relationship is more refracted than reflective and, as I have suggested, the technological fetish is an under-assessed medium in this regard.

For many US officials, today’s embrace of digital technologies as a means of conceptualizing and responding to extremist developments in some cases reflects, but more generally refracts, predominant conditions. The Internet, for example, as Daniel McCarthy (2015) documents, can be viewed as an objective force that constitutes the physical manifestation of neoliberal globalization, liberal norms and American power. Official arguments have even been made at the United Nations that the sovereignty of other states should not be recognized if they deny their citizens access to the

Internet. As such, the ‘freeing’ internet *itself* has become a means of entrenching American and, more generally, neoliberal interests.

Admittedly, following revelations about US surveillance and spying (primarily due to information released by Edward Snowden), critical questions have been raised in response to many of the claims surrounding Internet freedom. In the summer of 2013, for example, Human Rights Watch stated that American efforts to reduce online censorship and support better corporate practices had become nonsensical. “Now,” as its spokesperson put it, “the vision and credibility of the US and its allies on Internet freedom is in tatters” (quoted in Wong, 2013). In early-2014, the European Commission stated that “Recent revelations of large-scale surveillance have called into question the stewardship of the US when it comes to Internet Governance” (European Commission, 2014). Then in June of that year the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a report in which digital privacy was singled out as a human right. It also criticized mass surveillance as “a dangerous habit rather than an exceptional measure” (quoted in Fontaine, 2014: 4). More substantive responses include proposals in several countries to tighten restrictions on online communications [11].

Despite opposing the UN High Commissioner's assertion that the right to privacy should be part of Internet freedom (arguably a step too far for US officials given the litigation this might trigger), in June 2014 the United States sponsored a successful Human Rights Council resolution that reaffirmed that the rights people have offline – such as freedom of expression – should be protected online. According to Richard Fontaine, President of the Center for a New American Security, in “continuing to execute the Internet freedom agenda, US officials have attempted to reconcile their government’s surveillance practices with its expressed desire for greater online freedom.” However, he goes on to explain that

US officials draw a critical distinction between monitoring communications for purposes of protecting national security and surveillance aimed at repressing political speech and activity. While this distinction is intuitive to many Americans, it is likely to be lost on many others, particularly where autocratic regimes consider domestic political dissent to be a national security threat. At its bluntest, the American position is that it is legitimate, for example, for the US government, but not for the Chinese government, to surveil Chinese citizens (5).

We might add (following hacking activities and other such efforts to influence the 2016 US Presidential election) that this position extends to the Russian government also.

What Fontaine and others fail to assess are the more complex historical and structural underpinnings shaping both Internet freedom and extremist forms of resistance. In the absence of these power dimensions, the vested class interests refracted through the American state's promotion of digital technologies are marginalized or forgotten. This occlusion is, arguably, facilitated by fetishistic thinking generally and the technological fetish specifically. Explicit policy tensions, while occasionally recognized, are treated as if they are not ongoing.

In the latter period of the Obama administration, Secretary of State John Kerry, for one, acknowledged the need for reforms while continuing to promote Internet freedom as a universal good (Kerry, 2014). To give a more specific example, a lauded report commissioned by the United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (2014) admits that while the possibility of forging the technologies and techniques needed to accurately interpret and modify foreign public opinion in line with particular American policy interests is dubious, such efforts and developments are, nevertheless, inevitable. In its preface, authored by Nicholas Cull, the report recognizes that US officials have

embarked on a “quest to measure the un-measurable” yet “the new tools of social media make new kinds of evaluation possible even as the communication environment requires an ever more nuanced approach for an ever more savvy audience...” (12). Despite this explicit contradiction, the report goes on to make recommendations involving the use of digital technologies to assess not just the effectiveness of public diplomacy but, also, to further integrate assessment techniques in the framing of policy itself. In other words, what its authors regard as largely impossible – mechanisms of accurately measuring the effectiveness of US public diplomacy – should themselves frame the policies being pursued (Bean and Comor, 2017).

