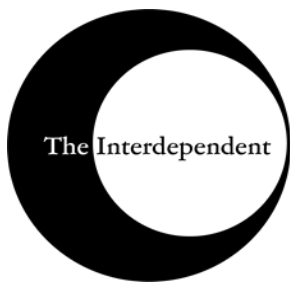


Retweets and Regimes: The Legacy of Political Spectacle from Ancient Rome to Modern Day



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Abstract

From ancient empires to modern democracies, power has always relied on more than brute force. It requires persuasion. Throughout history, leaders have turned to media in its many forms to shape public perception and build legitimacy. This article explores the use of propaganda through various forms of media in ancient Rome, specifically during the reign of Augustus. Given the expansiveness of the Roman empire, carefully crafted means of influence were needed to control its population. This study highlights how Augustus strategically used propaganda to shape public perception and legitimize his authority. By analyzing the Roman gladiatorial games and coinage, this research reveals how these forms of media were used to instill a collective identity, reinforce political power, and disseminate messages of Roman strength and superiority across the empire. Additionally, this article draws parallels between ancient Roman political strategies and the tactics of modern political figures, with particular attention to how today's leaders leverage social media in disseminating propaganda.

Keywords

Augustus; Roman Empire; Propaganda; Amphitheater; Gladiatorial Games; Coinage; Political Influence; Media; Spectacle; Political Communication

Introduction

Since the dawn of time, humans have been susceptible to influence. Yet, paradoxically, humans often consider themselves to be the exception when it comes to this susceptibility. When thinking of media as a vehicle for propaganda, contemporary platforms such as Twitter and Facebook often come to mind, with their vast and receptive user bases consuming and spreading biased information. Likewise, traditional print media has long been instrumental in shaping public perception. However, what about before the digital era—even before the invention of paper? This article aims to explore the intersection of media and propaganda beyond the modern landscape, breaking down the term “media” to its most fundamental root: the Latin noun *medium* (plural: *media*), meaning the middle, interval, or intervening space.

To establish a foundation for this discussion, it is essential to first define propaganda. In his 1963 *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, French philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul defines propaganda as “a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulation and incorporated in an organization.” (Ellul 61). Ellul’s definition is particularly significant because it states that propaganda involves the strategic effort to unify and mobilize a population toward a desired action or ideology. The psychological underpinnings are absolutely crucial in examining and defining the essence of propaganda.

As previously noted, ancient Rome was no stranger to propaganda and exercised it thoroughly through different means of media. The Roman Empire required more than just military strength to maintain its dominance; it equally relied on a carefully crafted system of influence to bind and control its diverse population. No leader grasped this concept more fully

than Rome's first emperor, Octavian Augustus. Throughout Augustus's reign, he was able to leverage media as a tool to instill a collective identity and reinforce political and imperial power. Under his rule, all forms of media ultimately centered on one defining element: spectacle.

Modern-day democracy is notably modeled after the political structure of the Roman Republic; however, unlike Augustus, who ruled with near-total control, today's leaders must navigate democratic systems where power is contingent on public approval; as a result, propaganda remains central to the political process. As Ellul further observes, "Propaganda is importantly linked to democracy...Democracy depends on public opinion and competition between political parties. In order to come to power, parties make propaganda to gain voters" (Ellul 231). Though democracy is intended to safeguard against authoritarianism, the enduring power of propaganda complicates this ideal of an independent and rational electorate.

In this article, I examine how Augustus leveraged amphitheaters and the staging of gladiatorial games to reinforce loyalty between Roman citizens and the emperor, thereby securing his position of power. Similarly, the circulation and exchange of Roman coins under his rule served as a deliberate means of disseminating messages of Roman strength and superiority across the empire. By analyzing these forms of media, this study highlights how Augustus strategically used propaganda to shape public perception and legitimize his authority. Lastly, I aim to draw parallels between the political media strategies of ancient Rome and modern-day political practices by comparing how political figures of this era have utilized media channels to cultivate public trust, reinforce authority, and maintain political dominance. Ultimately, this exploration seeks to reveal that although the methods may have evolved, the fundamental strategy remains unchanged: shaping public perception is just as crucial to political success today as it was in ancient Rome.

Propaganda and Spectacle

At the heart of ancient Rome stood the amphitheater, a site that represented the splendor of the empire. There, men were forced to prove their bravery and prowess in combat, while regular citizens served as excited spectators, indulging in their favorite kind of entertainment. However, what these onlookers often failed to realize was that the amphitheater served as a site of imperial propaganda, and the citizens were used as pawns by the emperor in order to uphold his public image. In this upcoming section, I focus on Caesar Augustus' leverage of the amphitheater and Roman Games to shape the general public's opinion of him to bolster his political status and cement his image as a virtuous figure.

The *Ludi Romani* (Roman Games) were among the oldest and most significant public festivals in ancient Rome. Originally established as a religious tradition, the games were intended to honor the kingship, sovereignty, and protection of the state. These games, which included chariot races, theatrical performances, and gladiatorial combat, were celebrated annually and held in grand amphitheaters. The space had undoubtedly become a symbol of Rome's power. Yet in Rome's transition from a Republic to an Empire, the games and the amphitheater began to carry a new form of significance for political figures seeking influence.

