OF SLEEPS AND CYCLES: DIGITAL DISRUPTIONS AND THE MYTH OF AWAKENING

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_Abstract

This _Essay_ explores digital disruptions at the intersections of awakening narratives and historical revivals in the postdigital era. Characterized by the normalization of technology, the postdigital (as opposed to the hyphenated post-digital) invites critical reflection on the political, social, and cultural implications of digital infrastructures. While optimism surrounding digital advancements is often framed through the lens of apolitical affordances, this _Essay_ challenges that perspective by foregrounding the concept of cyclical time. The so-called 'Arab Spring' exemplifies that this temporal framework is used politically: the 2010–2011 uprisings in North Africa initially sparked hopes for liberation through technology (Spring/Awakening) only to be followed by disillusionment and despair (Winter/Sleep). These cycles highlight an apparent duality of digital affordances to both empower and constrain. Through the metaphor of biphasic pre-industrial sleeping patterns, this _Essay_ delves into the ideological underpinnings of digital disruptions and how they animate a contemporary *return* to imagined medieval fantasies. This resurgence reveals troubling overlaps between alt-right ideologies and digital culture. Ultimately, this analysis contends that the postdigital has become a fertile ground for rewriting and reimagining history, one that calls for selected knowledge seeking, and where the struggle for democratic rights continues amidst the spectre of reactionary forces.

Robert Harris's dystopian novel, *The Second Sleep* (2019), follows Father Christopher Fairfax to a remote village in England to conduct the funeral of an elderly clergyman. Initially on a simple mission, soon the young priest finds clues that suggest the deceased priest had been conducting forbidden research into the past. As the investigation evolves, Fairfax finds evidence of a lost civilization, which we discover is our current digital era. Set in England, in the year 1468, the novel leads the reader to believe that a lack of technological development corresponds to the European Middle Ages. However, spoiler alert, later in the book it is revealed that the novel is actually situated in a post-apocalyptic future consequence of the collapse of our present era of technological development. In the book, society has regressed to a medieval-like state, ruled by religious authorities who suppress knowledge of the past because once the digital has disappeared, all we are left with is an obscure era that resembles fantasies of the Middle Ages. *The Second Sleep* presents therefore a cautionary tale about the consequences of forgetting history and the enduring struggle between truth and institutional control, technological overreliance, and the fragility of progress. In what follows, the novel functions methodologically as both a thematic and narrative

framework for interrogating the dangers of historical amnesia, technological overreliance, and institutional control. In this _*Essay*, I argue against Harris's metaphor of digital disruptions, awakenings, and the revival of the past, proposing instead that such narratives risk reinforcing reductive views of both history and technology.

1_Postdigital Failures

The postdigital age is characterized by digital technology no longer being a disruptor, but rather an ordinary part of our everyday lives, at least for most of the Global North. The 'post-digital,' with a hyphen, represents a temporal marker, an era that follows in time the notion of digital disruption and digital revolution. With a change in spelling, the postdigital no longer apolitically signals a temporal 'after,' but signifies a critical engagement with emerging narratives about the digital. In this sense, the postdigital, much like postfeminism or postcolonialism, opens space for critical reflection on the ideological, political, and material disruptions caused by the digital. The shift from analogue to digital media, a consequence of the emergence of computers between the 1950s and 1970s, has also been referred to as the Digital or the Fourth Revolution. This revolution, seen as a disruption of the analogue era, has been mostly framed as a sign of progress, advance, development, and innovation—buzzwords still largely considered as positive, particularly in relation to technology. The irruption of rapid technological development that followed, driven by a dominant optimistic and techno-deterministic narrative, led to what has been articulated as digital disruption. In this view, the digital marks a key moment of historical change—a critical event that would, supposedly, transform our lives for the better.