That American officials themselves comprehend the contradictory nature of such policies *yet* forge ahead nevertheless is probably (and ironically) more significant to an outside observer than to someone directly employed in US foreign policy. Typically, for policy insiders (at least in their everyday work), anti-American extremism is de-historicized as it is a dimension of foreign policy that lies outside the parameters of useful common sense debate. Internet freedom and other policies concerning ICTs – understood as the refractions of vested/class interests – here reveal themselves to be initiatives and applications arising from an ahistorical and mechanistic framing of the problems they are addressing. As discussed below, this insight clarifies several broader contradictions in American foreign policy and it is a remarkable example of where Collingwood’s “outside” and “inside” of history meet.

### **Tension, contradiction, interpassivity**

Iterations of Internet freedom and related policies promoting digital ICTs are reminiscent of the kinds of sentiments Carr warned against. Assumptions regarding the policy and the technologies it supports – as facilitators and embodiments of liberal freedoms – are pursued alongside an array of decidedly illiberal activities (including surveillance, propaganda and forced regime change). Predictably, officials representing the White House, State Department, or Pentagon, who admonish other states for using digital technologies in similar ways, are seen by critics to be hypocritical. They tend, however, to ignore such criticisms and, when pushed, sometimes reference American exceptionalism [12].

When viewed from another angle, ICTs supposedly yielding liberty and international security have become nodal points for fomenting and responding to violent and de-stabilizing conflicts. Thus, ISIS depends on the internet to network and disseminate information. According to US officials, in early-2015, ISIS supporters sent 90,000 electronic transmissions using social media and websites daily (Dale, 2015). Instead of a public diplomacy ‘dialogue’, various officials (working for the State Department, CIA and others) are responding by directly engaging ISIS in an online propaganda war. ICTs are also the primary means through which US officials track ISIS activities and its (existing or prospective) personnel. Data is gathered for activities ranging from surveillance in the ‘homeland’ to ‘kinetic engagements’ overseas [13].

Perhaps liberal democratic sentiments and the empowering implications of digital technologies together constitute necessary illusions in the construction or maintenance of something else, which is ingrained but conceptually refracted. Put differently, ideals such as liberty, neoliberal economic development and the role of ICTs in their realization are more refractions than reflections of structural relations and power interests, while the contradictions emerging in the process of associating these ideals with technologies are mediated by the fetish.

This mediating role is conceptually tricky so we need to examine it carefully. As Carr understood, the framing of, and desire to solve a problem itself alters the intellectual capacities of the analyst. In referencing mediation, I am not simplistically arguing that the fetish masks or disguises reality. To repeat, the fetish shapes and is constitutive of reality itself. In G.A. Cohen's reading of Marx, the fetish is likened more to a mirage than some kind of hallucination. The mind registers the material relations that constitute the fetish; it does not create it. The employment of high speed digital technologies are on the one hand, empowering but, on the other, facilitate intellectual fragmentation. Simply put, the quantitative advantages of utilizing ICTs to access a vast amount of information and its mechanized organization, in effect, tends to undermine qualitative dimensions of the policy analysis undertaken. The medium, to reiterate, is more than just an intermediary between the structures and relations of policymaking and the thoughts and intellectual capacities of the people using them: "the form of the mediation alters the things mediated, or by its nature indicates their nature" (Williams, 1976: 171). In this respect, the social and intellectual norms accompanying the use of always-on ubiquitous ICTs likely diminishes the time and, indeed, the space needed to engage in the thoughtful, holistic and reflective work that is (or should be) foreign policy [14].