As a man trying to embody the role of Rome's first emperor, Augustus needed to consider the impression he wanted to leave behind on the citizens of Rome. With the disastrous ending of the Triumvirates and his involvement in high-profile assassinations, Augustus had acquired a reputation for being quite brutal in his early ruling years. However, it was clear that he aspired to be remembered as a wise and courageous ruler, embodying the strength and virtue that Roman citizens expected of their leaders. This can be gathered from his historic autobiography, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (translating to the Deeds of the Divine Augustus), in which Augustus

refers to himself multiple times as “Princeps Civitatis,” translating to “The First Citizen” and “Pater Patriae” (Father of Fatherland), who freed and saved the Republic through his virtuous deeds (Starr 296-98).

In order to counter those previous negative perceptions, Augustus knew he had to set out to reshape his public image so that his subjects would see in him what he saw in himself: a protector and a man of virtue. Augustus was in close proximity to Cicero, the great orator of the public, who, according to history professor Andrew J.E. Bell, was said to have had the ability to construct words in a way that would “shape men's opinions and move their hearts” (Bell 1). Augustus saw firsthand how Cicero captivated the Roman people and began to be contemplative of his tactics. One of Cicero’s main political beliefs was that of *concordia ordinum* (the harmony of orders). *Concordia ordinum* is the belief that the foundation of the Republic is dependent on the harmony between the Senate and the citizens. If one party is resentful towards the other, then internal division occurs, and the state is more susceptible to rebellion. This principle resonated with Augustus, who realized that winning the trust of both the elite and the plebeians was essential for lasting authority. For him to maintain not only the security of the state, but his own security and longevity as an emperor, there had to be some established bridge between the elite (himself) and the general public. For Augustus, the gladiator games would serve as this very bridge.

With this new vantage point, Augustus began implementing strategies to revitalize the amphitheater and the games and use them to his advantage. His first motion forward was to invest more money in the amphitheater and the games to make them grander. Augustus began to allocate some of the funds that Rome acquired through military conquests towards building up the amphitheater. Most notably, this money went into the construction of the Amphitheater of

Capua, the largest amphitheater of Augustus's time before the construction of the Colosseum almost 100 years later.

Augustus was also responsible for increasing the number of games that were held in a year. The ancient historian, C. Suetonius Tranquillus, states in *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, “[Augustus] surpassed all his predecessors in the frequency, variety, and magnificence of his public shows. He says that he gave games four times in his own name and twenty-three times for other magistrates, who were either away from Rome or lacked means” (Sue. Aug. 45.43). He also states that under Augustus, around sixty-six days a year were dedicated to public games. This rising emphasis on the theatricality of the games, along with their growing frequency, marks a shift from their role as sacred tradition toward their use as political capital.

Cicero once noted that sponsoring games should not be the priority of any man aspiring to rise in political rank. While hosting games may win popular favor, this support is inherently unstable because people are not drawn to the sponsor's virtue or character, but rather to the immediate gratification of entertainment. Cicero saw this as a form of bribery and considered it to be both fleeting and superficial, making it a far less reliable foundation for genuine loyalty. He also says the games do not serve as a sufficient connection to citizens, as the games were much too expensive for ordinary citizens to attend. They were for those who were financially more well-off (Cicero). Augustus, however, sought to directly subvert this notion, believing that he could forge a connection with citizens through his revitalization of the games, and he was ultimately successful in this endeavor. By reducing the cost of the games, allowing for more citizens to view them, providing free provisions for spectators, and even attending the games himself, he minimized the gap between the emperor and the plebeians even further and maintained *concordia*.

Through his actions, it is clear that the amphitheater extended beyond a site for entertainment for Augustus. The amphitheater was a medium in which a collective Roman identity could be shaped. This idea aligns with the work of political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson, who, in his influential *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, explores how nations are socially constructed through shared symbols, rituals, and narratives rather than direct interpersonal connections. Anderson argues that a sense of belonging to a larger community is often based on collective experiences rather than physical proximity or direct relationships. The Roman amphitheater functioned much in the same way, fostering a shared identity among citizens who, despite their geographic and social differences, felt unified through the spectacles they witnessed. Augustus reinforced this imagined connection by expanding the games, lowering costs to ensure broader participation, and even attending games himself to further blur the lines between ruler and ruled. Spectators who had never met Augustus—and never would—nonetheless felt a personal association with him, shaped by the grand narratives of Roman power and virtue that played out in the arena. Through this shared experience, the amphitheater became a mechanism for consolidating imperial authority and reinforcing the idea of a unified Roman people.

As Richard Beacham discusses in *Spectacle Entertainments of Early Imperial Rome*, the games were no longer seen “just as public religious ceremonies but also as gifts from the responsible official” (3). This perspective, from the citizens’ standpoint, allows for the games to now directly correspond to the image of the elite, casting them as symbols of generosity and benevolence. By hosting these events, Augustus positioned himself as the benefactor of the Roman people, not only satisfying the people’s need for entertainment but also reinforcing his desired role as *pater virtutis* amongst the people.

