Poor Image as a Weapon, Supercut and Digital Resistance

Zhang Yihuan

University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom
harrisonzhang0921@163.com

Abstract: Beginning with Steyerl's enquiry into whether the Internet can create new possibilities, this article draws out how digital media has been used for digital resistance through the combing of some historical events. By citing Steyerl's conceptual elaboration of the poor image, this article introduces Supercut, as one of the forms of the poor image, tracing its origins and characteristics, focusing on its various possibilities as a practice of digital resistance, including providing evidence for analysing the relationship between media and politics; deconstructing misrepresentations and reconstructing group identities; and resisting the hegemony of political propaganda discourse. Supercut is a powerful response to inequalities and that it has great potential for future creators to explore.

1. Introduction

Is the Internet dead? This is not a question of whether the Internet is broken or obsolete, it is more a question of whether the Internet can still create new possibilities [1]. While online shopping platforms have changed the way people consume, online meeting tools have changed the way people work, and social media platforms have changed the way people interact and access information. In terms of political participation, digital media has become an important element of citizens' political life, as there are many forms of political resistance through the use of digital technologies [2]. In recent decades, with the development of digital media technologies, various forms of digital resistance have emerged in different parts of the world.

2. The practices of digital resistance

The rise of social networks helped in large part with the mobilisation of protests in Russia in 2011-2012. The networking and mobilisation of protests was aided by a wide and uncensored social media presence [3]. The spread of digital media contributed to the development of the Arab Spring movement as it led to an increase in the production and consumption of international news, the widespread presence and use of social networks, the consolidation of online civil society, and increasing access to the internet to engage the public [4]. In Tunisia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Algeria, protests against their respective governments were organised and facilitated in part through Facebook. In addition, local digital platforms localise news stories to international media networks for

international support such as Twitter and YouTube [5]. As Mutsvairo (2016) [6] points out, digital media often has particular power when social movements and demonstrations take place, as it allows diverse voices to be heard.

In addition to the use of digital media platforms to organise and mobilise direct political resistance, the use of new technological tools for everyday resistance, such as confrontational interpretations of mainstream media propaganda and the creation of rumours against the government, is another important practice of digital resistance. Take China as an example. Despite China's unique censorship system, its citizens are adept at using rhetorical strategies such as coded language, homophones, spoofs, parodies and satire to debate taboo subjects in political discourse, circumventing and opposing the authorities' censorship through digital media [7].

As well as playing word games with political censorship, video creation is increasingly becoming a new battleground for everyday digital resistance. In today's world, meaning is conveyed through the visual as well as the auditory and the written word. Images convey information, provide pleasure and pain, shape fashion, determine consumption, and mediate power interactions [8]. Supercut is an important folk visual practice in this field, which is more of an expression of conscious or unconscious resistance.

3. The possibilities of Supercut as a practice of digital resistance

Poor Image is visual material that has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted and re-edited several times. After its liberation from the basements of cinemas and archives, the image is driven into digital uncertainty at the expense of its own substance. The degraded image tends towards abstraction: it is a visual concept that takes on a life of its own [9]. Although compressed, scratched and flawed media works lose quality, they gain something through circulation [10]. Poor image networks include various forms of digital video creation, such as Supercut, mashups, microblogging, electronic art, secondary editing of films, re-uploaded TV shows, etc. In some ways, these digital image productions act as a revolt against elite media production. Due to their copyright-free and decentralised nature, poor image is often associated with subversive or resistant cultural practices [11].

As a key member of the poor image network, Supercut is based on the idea of using video as a kind of database in which a certain internal logic is followed and video clips that fit into this internal logic are edited together to express a certain idea or critical opinion [12]. Supercut can be traced back to the use of montage in 20th century American cinema. Supercut videos first appeared on YouTube in 2005, shortly after the site's launch [13]. Tohline (2021) [12] defines Supercut as a collection of rapidly edited videos consisting of appropriated moving images that have a specific matching feature and are presented as a representative cross-section of that feature.

Networks of poor image become battlegrounds for commercial and national agendas [9]. As a member of the poor image network, the Supercut plays an increasingly important role in political resistance as a form of digital practice.

Firstly, Supercut can provide evidence for the analysis of the relationship between media and politics. Media and politics have a close relationship, especially in the United States, where media groups and political groups have gradually formed a set of communities of interest. In March 2018, Sinclair Broadcast Group, which owns nearly 200 television stations in the US, forced its news anchors to record propaganda videos calling news about other media outlets reporting facts against Donald Trump during his presidency 'fake news'. In these promos, local news anchors denounce 'one-sided journalism' and promise 'a commitment to factual reporting'. However, all the dozens of relevant editorial messages are based on the same text and can clearly be seen to be planned political propaganda. Timothy Burke (2018) [14] has made a Supercut of different renditions of the exact same

text, editing all these parroted videos together in a split-screen but simultaneous sound bite that allows the viewer to fully realise the absurdity of this behaviour and also exposes the hypocrisy of the Sinclair Broadcasting Group and its collusion with political groups through this presentation of evidence.

In the example above, Supercut plays the role of an analytical tool, bringing awareness to how big media groups serve the political brainwashing of political groups by restructuring and editing existing TV video clips. This type of Supercut gives the viewer a more immediate visual and aural impact, making it easier to analyse the underlying ideology behind the media.

Secondly, supercut can deconstruct the misrepresentation and reconstruct the group identity. Digital media platforms provide the technological conditions for an alternative way of critiquing state and corporate media institutions [15]. Outside the system of representation of mainstream media or capitalist groups, users of online media platforms can discover stereotypes of the representation of certain groups in those famous films and also reconstruct group identities by re-editing film and television footage through Supercut.