Problem-identifying and problem-solving under these conditions has come to involve a common sense embrace of principles such as access, transparency and the right of expression, all of which are reified through the moment-to-moment use of digital technologies. Rather than an awareness of the complex underpinnings of 'the problem' itself (in all its time-consuming and intellectually-taxing dimensions), policy makers rely upon general abstractions to manage and make sense of their world. As with capitalist exploitation of labour, the ubiquitous use of technology (beginning with the mechanical clock) has abstracted time itself. This has had serious qualitative implications for both decision-making and, more generally, thought itself (Harvey, 1989). Consequently, analysis becomes marginalized as "action and reaction [now] occur [virtually] at the same time" (McLuhan, 1995:149).

From an instrumental perspective, policy, of course, is primarily about 'getting things done' within 'the system' and not about attempting to subvert the system to accomplish policy goals. But this is not say, as Freedman put it earlier, that the "unasked questions, untabled agendas...and unspoken assumptions" that might facilitate foundational enquiries as to what 'the system' is and needs (in all its complexity) is something that policy officials should ignore. Unlike the world idealized by the Obama administration, more precise, mechanized and instantaneous information is not the same thing as communication. This fact may well undermine policy thinking that is deliberative and creative rather than reactionary or narrowly cast.

Some Marxists have argued on questions concerning ideology that while social practices are 'real', in the process of justifying them, illusions emerge (Eagleton, 1991: 40). In the case of the fetish, however, Marx recognized that, in fact, the illusion (also) is real. This furthers our comprehension of Cull's rejection and acceptance of a 'data-driven' public diplomacy. It also might illuminate the many examples of military officials recognizing the contradictions of the Pentagon's longstanding penchant for technological solutions. The development of a new class of nuclear weapons designed to penetrate bunkers is but one example that illustrates the contradiction at hand. Military analysts understand that it will likely accelerate what it is designed to redress: efforts to develop chemical, biological and nuclear arsenals among 'rogue' states.

According to strategic studies scholar, Colin S. Gray, "[a]lthough war is fraught with problems with a technological dimension, the institution of war is not itself a technological problem" (Gray, 2001: 13; see also Gray, 1993). The common sense of the technological fetish persists despite this awareness and, indeed, all of the services that make up the US military have embraced a high-tech

vision of future warfare that is directly entwined with digital ICTs. The technological fetish, we might say, is not just a way of describing how ICTs are conceptualized; the fetish is inscribed in the very relations that constitute their use and development. It makes sense to go along with fetishistic thinking, but not primarily because it reflects the interests or needs of the powerful (such as weapons manufacturers, fractions of capital or, still more generally, a hegemonic bloc of interests). More importantly, the fetish as a common sense conceptualization mediates and is enmeshed in relations of power.

Existing conditions bode well for the perpetuation of fetishistic thought. While self-reflexive thinking cannot itself de-fetishize policymaking, an erosion of critical thinking capacities in light of the growing dependency on specialized or mechanized means of knowing through, for example, probability assessments, market-framed outcome evaluations, 'big data' algorithms and so forth, makes the questioning of fetishism less likely. The application of digital ICTs to empower state officials and enable their promulgation of liberal democratic ideals such as interaction and dialogue (as mediated by the fetish) may be facilitating something quite different: the tendency towards a kind of policymaking interpassivity.

To be interpassive is to be passive in one's interactions. This mode of relating to others is well established. Erich Fromm (1955, 1976), drawing on both Marx and Freud, recognized the pervasiveness of its material and social-psychological underpinnings in his critique of the intellectual, political and spiritual passivity of most Westerners. Today, the ubiquity of personal communication devices, such as smartphones is contributing to the perpetuation of such norms. The popular use of digital technologies in both public and private spaces has been associated with efforts to assuage a sense of isolation but, paradoxically, they are used also in ways that distance people from deeper connections and intimacies. The political, economic and cultural conditions drawing people to this form of interpassivity resembles (and, again, refracts) the competitive logic of capitalist relations and the related promulgation of evermore information and the greater demands on people to efficiently order and process it. In this context, digital technologies are embraced as the means of managing these accelerated and intensified conditions despite the fact that they constitute the essential means through which this acceleration and intensification is being carried out.