This transformation of the games as a means to garner the public's support proved to be a successful strategy, as we can see in historians' past accounts of the games, such as Seneca, who noted how citizens were quite vocal in their excitement and support for these games.¹ This growing emphasis on public entertainment and satisfaction was embedded in a broader approach to governance, one that would come to be known as bread and circuses, a phrase coined by the Roman poet Juvenal. In *Satires*, Juvenal famously wrote, "Give them bread and circuses, and they will never revolt." Although Juvenal lived shortly after Augustus's reign, his words capture the enduring imperial notion of using public spectacles to secure political favor and suppress dissent. The games became a means of keeping plebeians content and loyal. By satisfying the people's desires for entertainment through gladiatorial games, Roman leaders such as Augustus were able to ensure that citizens remained willingly subservient, safeguarding the emperor's authority and stabilizing the empire.

The prospect of entertainment and food also served as a powerful distraction, diverting their attention away from the pressing political and economic challenges facing the empire. This tactic was central to Augustus's approach, ensuring that the public remained focused on the spectacle rather than questioning whether he was truly a man of virtue and justice. Most importantly, it diverted the public's attention away from the possibility of insurrection against his rule. By using gladiatorial games and other entertainments as a distraction, Augustus was able to keep the plebeians satisfied, strengthening his position and reducing the risk of unrest.

The games, in and of themselves, were grand statements of imperial dominance, designed to publicly display the strength and superiority of the Roman Empire. Every aspect of the games is laced with imperial implications, all tying back to Rome's military conquests, reinforcing not

¹ Noted in his *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* (Letter 7.5) Seneca reflects on the crowds rowdiness during the games and rebukes their enjoyment as they express their superiority over the ill-fated gladiators in the arena

only the emperor's authority but also the empire's authority as a whole. In this context, the participants in the games were symbolic of Rome's expansive narrative.

The men who fought in the games were typically prisoners of war, condemned criminals, and slaves—many of whom were purchased specifically for the purpose of fighting in the arena. As Associate Professor of Roman History at The University of Arizona, Alison Futrell, notes in *The Roman Games*, “There is a good deal of overlap between this category of gladiator and the others; in part because prisoners of war were often sold as slaves to a gladiatorial school, just as those condemned to the ludus (game) by criminal conviction were considered slaves legally” (125).

Ultimately, what all these men had in common was that they were victims of the empire’s military conquests, forced into a life of combat for the entertainment and amusement of Roman citizens. Not only were they deprived of their freedom, but they were also stripped of their identities, reduced to mere spectacles for the public's gratification. This dehumanizing practice served as the ultimate exercise of Roman power, demonstrating the empire's absolute control over its imperial subjects, and reinforcing its dominance through violence and spectacle.

Not only were the gladiators representative of Rome’s imperial power, but the animals used in the games were as well. Records document that a variety of animals were used in the games, including crocodiles, hippopotamuses, tigers, lions, and leopards, sourced from regions as far as Africa and Asia (Coley). The extravagance of animals highlights the lengths to which Augustus went to amplify the grandeur of the games, reinforcing Rome’s dominance and contributing to the glamour and spectacle Augustus sought to craft as a visual representation of imperial power. Beyond the exotic beasts, the games featured other impressive spectacles that showcased the empire's grandeur, with the most notable being the naval combat games, or

naumachiae. First introduced during the reign of Julius Caesar, in these games, the amphitheater would be flooded with water, and specially constructed ships would reenact naval battles. Augustus mentions that 3,000 men participated in the naval battle, not even including the slaves tasked with controlling the oars. Similarly, Augustus recalls securing beasts for the games and notes that “some 10,000 men took part in combat” (22). These numbers highlight Rome's unparalleled ability to mobilize human resources, transforming its imperial subjects into theatrical pawns for the empire's grand displays. Furthermore, this act of restaging past glories reinforced a sense of invincibility among the spectators, reminding them of their empire's dominance and their own place within its legacy.

The influence of Roman amphitheaters extended far beyond the borders of the empire. Archaeological excavations have discovered remnants of Roman amphitheaters in various locations such as Africa, Britannia, Turkey, Lajjun (modern-day Israel), and France. These sites serve as evidence of the Romans' cultural influence and the imperial propaganda they spread across the empire. These findings underscore the significance of amphitheaters in Roman society; they were seen as so crucial and integral to Roman society that, in order to leave a mark in the imperial territories, they reconstructed more amphitheaters in their likeness. All of this highlights the amphitheater's role as a vehicle for the dissemination of Roman customs and traditions.

The implementation of amphitheaters in Britain in the context of the Roman conquest further emphasizes their importance as symbols of Roman cultural expression and imperial domination. As Futrell further discusses in *The Roman Games*, the construction of amphitheaters in newly conquered territories, such as Britain, served as a means of asserting Roman authority and reinforcing loyalty to the emperor. By establishing gladiatorial games in these amphitheaters,

Roman officials sought to instill a sense of allegiance among their imperial subjects, promoting adherence to Roman ideals and values. This strategic use of public spectacle as a tool of political control highlights the propagandistic tactics employed by the Romans to maintain imperial authority and expand their influence beyond the borders of Rome itself. The presence of amphitheaters in these imperial regions allowed the emperor to exert control and influence over subjects, even from afar. By participating in and sponsoring these games, the emperor could cultivate a sense of loyalty and obedience among the populace, ensuring their continued support for Roman rule.

