

INTRODUCTION: POLITICS, POWER AND 'PLATFORMATIVITY'¹

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The Internet is vanishing: as its ubiquity increases, it has also become less and less visible in the production and experiences of network culture. Indeed, many of the operations that used to typify the Internet are now funnelled through so-called 'platforms'. We do not have a single Internet anymore, but rather a multiplicity of distinct platforms, which in this issue are broadly defined as online 'cloud'-based software modules that act as portals to diverse kinds of information, with nested applications that aggregate content, often generated by 'users' themselves. These are characteristics often associated with 'Web 2.0' in marketing and popular discourses; discourses that are wholly inadequate for a serious critical engagement with the politics of platforms. 'Platform' is a useful term because it is a broad enough category to capture a number of distinct phenomena, such as social networking, the shift from desktop to tablet computing, smart phone and 'app'-based interfaces as well as the increasing dominance of centralised cloud-based computing. The term is also specific enough to indicate the capturing of digital life in an enclosed, commercialized and managed realm. As Eugenia Siapera points out in her article included in this issue, the roots of 'platform studies' in gaming and operating systems need to be extended to include digital platforms of all kinds. Therefore, while the presence of the Internet must not be forgotten, theories of network culture need to be supplemented with new frameworks and paradigms.

The challenge can be seen most clearly in the contradictions of platform politics. The desire expressed by Mark Zuckerberg in the early days of Facebook 'to make Facebook into something of an operating system' has become a widespread stimulus to platform development. The motivation is obvious: 'creating a platform that enables a software company to become the nexus of an ecosystem of partners that are dependent on its product' (Kirkpatrick, 2010: 218)

will generate huge revenues and profits for that company. Yet, at the same time, the immense power of the 'social graph', which has expanded hugely as a result of the ease of use of many platforms, has provoked widespread speculation as to the role of, for example, social media in recent waves of protest and revolution. As a result, the potential for harnessing platforms against constituted power in all its forms has become one of the most pressing political questions of the early 21st century. All of these topics, and many more, are touched upon in the articles in this issue of *Culture Machine*. We hope the issue will be a valuable contribution to the growing body of critical work on 'platformativity'.

The issue opens with the contribution from Greg Elmer and Ganaele Langlois, who argue that the 'digital object' is the constitutive element of platforms. In considering platforms as objects they recognise an inherent autonomy of relations and affects. The characteristics of digital objects contribute to a specific kind of platform politics that reflects their increasingly discrete and hidden workings, yet at the same time shows how their external tentacles reach throughout the Internet. The point here is that platform 'objects' operate in a digital ecosystem ever more vast and hidden, and increasingly operating beyond human control or understanding. It is the hidden character of the source code, the algorithms that sift the vast amounts of data they process, and their autonomously generated relationships, that presents a great difficulty in both marshalling platforms for resistant uses and in researching them. The 'objectness' of platforms is what Elmer and Langlois identify as the chief barrier to their research and understanding. They discuss attempts to access these platforms through alternative assemblages of data, rendering them visible in new ways, for example via their APIs (Application Programming Interfaces). While such alternatives assemblages present one possibility, this possibility is always already truncated by the fact that, in most cases, the access to the full spectrum of data is limited to the owners of the 'objects' themselves.

Neal Thomas also employs the concept of the 'object' in his contribution; building on this notion via Bernard Stiegler's understanding of memory as having 'material origins in *technicity*'. In that sense the digital objects of memory are grammatised as informational objects and understood as the originating elements of the subject, which are formed through the experience of time in the retention and protention of memory. Doubly important, therefore, is what Thomas calls 'industrial social computing', otherwise known as 'cloud computing'. As the latter is becoming a 'general substrate',

it organises what any platform can do, working at such speed so as to effectively become the exteriorised object of memory. The implications of this state of events are profound and reflected in the tendency towards a mass truncated 'affective participation', in which human subjects drift around helplessly on the surface of affective experience.