Officials use ICTs to deal with conditions (partially of their own making) in ways that are intellectually passive. As policymakers and publics interact using overwhelming amounts of data produced, circulated and processed at the speed of light, interaction is likely to be accompanied by disconnection.

Here, I am using interpassivity somewhat differently than Žižek. For him, interpassivity refers to technology taking the place of people, as when technologies interact and even 'think' on their behalf (a perspective that indirectly echoes Innis' critique of the mechanization of knowledge). As with the commodity fetish, Žižek argues that technology has displaced our knowledge that things are only things and, because of our willingness (or need) to accept that things have come to mediate our relations, people unconsciously and routinely act on this real abstraction. In psychoanalytical terms, the technological fetish is more than a reflection or refraction of society-consciousness interactions; the fetish also mediates the relationship between the conscious and unconscious, and our internalization of the fetish is revealed primarily through our actions (Žižek, 2008: 299-302). In sum, according to Pfaller's reading of Žižek, "People contribute to the social existence and efficiency of certain beliefs...by delegating them" to a social reality that stands outside them (Pfaller, 2005: 115). President Obama, in a speech unrelated to foreign policy (months before Internet freedom was officially unveiled), told his audience of college graduates that "you're coming of age in a 24/7 media

environment that bombards us with all kinds of content and exposes us to all kinds of arguments... And with iPods and iPads, and Xboxes and PlayStations ... information becomes a distraction, a diversion, a form of entertainment, rather than a tool of empowerment, rather than the means of emancipation” (quoted in Davis, 2013: 8). Six years later, in an address to the people of Vietnam, he argued that “When there is freedom of expression and freedom of speech, and when people can share ideas and access the Internet and social media without restriction, that fuels the innovation economies need to thrive. That's where new ideas happen” (Obama, 2016).

There is, I think, an intellectual selectivity or blinkered outlook that is not so much the product of subsuming policymaking to the ‘technological sublime’ as much as it is an experiential outcome of the fetish itself. By conceptualizing the technological fetish as a relational medium, we can better understand how the power of digital technology has become both imagined *and* very real (in contrast to debates concerning technological determinism where the truth or falsity of this power is emphasized) [15]. Instead of a reductive explanation for what some might see as America's blind pursuit of a contradiction-laden policy, addressing it in terms of the fetish potentially brings into sharper focus the complex orientations and interests that are refracted and mediated in the policy process.

For policy officials at least, the quantitative or apparent realities that ICTs illuminate may well subvert the qualitative dimensions of what is at hand. Grasping the totality of what is being assessed or implemented thus becomes more difficult. The efficiencies for both the American state and the psychological and intellectual needs of the policy official are apparent. However, in the process, the human and refractive dimensions of power are largely ignored. The naturalness, inevitability and seemingly unalterable nature of a world dominated by real abstractions occlude the complexity that is ‘reality’, just as technology is used to further mechanize America’s (mis)management of world (dis)order.

## Conclusions

In Žižek’s *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008), he argues that our hamsters/fetishes enable us to (pretend!) to accept reality “the way it is” (299). This world in which magic acts are known to be fake but are embraced nevertheless has reached its apogee in the everyday predominance of virtual capitalism. As Žižek asks, “[d]o phenomena usually designated as ‘virtual capitalism’ (futures trading and similar abstract financial speculations) not point towards the reign of the ‘real abstraction’ at its purest, much more radically than in Marx’s time? ... [I]t is only at this stage, when money becomes a purely virtual point of reference, that it finally assumes the form of an indestructible spectral presence” (302-303).

Something similar can be said for digital ICTs. Through the fetish, I have attempted to look beyond the forms that US policy has taken (from the idealization of the Internet to American exceptionalism) in order to critique the material conditions that (at least some) policymakers understand to be both real and imagined. Despite this sometimes recognized duality, and beyond its utility as a psychological balm or mechanism enabling action in the face of overwhelming complexity, I have argued that the technological fetish is so structurally embedded it has become, in effect, what Gramsci called common sense.