The Roman amphitheater was more than just a site of entertainment: it was a powerful tool for shaping public perception and consolidating imperial power. Under Augustus, the transformation of the games from religious observance to a means of political influence marked a deliberate shift in the role of public spectacles. These events fostered a sense of unity, distracted the populace from political discontent, and established Augustus as a benevolent leader. His strategic use of the games not only helped secure his authority but also set a precedent for future emperors, who continued to leverage the amphitheater as a bridge to the public and a cornerstone of Roman propaganda. Through these spectacles, the empire not only expanded geographically but culturally, embedding its ideals into conquered lands and leaving a legacy that underscored Rome's enduring influence across the ancient world.

The Imperial Mission of the Roman Coin

Coins, as small as they may seem to the common eye, hold great value when it comes to storytelling. These tokens have the ability to give the modern onlooker a peek into history, approximately when and where the coin was minted, as well as the traditions and values they

reflect. The coins also pose deeper, subliminal questions: What messages are the elite or government trying to convey to the people through these designs? In this section, I examine how coins during the Augustan period served as tools of political propaganda. By utilizing imagery, these coins project an image of superiority and authority, shaping public perception of the emperor. Given the vast reach of the Roman Empire, the coins have the ability to leave a lasting impression on its many imperial subjects.

During Classical Antiquity, as one can imagine, news was far less accessible to the general public than it is in modern times. Letters containing updates or information were delivered by carriers, either traveling on foot or by horse. It could take a few weeks for messages to be delivered, and this is only taking into account areas within Rome's vicinity. For further imperial regions, it could take months to receive said news. Coins would come to serve as a much more efficient medium for disseminating messages across the Roman Empire. Unlike statues, which are often created to showcase the power and presence of political figures, coins acted as a more portable and practical alternative. While statues can only be admired in specific locations, coins circulate widely, remaining with individuals and staying closer to the imperial subjects in their daily lives. This proximity and utility make coins uniquely effective in allowing rulers to convey an image of themselves directly to their subjects.

There are two distinct means of numismatic identification within the late Republic and imperial timeframe: provincial coinage and imperial coinage. Provincial coinage refers to any coin minted within the conquered provinces and circulated outside of Rome, while imperial coins were minted in Rome and typically depicted the bust of the emperor or a member of his lineage on the obverse. These two forms of coinage offer the onlooker contrasting perspectives. One viewpoint is from the imperial power himself, while the other is on behalf of the imperial

subject. As University of Colorado graduate student Sarah A. Nichols notes in her 2011 dissertation “Between Imperial and Provincial: The Questions of Center and Periphery in Constantinian Numismatics,” “the provincial coins provide a closer reflection of local attitudes than imperial coins minted throughout the empire and are frequently subject to a complex set of inquiries surrounding the issues of center and periphery” (iii). Nichols argues further that although all mints, both provincial and imperial, were forms of pro-Augustan propaganda, each type of coin has the ability to reflect both the projection of Augustan ideology and the very result of that projected ideology. One particular example of this dynamic comes from an Emerita

(Hispania) mint. Figure 1 displays a silver denarius, minted circa 25 BCE–23 BCE (Roman Imperial Coinage I). The coin depicts a bound captive kneeling with a trophy resting on top of his head. This imagery is significant for a number of reasons, one of which is due to the context of



Fig. 1 Silver Denarius of Augustus. Obverse on the left depicts the bust of Augustus, while the reverse on the right depicts a kneeling captive with a trophy resting upon his head.

its provincial creation. The coin mirrors the reality of the imperial subjects who have created this mint, acknowledging the inescapable power of Roman authority. It visually communicates the outcome of conquest from the perspective of the conquered, while simultaneously aligning itself with Augustan messaging of his imperial power. In this sense, the coin functions not only as propaganda but also as a visual acknowledgment of provincial subjugation.

In designing the Roman imperial coin, Augustus drew heavily from Hellenistic influences, particularly within the realm of imperial portraiture. Coin portraiture of political figures dates back to the 5th century BC in Persia, with the first being of the likeness of

Tissaphernes, a statesman and military commander of the Persian army. One of the earliest examples of coins used to advance a political agenda occurred in 333 BC under Alexander the Great, ruler of the Macedonian Empire, the largest empire of its time. Following his victory over Darius III during a military campaign, Alexander began to mint his own style of coins to reflect his status as a triumphant leader. Effectively marking a shift in the approach to coin minting, “which now often portrays a portrait of the ruler or an emblem of the new dynasties” (Metropolitan Art Museum). This practice would come to spread quickly worldwide, including to Rome. When it comes to Augustus crafting an image for himself, he would take inspiration from the Greek East, in emphasizing their heroic and divine attributes through their own depictions (Thompson 41).