Paul Caplan dedicates his contribution to a full examination of the digital platform as just such an object, and does so through the lens of object oriented computing. Unlike the other uses of the term, which employ the idea as part of a constellation of materialist, or perhaps even 'new materialist', understandings, Caplan draws fully on the framework of Graham Harman's object oriented ontology. Caplan speaks of 'meshes' of objects, wherein all manner of digital phenomena, including social media 'likes' and 'friendships', as well as the algorithms that drive them, are described as objects. Through this, their objectness gains a life, a 'thing-power' that encourages us to think beyond the standard categories of being on-line and suggests a more positive reading of the digital object. The advantage of such a view is that it gives a reality to somewhat illusive digital phenomena - perhaps another dimension of the 'grey' and 'evil' processes that are discussed by Jussi Parikka later in the issue - but Caplan frames these as positive objects 'within' objects. The machinic quality of the digital object then becomes the real agent of platform politics, and thus a political object to be brought into the open and worked with. While the notion of an object has the advantage of throwing a border around the platform - of seeing it as being 'discretely connected' - other articles in this issue foreground the economic and technical context of the platform, its process and place at the centre of the flows of the global noosphere and as a neo-liberal force of machinic enclosure and subjectification.

We can certainly see this pattern developing in the advances of Facebook as it tries to absorb many of the functions of the Internet, including the Web, but also IRC, email, video communication and VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol), newspaper distribution, blogging and recently search. What Manuel Castells has referred to as 'switching power' (2009) becomes more and more focussed on a handful of platforms that colonise or enclose the Internet into a source of value creation, accumulating economic and consequently political power - which is captured in the dynamics of 'communication power'. While Castells foregrounds more traditional notions of a logocentric network, driven by the capacities of individuals and hubs, the approaches characterised in this issue

are sceptical of this notion of power. Instead, they find power embedded in matter itself; in the notion of the digital object as a distributed set of micro-relations characteristic of the 'digital objects' already mentioned, but also – to take a position outside of object oriented ontology – in relations viewed as antagonisms structured into protocological systems as a whole. On this basis, it is suggested, we can start to think about the dialectical relations that can be grasped as the driving power of a whole panoply of multifarious actants and networking logics.

Harry Halpin, for example, looks at the underlying institutional power of the Internet and its materialisation of control in the management of the Internet by ICANN and various other bodies. He points out that even where the Internet has managed to cling on to its 'neutrality', the ever growing power of Google and Facebook make this supposed neutrality less and less materially significant, as those corporations absorb its diversity and its affordances for the realisation of a counter-power in instantiated technological collective intelligence. Halpin refers to the rise of the platform as a matter of life itself, given its all-encompassing nature and its moves to capture value from free labour. Eugenia Siapera, also following a Marxian interpretation of online news and the ambiguities of the existing institutional power to influence online life looks at the subsumption of journalistic labour into the logic of the platform. In examining the increasing centrality of distribution for understanding the place of journalism in the political economy of news, Siapera insists this is necessary for rebalancing our understanding away from the traditional site of news 'production' to the 'whole' picture. She finds that an emptying out of meaning occurs with the circulation of fragments and 'liked' articles – an argument that resonates with Jodi Dean's (2012) notion of communicative capitalism. Siapera suggests that the platform politics of journalism is one that demands an account of consumption as increasingly inseparable from production and circulation, in ever more immediate and profound ways.

The question of possibility and hope beyond the increasingly control-oriented and value-capturing aspects of platformification lies in the capacity of platforms to provide affordances for radical political configurations. Such a facility, for example, to open up prospects for events that rupture the smooth surface of capitalist flows, and for fidelity to events as such, is explored by Joss Hands, who touches on the themes of subjectivation and becoming common in his evaluation of the chances for a non-capitalist