But what has become a common sense also, conceivably, contributes to the analytical disempowerment of policy officials. As with so many other mechanized applications, digital ICTs do more and more things for us and, in the process, intellectual capabilities once exercised are replaced

or subsumed. Indeed, as I have argued, the fetish facilitates the interpassivity that characterizes how the Internet and other such technologies are commonly used. Because technological fetishism stems from structural conditions and material relations, for analysts and officials aspiring to redress its contradictory implications, our conscious recognition of its presence is not in itself a sufficient response. As Žižek might put it, confronting our use of a hamster is unlikely to itself change our dependency on it.

Assumptions concerning the innate benefits of ubiquitous digital communications as they have been conceptualized through Internet freedom discourse are delusional. However, to reiterate a point made previously, it is incorrect to dismiss the initiative as entirely self-serving. A policy pursued to advance security and economic interests can also advance liberties and rights of various kinds. This, of course, is in keeping with the broader history of capitalism and the liberal values and institutions that are abstractly or indirectly related to it.[16] What I have presented thus should not be simplified into a reductionist critique of biased American officials deluded by technological fetishism (although there is something to this interpretation). Instead, this article has emphasized the contradictory nature of Internet freedom and public diplomacy policies involving digital ICTs. More generally, I have speculated that the fetish has had (and is having) a significant impact on the intellectual capacities of policy officials.

The fetish reflects and mediates a way of thinking about the problem of anti-American extremism. Its mediation serves to externalize this problem as isolatable and resolvable rather than as a problem that the American state (or the interests it represents) has helped to create. This historical dimension of foreign policy, for practical purposes, lies outside the parameters of most analyses. Foreign policy continuities concerning American power are not just marginalized; technological developments are insulated from their socio-economic dynamics and contexts. Developing and applying the concept of technological fetishism, arguably, sharpens our critical assessment of policies such as Internet freedom. Digital ICTs have come to embody the kinds of moral sentiments that Carr argued could not be the basis for constructing a secure international system. More than this, the fetishized status and treatment of these technologies may be reproducing (if not deepening) a dependency on them in the very conceptualization of US interests. For American officials whose work involves somehow managing world developments, their active participation in elaborating the magical power of digital ICTs is profoundly contradictory in that it entails their own intellectual (and thus policymaking) disempowerment [17].

The technological fetishism that appears to be mediating US policy should not be simplistically assessed as a shortcoming in the intellectual capabilities of American officials. Instead, to quote Maurice Godelier, “it is not the subject who deceives himself, but *reality* which deceives *him*” (quoted in Sayers, 1985: 203).

## Endnotes

- [1] Although I have critiqued the use of digital technologies and Internet freedom in combatting anti-American extremism elsewhere (Bean and Comor, 2017; Comor and Bean, 2012; Comor, 2013), the present article develops this through its direct application of technological fetishism.
- [2] See Wyatt (2008). For a discourse focused analysis of technological determinism, see Marx (1997).

