

Towards collective psychosis - why new technologies are  
making the world a worse place

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## **Introduction**

If not before, we all became aware of the effect that new technologies and social media in particular have on our society with the presidency of Donald Trump, when he won the election with their help and afterwards, he used them to rule and divide. It ended his presidency with the mob taking over the U.S. Capitol. How did this happen, how did we come to this point and what can analytical psychology say about it?

As shown in my paper “Emergence of Communism and Archetypes behind the Phenomenon” (Papič, 2015), social changes are not driven by ego consciousness and certain people, but by changes in the collective unconsciousness. Lenin had no idea that revolution would come, lecturing in January 1917, one month before the February Revolution, that he would probably not be fortunate enough to see the revolution in his lifetime, but that new generations might live long enough to see it. Similarly, people like Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, and Jack Dorsey, the founder of Twitter, had no idea a few years ago what kind of power they would create and have in their hands in the not-so-distant future.



*Image 1 Franz von Stuck Die Wilde Jagd, portraying Wotan hunting. The picture was painted in the same year as Adolf Hitler was born (1889) and is portraying what is happening in collective unconsciousness and consequently predicting as art is in many cases what will happen on a collective level in near future.*

## **Psychoanalytical view of society**

To understand the phenomenon, we have to first look at how society works. For this reason, I will look at the works of the British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, as he is one of the most original thinkers concerning group dynamics. Young Wilfred Bion worked at the newly established Tavistock clinic, where he started to work with groups of young soldiers returning from the first world war, suffering from shell-shock syndrome, as they called it at that time. Today we call it PTSD. As he had no idea how to work with groups, since there was no coherent psychoanalytic theory or method present at that time, he invented his own. To do this, he used his Kleinian psychoanalytic knowledge. He analysed a group as one would analyse a person. Kleinian theory puts great emphasis on the individual's internal world from the

moment of birth. The infant is perceived as the subject, the mother as the primary object. From the start the mother (or primary caregiver) is the omnipotent object, which represents the world to the little subject, who is full of archetypal content – fantasies, desires, anxieties. With fantasies we mean the way the infant experiences internal and external realities. The mother or the primary caregiver is here seen as the object, who is supposed to simultaneously fulfil the child's needs and to constitute a container into which it is possible to project all that is unbearable or difficult to contain, and hopefully transform it and return it in a bearable way. Bion's genius lies in the fact that he managed to transfer these ideas to the dynamics of the group, which is probably one of the most important contributions in group theory. In his view the group behaves as a regressive infantile subject, which regards its conductor as the omnipotent object, for better or for worse. As such, the group is no longer only the sum of its members, but it is also an entity existing beyond the individuals, with its own unconsciousness. (Biran, 2015)



*Image 2 Portrait of the English psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion in uniform in 1916.*

We can treat a group as a subject, although regressive in its nature. C. G. Jung came to the same conclusion separately, as he stated in his famous interview in late 1938 for the *Cosmopolitan* magazine by the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist H. R. Knickerbocker (Jung, McGuire, & Hull, 1977):

“I say, studying Germany as I would a patient, and Europe as I would a patient’s family and neighbours, let her go into Russia.”

In the same interview he also stated a similar observation on the regressive nature of a group:

“Don’t you know that if you choose one hundred of the most intelligent people in the world and get them all together, they are a stupid mob? Ten thousand of them together would have the collective intelligence of an alligator. Haven’t you noticed that at a dinner party the more people you invite the more stupid the conversation? In a crowd, the qualities which everybody possesses multiply, pile up, and become the dominant characteristics of the whole crowd. Not everybody has virtues, but everybody has the low animal instincts, the basic primitive caveman suggestibility, the suspicions and vicious traits of the savage. The result is that when you get a nation of many millions of people, it is not even human. It is a lizard or a crocodile or a wolf. Its statesmen cannot have a higher morality than the animal- like mass morality of the nation, although individual statesmen of the democratic states may attempt to behave a little better.”

As we can see from the above text, Jung saw a group similarly as Bion, as a subject. Here I have to remark that this idea of group behaviour does not apply only for psychoanalytic groups, but for any group in general. It can be a state, a nation, a local society, a family or a group of friends. We are all members of different groups and a group can have many subgroups, for instance a nation consists of many other groups, which can interweave.

Another great thinker that gives value to this idea is the sociologist George Herbert Mead. According to him (Mead, 1934), the individual self is the mechanism by which society becomes incorporated into the human psyche. Because the self is constructed out of relationships with others and therefore involves the

internalization of societal codes and conventions, it can be considered a miniature society within the individual.

From the text above we can conclude that it is feasible to use the idea of society as a subject. By doing so, we can apply our psychoanalytic knowledge and concepts derived from working with individuals to analyse large group dynamics, even nations. However, we need to apply this concept with special care, as oversimplifying it could be a great mistake. Each concept needs to be carefully rethought and re-evaluated when doing so.