One of the most notable examples of Alexander the Great expressing these attributes comes in the form of his Tetradrachm (Fig. 2), which features the face of Hercules, the Greek



(Fig. 2) Tetradrachm coin issued under the command of Alexander the Great. Obverse depicting the head of Hercules, and the reverse depicting Zeus holding an eagle and scepter, with the name "ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ" adjacent

god, who was said to have once carried out a successful conquest of the East, and who Alexander the Great claims to be a descendant of (Lawton 1996). On these coins reads “ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ,” meaning “of Alexander,”

implying that Alexander associates himself with the strength and military prowess of Hercules. This creates a distinctive intermixing of man and the divine, undoubtedly inspiring future great leaders.

During the Roman Republic, political portraiture differed significantly compared to the later imperial period, particularly in terms of the way people wanted to be represented. In the earlier period, political figures were content with being depicted in a more realistic fashion.

However, there was a notable shift after Augustus's accession to power. Portraits became much more intentional; they were no longer focused on accurately depicting appearances but rather on conveying a crafted image, becoming more symbolic representations of emperors and political figures. Given that Augustus is the first sole emperor of Rome, he was determined to craft a distinctive image for himself, one that set him apart not only from the Roman elite but also from his predecessors. Augustus was very mindful of the public opinion circulating about him among the people and constantly sought to redirect those murmurs into a more favorable light. Zanker observes that Octavian's "most urgent concern at first is public acknowledgment of his services to the state and his abilities as a commander of the army" (37). A notable example of this is the Denarius of Augustus as Neptune, minted between 31-29 BC (Fig. 3), which symbolizes his victory over Sextus Pompey, a prominent statesman, member of the First Triumvirate, and son-in-law of Julius Caesar.



(Fig. 3) Denarius of Augustus as Neptune, circa 31-29 BC

Like his father, Sextus excelled in naval warfare, and the Pompeius family claimed descent from Neptune. Both leaders garnered political and public support, but Augustus ultimately triumphed at the Battle of Naulochus. He commemorated this victory on the denarius, which depicts Octavian holding an *aphlaston* (the stern of an enemy ship) in one hand and a lance in the other, reinforcing his image as a dominant military commander. Augustus even goes as far as using the same imagery that appeared on an earlier coin of Sextus Pompey, which celebrated his previous victory over Augustus's troops. In this denarius, Augustus not only reclaims the symbolism of naval dominance but also asserts his superiority by reversing and somewhat mocking Sextus's earlier triumph. Through this imagery, he positions himself as

Rome's rightful protector and leader while simultaneously undermining Pompey's self-proclaimed divine lineage.

In his *Philippics*, Cicero drew parallels between Augustus and Alexander the Great, saying that both rulers were destined for greatness from a young age. Augustus himself also adopted some of Alexander's tactics when it came to establishing his image across the empire, both figures placing emphasis on their relationship to divinity, particularly through their minting of coins. Like Alexander, who associated himself with Hercules to highlight his divine lineage and military triumphs, Augustus crafted his coins to assert not only his political authority but also his unique connection to the divine. Alexander's coinage emphasizes his alignment with Hercules, drawing parallels between their shared conquests of the East. Augustus, however, expanded on this by intertwining his divine affiliation with Julius Caesar and asserting his connection to the gods more broadly. His portrayal of himself as Neptune is a deliberate move to highlight his unique relationship with the divine—one that surpasses any claims made by his counterparts, particularly Sextus Pompey. This imagery reinforced Augustus as not only the rightful leader of Rome, but also as a figure inherently linked to godly power and favor. Through this visual and symbolic language, Augustus ensured that his portrayal as a divine and victorious leader resonated throughout the empire, drawing upon a tradition established by Alexander but tailored to Rome's particular political and cultural state. The coin, therefore, functions as a piece of propaganda, ensuring that Augustus' victory and supremacy are known throughout the empire.

Another interesting feature of Augustus' coinage is the evolution of his depicted age (Fig. 4). The coin on the left, minted when Augustus is about 27 years old, shows him in his youth, while the coins on the right are minted when he is around 50 years old. Yet, in these later coins, Augustus appears with younger features than those of his 27-year-old self. This highlights how

coins function as tools of self-mythologization through immortalization. They capture Augustus in his prime, ensuring that this image of him as youthful, victorious, and the divine son of Julius Caesar is the one remembered by imperial subjects. Even those in far-reaching imperial regions would never associate Augustus with old age but instead with his military conquests and divinity.



(Fig. 4) Coin on the left was minted when Augustus was a youth, while the two on the right were minted at age 50.