- [3] In relation to corporate interests, Internet freedom is by no means ‘free’. Instead, it involves the building and maintenance of vast infrastructures and is sustained by commercial activities drawing on the wealth of people and involving the commercialization of cultures around the world. Through the flexibilities and efficiencies associated with ICTs (involving, among other dynamics, logistical advantages, faster turnover times, marketing efficiencies, job de-skilling and replacements, etc.), the global deployment of these technologies has been a key pillar in neoliberal economic strategies since the 1980s. Moreover, through the property rights mechanisms established in trade agreements and other means, the openness of Internet communications is delimited by intra-state and international regimes regulating online activities.
- [4] In accordance with this dual reality, Marx also argued that workers, especially when immiserated, collectively have the capacity to recognize the constructed nature of their situations and thus their political capabilities in relation to capital (Marx and Engels, 1979).
- [5] G.A. Cohen (2001) likens commodity fetishism to the materially determined occurrence called a mirage rather than an illusory phenomenon such as an hallucination (115-116).
- [6] An inspiration for this focus is the analysis of Roy Bhaskar’s work by Roberts (2013).
- [7] “Philosophy,” as Gramsci (1971) put it, “is criticism and the superseding of religion and ‘common sense’. In this sense it coincides with ‘good sense’ as opposed to ‘common sense’” (326).
- [8] Žižek (2006) calls the fetish an “objective illusion” (340).
- [9] Some of the implications of this point for policy officials will be developed subsequently. At this stage, it is worth making a general point: the predominance of the real abstraction that is the fetish delimits the capacity to *think* self-reflexively. This condition, ultimately, constitutes a contradiction for the American state and the interests it represents.
- [10] For representative examples of these in the context of Internet freedom, see Shirky (2011) and Slaughter (2009). “Internet freedom,” as Hillary Clinton (2010) summarized, “supports the peace and security that provides a foundation for global progress.”
- [11] Countries such as Indonesia, Brazil and Vietnam have debated or pursued legislation (similar to that passed in Russia in 2014) that require foreign corporations, such as Facebook and Google, to store the personal data of citizens within their borders (Fontaine, 2014: 4).
- [12] A rare intra-state critique of such contradictory or narrow perspectives can be found in the United States Defense Science Board (2004): 40. American exceptionalism in relation to Internet freedom – entailing working assumptions among policy officials of the unique status and responsibility of the United States – may well involve their refracted perspectives (and, indeed, self-identities) vis-à-vis the political economic interests that underlie the American constitution’s first amendment. For a unique (non-Marxist) historical materialist analysis of ‘freedom of speech’, see Innis (1946): 1-34.
- [13] For all the praise and enthusiasm given to the Arab Spring and how digital ICTs were lauded as the means of democratic uprising, official US indifference to the fate of (or



its opposition to) subsequently elected governments raises questions as to both the genuineness of a universal commitment to democratic ideals and, more to the point of this article, the contradictory implications of a fetishized treatment of such technologies.

- [14] Empirical evidence for such quantitative-qualitative contradictions can be found in Carr (2010). This argument extends William A. Williams's (1959) assertion that the history of US foreign policy demonstrates a "loss of the capacity to think critically about reality" (303).
- [15] Objective truth or falsity claims are implicit in many critiques of technological determinism. Part of this involves analyses that conceptualize technology as a reified thing rather than the material outcome of a complex of human activities – the latter being a more dynamic perspective as in our focus on the fetish.
- [16] According to Marx, surplus value, for instance, can only be produced through an exchange of wages for the labour power of workers. This relationship, unlike other forms of labour exploitation (as in classical slavery or feudal society), requires the individual to own his/her capacity to labour. Another example is the relative autonomy of institutions in civil society – a relative autonomy that was exceptional rather than normal in non-bourgeois political economies since social relations were not mediated primarily through contracts and money.
- [17] It should be noted that while the illiberal security and intelligence activities of the past continue under President Trump, his administration has signalled the prospect of using state power to discipline (seemingly) anti-Trumpist corporations (e.g. Amazon). The irrationalities that such overtures entail demonstrate, I think, an extreme form of interpassivity and executive branch ignorance more than some kind of *direct* policy shift (away from the previous administration's hegemonic use of digital engagement towards, instead, a reliance on coercion and more insular economic policies). The contradictions emerging from a President who appears not to know that he doesn't know, and the role played by technological fetishism in his thinking, are too far reaching to address here.

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## Author Bio

Professor of Media Studies. His research focuses on the political economy of communication and culture. Comor, most recently, co-edited the re-publication of Harold Innis' *Political Economy in the Modern State* (2018). His previous books include *The Global Political Economy of Communication* (1994), *Communication, Commerce and Power* (1998), and *Consumption and the Globalization Project* (2008). Comor was the Co-Founder and Inaugural Chair of the International Communication Section of the International Studies Association.

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