### **Nation, newspaper and social media**

When we want to analyse society, we have to look at the phenomenon of nation. Here one has to rely on the works of Benedict Anderson and his seminal book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, written in 1983. Anderson argues that the emergence of the idea of nation is closely connected to the emergence of printed press. In his view the nation is actually imagined, it entails a sense of communion or “horizontal comradeship” between people who often do not know each other or have not even met. Despite their differences, they imagine belonging to the same collectivity, and they attribute to the latter a common history, traits, beliefs and attitudes, or, as he wrote it (Anderson, 1991):

“The concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. Coming to maturity at a stage of human history when even the most devout adherents of any universal religion were inescapably confronted with the living pluralism of such religions,

and the allomorphism between each faith's ontological claims and territorial stretch, nations dream of being free, and, if under God, directly so. The gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state.“

According to Anderson, the major role in establishing this was the emergence of the printing press, which enabled the sharing of this common fantasy of a nation among people.



*Image 3 "The Universal Republic". Lithograph by Frédéric Sorrieu. Published in 1848, it allegorically exalts republican, liberal and democratic values, which mobilize all the peoples of Europe.*

If the printed press was the original hub, the glue that connected people in sharing the identity and the idea of being part of a nation, in the middle of the twentieth century this role was taken over by television, and at the beginning of the twenty-first century the social media are slowly taking primacy in this role.

If the content of the printed press and television programs was carefully produced and controlled by the few in power, who skilfully produced the images and fantasies of the nation, social media is different. Its content is a jungle, where anyone with enough time can produce their own content, images and fantasies, which



represent their subjective version of reality, accessible to anyone. Not only that, when one uses the internet, a golem, a soulless artificial intelligence (AI) shows the people visiting the web the content they will most probably be interested in. The whole goal of AI is to keep one surfing on a certain social media site as long as possible, as it earns its money by showing ads. By doing so, one is deprived of information that might broaden their horizons and put their current worldview into question. The distribution of views is not evenly spread, certain content is more attractive and attracts more people. The algorithms take note of it and refer even more people to this content. Consequently, we start to get hubs, around which new subgroups emerge.

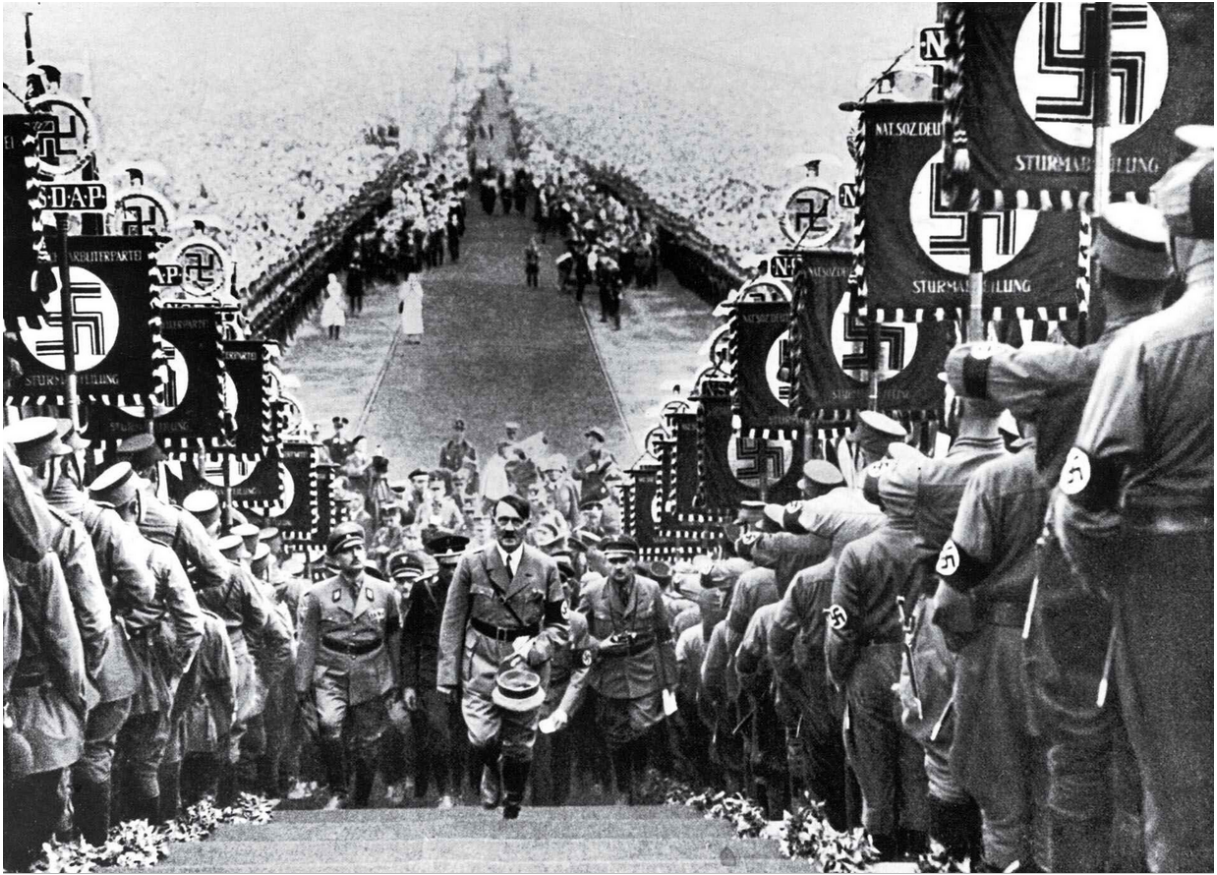
In this way, society as a group or imagined nation with its worldview splits into smaller subgroups, where the medium that conducts their fantasy of the group identity can be controlled and content is created by questionable people with questionable ideas. Inside a nation or a society different groups start to emerge, with different ideas and worldviews, or, as they are called, alternative truths.