Augustus makes use of the coin not so much as in fostering an *imagined community* as Anderson suggests, but rather an imagined *identity*, that he is mindful of impressing upon the memories of the Roman citizens, and all their imperial subjects. Unlike Anderson's notion of a community bound by shared symbols and narratives, Augustus's coins serve as a direct medium of self-representation, projecting his authority and ideological vision onto the empire. When Zanker discusses Augustus' transition from Octavian to Augustus, he explains, "It expresses Augustus' new image of himself, how he imagined himself as 'Augustus,' and how he identified himself with the new title" (Zanker 98). This deliberate act of self-fashioning extends beyond personal glorification; it functions as a strategic exercise in political branding, ensuring that his carefully curated identity, one rooted in stability, divine favor, and the restoration of Rome, permeates every level of society. Unlike Augustus's use of the gladiator games to assert an image of a more relatable, down-to-earth emperor who allowed citizens to indulge in entertainment of their liking, Augustus chose to use coins in a different manner, one that would allow him to assert an image of authority and superiority within the imperial regions. Gladiatorial games connected him to the Roman masses, offering a sense of familiarity and mutual participation in civic life, whereas coins functioned as a one-sided assertion of imperial dominance, shaping not

only how Augustus wanted to be seen but how he wanted to be remembered across the empire. Coins, as a ubiquitous and transactional medium, make Augustus's image inescapable, reinforcing his status as the singular figurehead of Roman power. In this way, the currency does not merely reflect imperial authority but actively constructs and sustains it, demonstrating how these coins exert influence over public perception and have the power to legitimize political narratives.

The Roman coin is more than a monetary instrument; it is a medium of communication, a portable propaganda tool that reaches the farthest corners of the empire. During Augustus's reign, the emperor expanded the role of coinage in crafting his public persona, blending divine symbolism with political power. Through these small coins, Augustus shaped the perception of his rule, establishing his legacy as a youthful, victorious, and divinely endorsed leader. The enduring influence of these coins demonstrates their significance in ancient Rome as a powerful form of politically driven media.

Social Media: Modern Day Rome

In recent years, there have been many conversations regarding the comparison between the Roman Empire and America, with many questioning whether the United States is approaching the end of its established empire. While centuries separate these two civilizations, both demonstrate the ability of political leaders to craft and control public perception through strategic messaging. Much like Augustus, who transitioned Rome from a republic to an autocracy under the guise of restoring stability through propaganda, public works, and military victories, political leaders of today use eerily similar rhetoric in efforts to rally support from citizens. Figures such as Donald Trump position themselves as a necessary correction to a failing

system; however, now, rather than spreading subliminal messages through entertainment or coins, political figures are able to spread rhetoric and establish support through social media.

Today, social media forums like Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok have assumed the role of the amphitheater, bringing people together to share ideas and bond over common interests, unhindered by distance. Critical theorist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas describes this as the public sphere: a place where “[c]itizens behave as a public body...confer[ring] in an unrestricted fashion—that is with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions about matters of general interest” (49). Habermas envisioned the public sphere as an open and inclusive space for open, influential, rational dialogues, noting the evolution of the public sphere moving from a more bourgeois sphere including only those of the upper class, to a more inclusive and democratic sphere. Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok widen the public sphere and allow citizens of every class to come together to discuss and debate their differing political and social views.

Furthermore, Anderson’s notion of "imagined communities" becomes central to this digital interaction. In the exchange of opinions and interests, different groups tend to materialize, based on their commonalities. There is an underlying imagined component that unites different people together, without ever truly knowing the other individual with whom they are forming the relationship. Yet, the more we examine interactions on these social platforms, it has become clear that discussions tend to stray away from the rationalism that Habermas promoted, and instead evolve into exchanges fueled by emotion. As emotion increasingly shapes discourse, and the embedded sense of “imagination” is, in a sense, unavoidable within these digital spaces, it is also important to note how the relationships formed between audiences and public figures begin to take on new dimensions. The phenomenon of parasocial relationships is inexplicably linked to

these social forums and undoubtedly becomes a tool used by political figures to facilitate the creation and spread of propaganda.

Augustus's underlying intent with the gladiator games was to establish not only a reputation for himself, but also a relationship with his subjects. He refused to have gladiator games held in his honor after any of his victories to portray himself as humble, yet he financed and built amphitheaters for the public's entertainment, hence portraying himself as a man of the people. In Augustus's use of the amphitheater, it can be said that he aimed to form a parasocial relationship with his subjects. Even though they would never know him personally, they would associate him with humility and perceive him as a benevolent leader who prioritized the well-being and entertainment of the public. In her article "Evolutionary Theory and Reactions to Mass Media: Understanding Parasocial Attachment," psychology professor and fan/celebrity studies researcher Gayle Stever defines a parasocial relationship (PSR) as "a non-reciprocated relationship with a mediated personality" in which one derives "a sense of felt security and safe haven" (95). The rise of social media has fundamentally altered the nature of parasocial relationships, making them much more easily fostered than in previous times. Public figures, whose lives were once so seemingly distant—limited to television appearances, carefully curated interviews, and magazine profiles, are now made to be accessible. Celebrity figures are now tweeting what they had for breakfast, posting what songs they were listening to, etc. People are now led to believe that they truly know the person on the other side of the screen. In the American Psychological Association's article, "More Than Just a Tweet: The Unconscious Impact of Forming Parasocial Relationships through Social Media," these relationships are likened to a "[a]n individual who has a parasocial bond with a celebrity would not experience different mental processes when thinking about that celebrity than when thinking about a

‘real-life’ friend; the individual would likely feel greater empathy toward that celebrity, take pride in the celebrity’s successes, and feel understood by the celebrity, similar to how that individual feels about other friends in his or her social life” (Paravati, Naidu, Gabriel, and Wiedemann, 2020). However, in these relationships, one cannot truly know the person on the other side of the screen, but rather the image that the figure puts forth. Similar to Anderson’s argument, even though these relationships are imagined, the emotions and behaviors that result from them are very real. It was only a matter of time before politicians took notice of the widening digital public sphere and parasocial tendencies of users, before they started to leverage these social media platforms to their own political agenda.