The optimism with which digital disruption has been embraced is closely tied to technological determinism, that is, the belief that technological development is inherently positive, but also an apolitical indicator of a society's progress. Internet penetration and the adoption of digital technology are often celebrated for their ability to 'advance' and 'develop' societies. As Tourya Guaaybess has noted in her critique of institutional discourses on media:

> [t]his faith in media is not reconsidered or questioned even by UNESCO, for instance, which continues its crusade for modernization via media and, today, via the Internet. UNESCO defends the idea that it is necessary to reduce 'the digital divide between rich and developing countries', even though the role of media in development has never been clearly established.[1]

A decade later, Guaaybess's words remain highly relevant. Internet penetration continues to be framed alongside keywords such as interactivity, freedom, and community—all regarded as digital affordances or inherent advantages for society. Yet we lack a comprehensive understanding of internet's role in economic, social, or political development. More crucially, we have not sufficiently challenged how technological development aligns with—or resists—political ideologies.

These seemingly consensual techno-deterministic narratives began to prove challenging during what has come to be known as the 'Arab Spring' (even if it was not uniquely Arab nor did it take place in spring). Pundits, journalists, and some academics celebrated the popular protests as an 'Arab revolution' enabled by the affordances of digital technology.[2] The dominant story told that technology would liberate an oppressed Arab region. By December 2010, protest in Tunisia had become unstoppable with demonstrators marching northward toward the capital, Tunis. Despite the presence of thousands of people on the streets—which soon echoed in protests in Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain, and Syria, but also in Spain and other countries in the Global North—media headlines focused on what was dubbed the 'Facebook Revolution' or 'Revolution 2.0.'[3]

These protests against governance were quickly aligned with the perceived positive effects of digital disruption by what David Golumbia refers to as cyberlibertarianism.[4] For Golumbia, cyberlibertarianism is an analytical category that encompasses a set of ideological commitments, which, although seemingly aligned with leftists and anti-corporate values, are in fact deeply entangled with right-wing doctrines. Terms such as 'open source,' 'community,' 'hacking,' or 'free software' evoke the language of democracy but often act against the very institutions and structures designed to uphold democratic values.[5] This misleading narrative of freedom persists, as Golumbia claims, because digital technology—and the internet in particular—has long been celebrated as a force for bringing freedom and democracy to all. However, in light of the uprisings in North Africa, the Cambridge Analytica scandal—where Facebook users' data was improperly obtained to build voter profiles and microtarget political ads in campaigns like Trump's 2016 run and Brexit—, the global rise of the reactionary Far-Right, and the recent erosion of democratic norms, such claims demand urgent re-examination.

Among the earliest academic responses to the demonstrations of late 2010 and early 2011, experts on North Africa and the Middle East challenged cyberlibertarian

narratives. In the introduction to the special issue of the *Journal of North African Studies* titled "North Africa's Arab Spring," the journal's founding editor, George Joffé, wrote that "old technologies may well have been more important, especially satellite television which is universally accessible and much more difficult to shut down, as regimes have discovered to their cost."[6] Television, even in the aftermath, consistently appeared as a first source of news in reports of media use across the region.[7] Despite this evidence, these reports continued to emphasize the significance of internet penetration throughout the 2010s. In this context, the argument that ever-growing digital penetration enables people's liberation seems to lose its strength: how can we speak about digital disruption affordances if 'old media' proved to be more effective?

2_Cyclical Infrastructures

It is telling that the name given to the 2010–2011 uprisings in North Africa evokes a cyclical timespan. The metaphor of spring, as a time of birth and renewal, was meant to suggest a new era of awakening. Together with the blossoming flowers, pundits leaned on the symbolism of spring to reinforce one of the region's most familiar narratives: angry young people rising up to free themselves from oppressive regimes—often cast in contrast to so-called 'Western democracies.' This supposed 'awakening of young Arabs' aligned neatly with social media's conceptual and infrastructural design: platforms positioned themselves as tools for uncovering truths acting as catalysts for a population presumed to have been asleep.