To give an example, a person comes to a certain social media site. The page recognises the person immediately by so-called fingerprint technology – where each person with a computer has a unique trace on the web. As different web platforms share data about their visitors, AI will immediately know their interests, desires, complete psychometrical psychological profiles. It will guide and show content and ads that someone is interested in. The system, however, does not know right from wrong; it has no ethics or consciousness and does not care about society. People will be guided into virtual space where their thoughts will be confirmed by like-minded people, not questioning anything. Consequently, social subgroups or bubbles are formed in society.



*Image 4 White nationalists, foreground, clashing with counterprotesters, some of them members of the so-called antifa movement, in Charlottesville, Va.*

As history tends to repeat itself, we have to look back to see if something similar to this has already happened and what the consequences were to society. One does not need to look far back. At the beginning of the twentieth century in the United Kingdom and in the United States of America the press was controlled by a few, but in Germany there was a boom of different newspapers. By 1912 there were 4000 newspapers, printing 5 to 6 billion copies a year. All political parties had their own newspapers; for instance, there were 870 papers read by conservative readers in 1912, 580 aimed at liberal readers, 480 for Roman Catholics of the centre parties and 90 connected to the socialist party. This spread of newspapers locally, transmitting different worldviews and enabling extreme views to find their place, is society forming its own imagined subgroups. In the end, one of them took over power and consequently ended the pluralism of newspapers in 1935, exercising total control by using the printing press to put a whole nation under its spell. (Corey, 2010)



*Image 5 Hitler at a Nazi Party Rally , Heinrich Hoffmann 1934*

### **Analytical view of the problem**

Here we can use our analytical knowledge to get a specific view of the problem. If we look at society as a subject, then the various subgroups could represent different complexes that form the Self. Equivalent to the ego complex, which is a conscious-making, governing and opinion-making function, the media can be seen as reflective-consciousness with opinion-making functions and the governing institutions serve as the will of society. Through the emergence of social media, we can see the role of central media weakened, as there are subgroups that do not relate or report to them. In a psychological sense we could speak about the ego being weakened by subgroups or complexes, which are not relating. When these subgroups get too strong, they first form a sort of neurotic split: society is still a functioning

democracy, but with huge tensions and blockages in governing bodies. If this split and tensions among groups continue, a sort of disintegration starts. The governing bodies stop functioning and different subgroups take power, or chaos emerges in the form of civil war. One could compare this with a subject, where in case of huge tensions one could speak of neurosis: the ego is still functioning, though with huge tensions and blockages, but when a complex takes over and the governing body – ego disintegrates, one could speak of psychosis.

We can see this clearly with recent events in the United States: through social media, subgroups have formed with their own worldviews and identities, living in their own realities, which collide with the otherwise generally accepted worldviews. Without social media, these people would just be unconnected local weirdos, but here they are able to organise themselves into movements, which for a moment and in chaos were able to take over the Capitol. One could say that the United States went through a brief psychotic episode, where the governing institution was for a short period of time taken over by a subgroup or a complex. It is interesting that as the complexes in a person have their own archetypal cores, which could be described as having a feeling-tone and mythology, such sub groups also have a certain feeling-tone and their own mythology, which connects them.



*Image 6 Supporters of President Donald Trump enter the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. Saul Loeb/AFP - Getty Images*

Another interesting phenomenon is the observation of our Jungian analyst Renos Papadopoulos, a leading expert in refugee care, who observed that in the worst-hit places of the world, the consciousness of people in extreme situations gets simplified and polarised. He used phrases such as “archetypal radiation”, “archetypal whirlpool” and “archetypal dazzle” to describe this phenomenon. He observed that polarisation and over-simplification spreads to most areas involved in a crisis. One can observe this phenomenon in war-stricken areas, where the other is always the oversimplified evil.