Dina Fiasconaro (2013) [16] has released a Supercut video on Vimeo that focuses on the portrayal of women in Martin Scorsese's films, cutting from over three hours of video footage the most powerful examples of how Martin represents women. In Fiasconaro's video analysis, women in Martin Scorsese's films have several typical characteristics: they are mentally unbalanced, jealous, always under the male gaze, often subject to verbal and sexual abuse and physical violence.

Through this Supercut video, Fiasconaro vividly demonstrates the ideology behind a famous director's representation of women, an ideology that appeals to the male imagination of women, stimulates and satisfies male desires and contains a strong sense of misogyny that has a very negative impact on the identity of the female viewer. In this case, Supercut can be used to analyse the ideology behind the film, an ideology that devalues and objectifies women, creating a new way of viewing films through the analysis of Martin Scorsese's films.

Being aware of the stereotypes of one's group in cinematic representations is the first step in reconfiguring group identity, and many video creators are actively exploring ways to use Supercut to re-narrate their group's identity. One person with the screen name bironic (2018) [17] uploaded a Supercut video in 2018 on Tumblr, Twitter, Vimeo, Youtube and other platforms that edited together images of minorities from the past three to five years in sci-fi and horror films. The creators set the video to the inspiring music 'The Greatest', making the video a new narrative of stigmatised and damaged minorities from the past, a narrative that is positive for them and one that helps them build a new self-identity.

Moreover, Supercut can be used to rebel against the hegemony of political propaganda discourse. Many politicians and political parties have become adept at using the media to portray themselves and promote their political views, and some mass media outlets have become, to some extent, mouthpieces for some politicians. But on many video media platforms, creators focus on creating videos that deconstruct politicians' propaganda discourse and even fool politicians' media images, videos that powerfully push back against the hypocrisy and clichés of those political campaigns.

A YouTube user named MuchDank (2020) [18] has created and uploaded a Supercut video of Donald Trump's interview with the show 'Axios on HBO', cutting out parts of Trump's propaganda explaining his policies and piecing together some of the indecent words he said to fit the reporter's questions. The video is a re-edit of a video of Donald Trump's interview with 'Axios on HBO'. The video, in which Trump appears comical, silly and even a little unhinged, powerfully deconstructs political propaganda discourse, thus creating a new way of explaining political figures and political propaganda.

Through these examples, we can see the various forms in which Supercut as a digital resistance practice can be used not only as a tool for media analysis or resistance to political propaganda, but

also to deconstruct traditional narratives and construct new ones. Beyond the examples I have listed, there are many other possibilities for Supercut as a media practice, which is becoming an increasingly powerful member of the digital resistance family.

4. Supercut responds critically to inequalities

Supercut is a recreation based on a database of existing video clips. However, this creation can only be achieved by downloading official videos, so it is an underlying commons, a reproduction of mainstream media and cultural forms, but in a way that is critical. Lothian (2015) [19] writes that fan culture is a mini-revolution related to radical movements for racial, gender and disability justice that continues to exist at the bottom of the fan community. Supercut shares many of the typical characteristics of fan culture, such as being unofficial, reinvented, and based on shared interests or political aspirations. To some extent, the creators of Supercut are also engaged in practices that combat various kinds of inequality.

In cyberspace, while everyone is a producer and digital media seem to promise more equal expression for all, political authorities and capitalist groups, with their larger networks of resources and connections, still largely hijack the power to produce discourse and produce narratives about other groups. Representation is the main way in which the media intervenes in the relationship between culture and power, and is a direct result of the role of ideology on the media. Representation is not only the media's objective presentation of things, but also the construction of others' images of certain groups, which is achieved through the mechanisms of representation in a given medium. The mechanism of representation exercises power through stereotypes, naturalising and fixing differences. As we can see from the examples above, Supercut has the ability to deconstruct the ideology behind the mechanisms of representation and can make a significant contribution to the struggle for gender and racial equality by forcefully challenging the discourse of inequality.

Moreover, as an individual or community-based undercurrent, its use and re-creation of official resources enables those who do not have access to them to enjoy the same cultural activities, which in part contributes to the struggle for equal access to resources. The focus is now on how rational and semi-autonomous people engage in deliberation and free action within networks of power relations, rather than on the ways and places in which subjects are objectified through discourse and practice. In identity politics, minorities can resist power and construct their own identities as self-constituting agents in the struggle for freedom and autonomy [20]. The sharing of resources and the collaboration of productive processes can greatly assist these marginalised groups in acquiring a technology of independence as a way of countering inequalities in the digital power order.

5. Conclusion

Whether the Internet is dead raises the question of whether it is still creating possibilities, and indeed the impact of the Internet is no longer limited to the creation of a virtual cyberspace, but has begun to influence the way people live and engage politically both online and offline. Digital media and various online media communication platforms have provided ordinary people with opportunities for digital political participation, and accordingly, many practices of digital resistance have begun to emerge. Supercut, as a type of the poor image, has many of the qualities of the family of the poor image: decentralised, critical, unofficial and defiant. As for digital resistance, Supercut offers many new possibilities, including its use as an analytical tool for media and politics, deconstructing the false ideology of cinema and generating new narratives to reconfigure minority identity. With the gradual increase in the database of video footage and the accumulation of practical experience and technical means, the possibilities of Supercut as digital resistance will further develop in the future, echoing other political practices that seek equality on a larger scale.

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