In *The Second Sleep*, Harris employs the concept of biphasic sleep—two sleeping phases—to introduce a world that has been disrupted by a digital blackout. In the book, inhabitants of an English village enjoy the pre-industrial practice of segmented sleeping patterns, rather than what is now considered as the normative eight hours of consecutive sleep. In pre-industrial England, waking up in the middle of the night took place as a moment for reflection, prayer, or quiet activity before returning to sleep. Just as individuals in pre-industrial times experienced a period of wakefulness before resuming rest, the novel suggests that civilizations, too, undergo cycles of enlightenment and ignorance. Like our hero, the young Fairfax, Arab youth had awoken from their first sleep to question the past and present. Social media would serve as the medium through which truths about authoritarian regimes would be revealed. Yet, as

in the novel, the narrative quickly shifted. Pundits soon declared a 'second sleep,' or in the metaphor of these events, an 'Arab Winter.'[8]

In the same cyclical tone of awakening and sleep, successes and failures, the Arab Winter has been conceived as a return to despair.[9] Situated around 2016, this is the moment of realisation that technology has failed to make earlier hopes a reality. The region is depicted as having regressed to a pre-Spring state—marked by bombings in Iraq, an ongoing war in Syria, a failed democratic transition in Egypt, or simply a lack of change in other countries. Winter here symbolizes the second sleep: a cyclical return to repressed anger, or worse, to indifference toward progress. By 2016, it had become clear that while social media offered opportunities for activism, it also facilitated surveillance and control. Social media had indeed enabled meaningful moments of participation that challenge laws and social norms, as I have argued elsewhere,[10] but we must also remember that, amid these favored cyclical narratives, the same 'affordances' that arguably supported the uprisings also became the breeding ground for the rise of the 'alt-right.'

The infrastructure of platforms like 4chan played a significant role in the spread of reactionary content.[11] Originally a space for random posts, the /b/ board on 4chan became an incubator for internet trolls. Users shared memes—image-macros or images with text—aiming to be creative, original, and politically incorrect. The board's voting system, similar to Facebook 'likes,' helped amplify content particularly extreme and reactionary. It is important to recall that this unfolded in the late 2000s, as social media was being celebrated as a catalyst for democracy. Platform infrastructure thus shaped meme aesthetics by requiring constant reposting for visibility, a process supported by the platform's radical anonymity. This dynamic—especially pronounced on 4chan— rewarded content that is sharp and considered humorous, contributing to the phenomenon of 'meme-forcing,' where memes fight to be voted up and therefore/thereby survive and be seen.[12] The aesthetics of memes emerge from the interaction between platform design and user behavior, resulting in a distinct, rapidly produced, and amateurish visual style. Digital infrastructures therefore favored the inceptions of meme culture that appealed to users drawn to these specific affordances.

The political undertone of imageboards and their emerging meme culture is evident in the long-standing phrase, "The Left Can't Meme." The phrase suggests that the Left either lacks the ability to create compelling memes or, perhaps worse, is too moralistic

to engage in meme culture.[13] Media Studies however has often studied memes in terms of virality, shareability, and collective participation. Against this backdrop, memes also reveal how digital disruption has been framed as apolitical, while in practice having emerged from online groups favoring reactionary content. From this perspective, Golumbia argues that digital media encapsulates right-wing ideologies through what has been termed "The Californian Ideology."[14] This ideology represents the intersection of cyberlibertarianism and hippie anarchism, combining to frame what are *de facto* conservative political beliefs as anti-establishment alternatives. By co-opting the language of freedom, connection, and community, this ideology seeks to undermine democratic institutions by demonising governments and dismantling the rule of law, all in favor of private companies. Digital disruption, then, conceals political and ideological forces more aligned with late capitalism than with civil rights activism or the pursuit of social justice. It is crucial, therefore, to situate digital disruptions within their politicised context. Only by unpacking the politics behind these narratives can we recognise how digital disruption continues to bolster the Far-Right.

In 2019, during Donald Trump's first administration, the United States began requiring visa applicants to provide their social media account information.[15] In his second term, reports have emerged of entry denial to academics based on messages critical of Trump, as well as announcements that social media screenings will particularly target those criticising Israel.[16] Such developments are likely to provoke fears leading to data concealment or self-censure for some travelers to the US. Rather than freedom and community, digital disruption under this administration takes the form of heightened concerns around privacy, surveillance, and oppressive undemocratic practices. Amid growing momentum for reactionary and anti-democratic forms of governance, how can we talk about digital blackouts—and the implied return to a pre-industrial era—when the Far-Right holds sway over the country under whose jurisdiction most of social media apps used worldwide (with the not unproblematic exception of TikTok) operate?