Donald Trump’s use of social media is unlike anything the American public has ever seen from a president. Previous presidents also utilized social media for communicating with the public, but their approaches were typically much more restrained and formal. Their posts were carefully crafted to align with their own political messaging, promoting policies or engaging with other political constituents in a traditional manner. However, Trump took a unique approach to social media during his political run. “More Than Just a Tweet” notes, “Over the first year of his presidency, Trump tweeted an average of 11–12 times a day, with the majority of these posts not discussing national policy but instead describing his personal feelings, thoughts, and reactions to the world around him” (Paravati, Naidu, Gabriel, & Wiedemann, 2020). Rather than acting in a more reserved and conventional manner, he used social media to express his authenticity. Trump was able to recognize that people often felt removed from the inner workings of the White House and the mind of the president, and like Augustus, he understood that a stronger connection to the public was more beneficial than a detached one. The study states that, due to Trump’s frequent tweets regarding his feelings, those who share similar thoughts and feelings are more likely to

feel seen by him, and thus more likely to do what he asks of them (Paravati, Naidu, Gabriel, & Wiedemann, 2020).

The impact of this parasocial relationship is evident in the unfolding of the January 6th riots. For additional context, in 2021, a mob of far-right Trump supporters stormed the Capitol in an effort to overturn Congress's count of electoral votes, in response to Trump's loss in the 2020 presidential election. Linda Qiu, fact-check reporter for the *New York Times*, reports that up until the day of the riot, Trump had made over 300 tweets expressing the sentiment that the 2020 presidential election had been rigged. On the day of the insurrection, Trump tweeted nearly 25 times, reinforcing the idea that the election had been rigged, and alluding to the fact that it was up to the American people to fight for the country. Below is a tweet posted in the hours prior to the insurrection:



Through his incessant tweeting, Trump was able to reinforce the belief among his supporters that the election had been stolen, while fostering a sense of anger and fear, ultimately mobilizing a group to act on his behalf. By continuously amplifying claims of fraud and positioning the election as an existential threat to the nation, Trump's rhetoric functioned as a form of propaganda. By exercising his parasocial command over his supporters, Trump was able to foster a mob, united not only in their "imagined" connection to him but also in their shared devotion to

him. Through this bond, he was able to invoke a sense of resentment and urgency for radicalization. The political implications are profound, as they demonstrate that social media gives political figures the power to incite action amongst the people, blurring the lines between truth and misinformation.

When analyzing modern media use in the spread of propaganda, it is crucial to recognize a shift in the relationship between leader and follower. In discussing Augustus's use of propaganda, I initially focused on the image-building aspect of his reign. However, in today's political landscape, it is clear that radicalization has taken on a new form that benefits political leaders more than ever. Today, it is not only about cultivating a strong, recognizable image, but also about leveraging an audience to move in a way that consolidates and extends the political figure's rule. Radicalization, as explored earlier, occurs through the media; however, the way the right and left approach their relationship with their respective followings diverges significantly. Both sides aim to evoke emotions within their audiences, which is essential for a leader to gain and maintain power. Yet, while the right often relies on fear (using the threat of outsiders and societal decay to unite its followers), the left has historically leaned into optimism and inclusivity, a strategy that became particularly evident with Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign.

In 2008, Obama became the first presidential candidate to fully harness social media as a political tool, using platforms like Facebook and Twitter to engage directly with voters, mobilize grassroots support, and craft a narrative centered on hope and unity. Stanford's Graduate School of Business article, "Obama and the Power of Social Media and Technology," notes:

Edelman Research analysts said that Obama won by '...converting everyday people into engaged and empowered volunteers, donors and advocates through social networks,

e-mail advocacy, text messaging and online video. The campaign's proclivity to online advocacy is a major reason for his victory...the campaign sent out a total of 1 billion e-mails in-house. They sent 8,000 to 10,000 unique e-mail messages targeted to specific segments of their 13-million-member-strong e-mail list, with subjects ranging from state and residence to issues to donation history (Aaker & Chang 1).

The Obama campaign's digital strategy revolutionized modern political communication, setting the stage for how future candidates, both on the left and the right, would come to leverage social media to build movements and establish personal connections with their audiences.

However, despite spearheading the integration of social media into presidential campaigns, the left has struggled in recent years to maintain the same level of digital influence.