The coronavirus pandemic brought this phenomenon to most of the world. This encouraged splitting and generated many groups, which believe in different conspiracy theories. Let us look at this phenomenon more closely. In my view, stress and anxiety in such times consumes a lot of libidinal energy; consequently, the

defence mechanisms work insufficiently and more archetypal content comes to the foreground. Another angle to look at this phenomenon is from a Kleinian point of view. Conspiracy theories are usually fuelled by paranoid fantasies. When one tries to convince people obsessed with conspiracy theories with facts and reasoning, it is as effective as trying to talk someone suffering with paranoid schizophrenia out of their delusions. Both the paranoid schizophrenic and the person obsessed with a conspiracy theory are immune to any reasonable arguments. One explanation is that under a lot of stress and anxiety people regress into a paranoid schizoid position. Besides conspiracy theories being an aspect of group dynamics that gives one a sense of being a part of a group, the theories themselves work as a defence mechanism, bringing order to chaos and protecting against disintegrating anxiety. Often science, for instance, does not have clear answers and solutions to a problem. The scientific method is based on repeatable studies and on systematic doubt in its own theories which is mostly incomprehensible to the lay person. Conspiracy theories on the other hand are clear, simple, understandable and coherent. They give one a feeling of understanding how the world functions and a certain comfort in the false feeling that the world finally makes sense. They give people a feeling of being in control. One also feels good, as the shadow is always projected onto the other. A combination of AI-driven social media and stressful times that we live in provides a perfect combination for an outbreak of collective psychosis or, in other words, disintegration of society as we know it.

## **Possible solution to the problem**

When looking at our current situation it is hard to give any feasible solution. One thing that could happen is an Enantiodromia, similar to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Germany where the uncontrolled multitude of printed presses turned into a totally controlled one. Likewise, current control over content on the web could happen in the form of controlling AI and algorithms to suit the ruling parties, hopefully in the best interest of all. We can see such a tendency with the literal shutdown of Donald Trump at the end of his presidency, when a handful of internet moguls wiped him out of social media and his domination of a major part of collective consciousness in a moment. Although this move was done in a state of emergency with the best of intentions in an effort to de-escalate possible violence, it was still not conducted by any democratic institution and bears in itself a seed of possible future undemocratic dictatorship. When the founders of social media pass away and their companies will be owned by hedge funds and anonymous capital, we will not be able to count on the best intentions of those in charge, but can expect the dictatorship of capital.

A more positive way to tackle the problem would be to implement Renos Papadopoulos' idea, which he uses when working with people in extreme situations, where polarisation occurs. His idea is to reintroduce complexity, which has been lost through archetypal polarisation. This could be done by altering the AI systems and algorithms, so that one would not be confronted only with the content which was chosen to best fit a person, but also with a content which would challenge one's worldview and introduce complexity to social media. Although this could be done, it is questionable if it will ever really happen on a large scale. There are some platforms already trying to do this, but they are not really getting the attention they need. It

looks like people like to see only what they like to see. In the end, even if the future does not look too bright at the moment, we still need to stay positive and search optimistically for positive solutions.

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As an expert in the IT field, he was invited speaker at the University of Ljubljana and the University of Maribor and several major industry conferences across Europe. Besides that, he is working at Open Institute for Psychotherapy Ljubljana as an analyst, training analyst and supervisor in the router program. He is also a co-founder, lecturer and organizer of the Jungian program at Sigmund Freud University Vienna Ljubljana branch and one of the founding members of Open Institute for Psychotherapy Ljubljana. He is co-founder, advisor and supervisor in the government-sponsored program in the field of nonchemical addictions. He is also the current president of the Slovenian Society for Analytical Psychology.

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## Image Sources

**Image 1** - [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Franz\\_von\\_Stuck\\_-\\_Die\\_Wilde\\_Jagd\\_-\\_G\\_1405\\_-\\_Lenbachhaus.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Franz_von_Stuck_-_Die_Wilde_Jagd_-_G_1405_-_Lenbachhaus.jpg)

**Image 2** - <http://www.pep-web.org/document.php?id=apa.046.1280a>

**Image 3** - <https://entropicbits.wordpress.com/2009/04/29/%E2%80%9Cimagined-communities%E2%80%9D-constructed-through-media%E2%80%A6-deconstructed-through-global-media%E2%80%A6/>

**Image 4** - <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/17/us/antifa-left-wing-faction-far-right.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>

**Image 5** - <http://100photos.time.com/photos/heinrich-hoffmann-hitler-nazi-party-rally#photograph>

**Image 6** - <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/trump-egged-rioters-capitol-he-needs-be-removed-office-now-ncna1253132>