3_Medieval Fantasies, New Awakenings

Alongside the techno-optimistic narratives surrounding technological development, fears of failure and its dramatic consequences have also emerged. Questioning the repercussions of technological progress and the potential negative outcome for

humanity lies at the heart of much literature, cinema, art exhibitions, and other forms of cultural expression. Gothic literary classics such as *Frankenstein*[17] highlight anxieties about technological misuse, while sci-fi has long explored themes of dehumanization of technology as seen in the German Expressionist film *Metropolis*.[18] Other classics, such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*[19] articulate fears of technology turning against its human creators. In the case of Harris's book discussed above, the novel engages directly with the fear of a technological blackout and its dramatic societal consequences. In the narrative, a digital collapse has thrust English society into a world dominated by the Church, where scientific knowledge is supressed, and historical narratives are under tight control. Eight hundred years after complete technological failure, books, devices, and relics from the past are hidden or destroyed, and the pursuit of truth becomes a dangerous act in a society built on secrecy. It is almost ironic that the novel associates the destruction of technology with a 'return' to what is imagined— at least in Europe—as a period of obscurantism. All the while, a fantasized version of the Middle Ages, marked by the suppression of knowledge, science, and truth in favor of moralistic and communal rhetoric, appears to be flourishing in—and perhaps because of—the postdigital era.

The digital affordances discussed throughout this _*Essay* have certainly favored a revisionism of historical accounts, or an alt-history.[20] One could argue that the past, and particularly medievalism, thrives in the postdigital era. By 'history' and 'past' however, I am not referring to the well-researched, scholarly study of history. The past embraced by the alt-right and other reactionary groups is a fantasy—a mystified version of a world that never truly existed inspired by fantasy books' take on the Middle Ages. In this fantasy, the Middle Ages are reduced to an oversimplified era of religious confrontation. A telling example is the image of Donald Trump's pick for Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, displaying a bare torso adorned with the Jerusalem Cross. Also known as the Crusader's Cross, this large central cross flanked by four Greek crosses is a symbol closely tied to Christian militarism. Hegseth also bears tattoos in both Arabic and Hebrew—one reading 'kafir' ('infidel') and the other 'Jesus.' If there were any remaining doubts about Hegseth's fascination with the Crusades, they were dispelled with the publication of his book, *American Crusade: Our Fight to Stay Free.*[21]

The domination of the Crusades online seems to be more concerned with cultural markers than symbols of shared religious practices and beliefs. The notion that

Christian identity today functions more as a cultural signifier than a reflection of genuine religious belief is explored by Tobias Cremer in *The Godless Crusades*.[22] Examining Germany, France, and the United States, Cremer argues that the rise of what he refers to as right-wing populism is not driven by a religious revival, but rather by a new form of secular identity politics. Christianity, given this dynamic, is instrumentalized to construct a collective identity—one that excludes all who do not belong. Effectively, heteronormative white men of the Global North, particularly in Europe and the United States, form communities around symbols of Christianity without necessarily adhering to its beliefs or practices.

In Harris's book, the return to an imagined medieval and conservative past is symbolized by disrupted sleeping patterns. Biphasic pre-industrial sleep typically consisted in a 'first sleep' in the early evening, followed by a period of wakefulness, and then a 'second sleep' before dawn. In the novel, these biphasic patterns metaphorically represent how technological collapse enables the return of monsters of the past. The period of wakefulness between the two phases becomes a time when truths can be suppressed and knowledge concealed. During this nocturnal interval, the young priest, Fairfax, begins investigating the mysterious death of a fellow clergyman. As the story unfolds, Fairfax increasingly questions his faith and the official history of the world. One could argue that, metaphorically, he wakes up during this temporal interlude to uncover buried secrets about a now censured past. The metaphor of awaking has strong parallels to a tweet shared by the contemporary conservative pastor Joel Webbon. In a post on X, Webbon responds to conservative women's complaints that men are not interested in working women. Webbon wrote:

> The young men are **waking up** [originally written in bold]
> Women will learn to have a quiet and gentle spirit, or they will learn to be alone
> Deus Vult.[23]

Ending with the Latin phrase "Deus vult" (Latin for "God wills it"), a rallying cry popular during the First Crusade (1096–1099), the phrase also appears not uncoincidentally tattooed on Hegseth's arm. The tweet encapsulates the postdigital revisionism of history and unapologetic misogyny—framed as 'awakening.' This language mirrors the alt-right's use of the concept of 'the red pill,' derived from *The Matrix*,[24] a film that has come to symbolise intellectual awakening or enlightenment. For the alt-right, "the Matrix" represents mainstream media, political correctness,

progressive ideologies, and academia. To take the red pill is to reject these supposedly dominant narratives and instead embrace what they claim is hidden truths about race, gender, feminism, and media control.

While a Christian pastor like Webbon employs the language of historical religious confrontations in his tweet, progressive activists—known pejoratively as 'social warriors'—are derided as 'woke.' The notion of being awake to social injustices has been rebranded as 'wokism,' a term conservatives now use as a derogatory word to attack those advocating against discrimination and inequality. In a world quite opposite to what Harris imagined, it is pastors who call for digital crusades and accuse those fighting for social justice of being *too* awake. If, during the 2010–2011 uprisings, digital disruptions symbolized a political awakening for young North Africans—over a decade later, the alt-right and conservative voices have positioned themselves as gatekeepers of wokeness. Awakening is necessary for young men, we are told, but only to the extent that it allows them to subjugate women—guiding them back, metaphorically, to a second sleep. Meanwhile, any awakening in the name of values arguably central to Christianity—such as love, compassion, justice, and fairness—is notably absent from the Far-Right discourse.

Equally striking is that, while the Crusades are celebrated uncritically by pastors and politicians in 2025, the Middle Ages have been evoked for decades in claims of Islam and Muslims' 'backwardness.' This narrative is reinforced through representations of Muslim women as subjugated—most visibly through the symbol of the veil. Yet ironically, the same reactionary narratives that romanticize medieval Christian values also fuel movements like the White Jihad, a white supremacist group that adopts imagined Islamist conservative values. At the same time, contemporary digital trends in 2025 such as 'trad wives' (short for 'traditional wives') reflect an aim to return to traditional conservative values and patriarchal norms. These paradoxes underscore a deeper contradiction: even leaders of violent Islamist groups such as al Qaeda—despite their savvy use of digital media—are routinely labeled 'medievalist,' suggesting a selective interpretation of the meaning of the Middle Ages.

The return to a pre-industrial era is, therefore, not truly desired—not in the way Harris imagines it—through a total digital blackout. At times, it seems as if the postdigital era is pushing toward the destruction of the very digital infrastructures that amplified the alt-right's voice. But this is not entirely accurate—because there is, in

fact, too much to lose for the alt-right in a true digital collapse. There is, in fact, no yearning to return to the past; rather, the desire relies on instrumentalizing history to disrupt any sign of change that benefits the imagined Other. Unlike Harris's fictional world, in which a blackout leads to a society defined by religious rigidity and suppressed knowledge, the postdigital era reveals that fascist and reactionary ideologies can and will flourish without the need for technological disappearance. Building on Golumbia's argument—that digital technology has long been entangled with right-wing ideological structures—and drawing on Harris's portrayal of disruption, we might instead think of two temporalities coexisting: the post-digital and a pre-industrial era. The postdigital, then, would not mark a phase beyond the digital, but rather a cyclical return to an imagined past—where technology is not disrupted in itself, but used to disrupt any form of gained democratic rights, even if flawed.

In 2025, the anxieties embedded in digital disruptions no longer revolve around utopian hopes but dystopian fears—melting AI servers, your 23andME genetic data auctioned to the highest bidder. The cycle persists: AI is praised as a miracle of productivity ('Learn how to do 8 hours of work in 1 with these 10 AI tools') while simultaneously raising urgent questions about collective contribution, ethics, and the exploitation of so-called 'free' content. While AI may appear as yet another step toward freedom, innovation, and development, it also stands as another monster ready to kill.

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