While right-wing figures like Donald Trump effectively harnessed platforms such as Twitter to communicate directly with their

base, generate media attention, and shape political discourse, Democratic politicians were initially slower to embrace the confrontational, personality-driven approach that has come to define modern political engagement and has helped the right establish digital communities. As previously argued, social media and celebrity political endorsements have favored the left, yet their approach has remained relatively passive in fully leveraging these media platforms. In recent years, the left has begun to take a more strategic approach in utilizing social media, actively integrating pop culture into their political messaging. This shift became especially apparent during Kamala Harris's 2024 campaign. Embracing the cultural momentum of Charli XCX's BRAT, Harris's team decided to co-sign the era within their campaign. By the summer of

2024, BRAT had become a full-fledged cultural phenomenon, with its neon green aesthetic and rebellious energy dominating online discourse. Later that July, Charli XCX took to Twitter to state, “Kamala IS brat.” Within hours, the Harris campaign had changed its Twitter header to the album’s signature green. The campaign even played into the inside joke about Harris’s past remarks, referencing the viral “coconut tree” moment² by updating its bio to “Providing the context.” This moment is representative of how the left is starting to actively engage with the culture in efforts to integrate their own political agenda into the entertainment landscape. This approach has proven effective in mobilizing young voters, who may have been disengaged from the traditional political discourse but deeply embedded in online fandoms. The left’s evolving approach to social media suggests a recognition that media and culture are inseparable from political mobilization.

A key distinction between the right and the left’s approach to social media lies in the former’s use of a political strategy known as “flooding the zone,” a term popularized in 2018 by Steve Bannon, Trump’s former White House chief strategist. In a 2025 *New York Times* article, journalist Michael C. Bender explains that the idea behind the tactic is to release such a massive volume of content—tweets, statements, conspiracy theories, policy shifts, and sensational headlines—that it becomes nearly impossible for the media or the public to separate truth from falsehood, or focus on any single narrative (Bender). As Bannon bluntly put it: “The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit” (qtd. in Lewis). While Obama famously sent a number of personalized emails and letters to supporters during his 2009 campaign, this style of outreach lacked the aggressive saturation and emotional volatility that defines “flooding the zone” as practiced by the right. Democrats continue to

² In reference to Harris’s 2023 speech during a White House event for an initiative focused on expanding educational opportunities for Hispanic and Latino Americans. During the speech Harris most notably recalls the words of her mother, “I don’t know what’s wrong with you young people, you think you just fell out of a coconut tree? You exist in the context of all in which you live and what came before you.”

employ similar techniques today, frequently sending mass emails and texts to solicit donations, but in doing so, they seem to be flooding the zone with the wrong kind of content: transactional, predictable, and easy to ignore. As Bender further observed, the right's strategy has left Democrats "gasping" (Bender) and confused on how to respond, without compromising their value of civil discourse, as it may seem that engaging with the opposite party through social media threatens this. However, much to their dismay, relying solely on donation solicitation and traditional outreach methods is no longer sufficient. In today's media climate, influence is built through speed, saturation, and emotional resonance, even if the connections formed are parasocial or polarizing. This raises a critical question: Is consolidated power even something the left truly seeks? As a political group that emphasizes checks and balances and traditional democratic processes, the left's conception of power often centers on representation and institutional integrity. In contrast, the right tends to prioritize a form of dominance that mirrors the model of Augustus, rooted more in spectacle and control than in collective governance.

The digital age has transformed political engagement, but the desire to create a compelling image persists. Just as Augustus used public events to cultivate loyalty, modern politicians use social media to build parasocial bonds and control narratives. The merging of politics and entertainment highlights the cultural forces that drive modern-day political engagement. Social media now functions as a real-time amphitheater, where politics, propaganda, and entertainment all co-exist.

Conclusion

Although the authoritarianism of Augustus and the Roman Empire may seem like a relic of a distant past, featuring the type of power-hungry tyranny that the Western mind often categorizes as archaic, the shadows of the Empire linger in the structures and strategies of

modern-day political life. Political figures of today, much like those of ancient Rome, rely heavily on carefully constructed images, curated messages, and controlled narratives to maintain their authority and shape public opinion.

Augustus simultaneously represents what it takes to reach emperor status, while actively laying the groundwork for the attributes of an emperor, in defining how a leader should interact with his subjects, what messaging he wants to disseminate to the masses, crafting his own image for the masses, etc. In the current political climate, particularly with the Trump administration, it is compelling to compare the two leaders and examine the ways in which each leader has gone about establishing a legacy for himself. Whether it be embedding one's presence through coins, games, or social media, all of these tools have come to serve a similar purpose for such leaders: to blur the line between the man and the myth, and to make their image inseparable from the state itself. We can also see how political leaders, both past and present, have utilized media to foster radicalism among their supporters and have been able to successfully consolidate their power by means of this radicalization. While right-leaning political figures have often embraced this mode of mobilization, it is clear that the political left still appears hesitant to adopt similar methods—whether out of ethical caution, strategic miscalculation, or a belief in the stability of institutional norms. Even their attempts to modernize, in acknowledging youth culture and participating in digital trends, have often lacked the urgency or authenticity needed to compete with the spectacle-driven strategies of the opposite party. As a result, there exists a growing imbalance in how power is performed and perceived, where one side masters the spectacle, and the other struggles to respond without compromising its ideals.

Circling back to Ellul's connection between propaganda and democratic function, it remains pressing today. The legacy of propaganda is not only relevant but essential for

understanding how democracies can be swayed by leaders who blur performance with policy, emotion with ideology, and spectacle with governance.

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