platform politics, or 'platform communism', being realised. Engaging with a range of recent thinking regarding a revived and rethought communism, Hands claims that platform communism's most feasible realisation is in the combination of expanded antagonisms alongside the construction of common spaces to accommodate an exodus that can challenge the dominance of the digital control society. While Hands focuses primarily on the prospects of platforms for ruptures and revolutionary breaks in the transition from capitalism, Nick Dyer-Witford offers a more fully historical conception of the relation between communism, cybernetics and planning through the lens of Francis Spufford's 'Red Plenty', which retells the story of Soviet computing and its dreams of a cybernetically-enhanced communism. Dyer-Witford explores the potential of a planned complex communism that could end scarcity and be finally realised thanks to the application of modern advanced computing power. The ability to develop platforms that could organise and plan a complex economy, according to the capabilities and needs of all, is taken seriously and the notion of a K-communism mooted. In that regard Dyer-Witford imagines what platforms, as spaces on the other side of the kinds of exodus discussed by Hands, could actually look like and how they could contribute to full computationally enhanced communism. Tim Jordan offers an alternative take on radical platform politics and the digital, diverging from some of the assumptions of the previous articles. Setting aside a prefigured Marxist or otherwise presumptive approach, he asks about the politics of information itself, exploring the question of whether we need to think of information and platform culture as a starting point that deserves its own specific politics. Taking as his point of departure an analysis of Jodi Dean's (2012) elucidation of communicative capitalism, Jordan makes a case for a 'multiple view of political antagonisms', or what might be described as a non-Marxist dialectic of antagonism, and the place of platforms as the latest instantiations of such informational politics.

While the articles discussed so far touch on a number of broad issues, the realities of a more concrete and immediate platform politics are picked up in the final two articles. Tero Karppi goes one step further even than Halpin by claiming that Internet life itself is the target of control, by exploring Facebook's valorisation of death. In examining Facebook memorialisation sites Karppi undertakes a subtle exploration of the platform politics of death and the bereaved. He shows how Facebook manages to translate the digital afterlife into a machine for extracting value from those left behind and in some prolonging life after death, but a rather peculiar form of digital

undead. Finally Parikka looks at the art practice of Weisse 7 in order to examine new forms of public that are produced by the kinds of 'evil' media described in Fuller and Goffey's (2012) book of the same name. Parikka understands the platform in the mode of 'wirelessness', taking the concept beyond the standard definition towards a more 'grey' configuration. In a way Parikka offers us a glimpse of the next step forward, thinking the platform beyond platform, towards the general subsumption of space and time.

The issue is completed by two video interviews carried out by Cornelia Sollfrank, with Dmytri Kleiner and Sean Dockray. These interviews are part of a broader project, 'Giving What You Don't Have',² that Sollfrank describes in the following terms:

Artists and creative producers play a central role in the discourse around copyright and intellectual property; at the same time, artists' voices are rarely heard. Normally, it is representatives of collecting societies or media corporations and other legal experts who claim the authority to speak on behalf of them – in order to argue for stricter copyright laws.

GWYDH aims at balancing this misrepresentation of contemporary artistic and cultural production. Using the interview format, the project collects and presents statements of artists whose practice reflects complex copyright-critical attitudes. However, the artists present in the project no longer work on the assumption of artists' privileged status, but rather consider themselves as part of the social movements for open access and free culture. Unlike appropriation artists, for example, who have claimed, and still do, to be 'super-users' who should be granted special rights and copyright exceptions for their appropriative practice, the artistic practices introduced in GWYDH produce real openings. They promote the free circulation of images, texts and other cultural products and intervene in broader cultural processes, related to the current overall 'post-medial' situation. This involves the development of forms of authorship and work conceptions that are able to elude the dictatorship of private property in the realm of culture and clear the space between life and art to

become a habitat for all. 'Artists' in the context of GWYDH are cultural producers of various backgrounds who work both inside and outside art institutions to realise their projects.

The goal of GWYDH is not to formulate one political position, but rather to give an insight into a variety of informed copyright-critical practices, which shall serve as a basis for further interdisciplinary research.

Dmytri Kleiner and Sean Dockray are the two figures whose projects are particularly valuable to this special issue, given that they both take platform politics beyond the academy and into the realm of praxis. Kleiner is a founder and key member of the Telekommunist collective and Dockray is the founder of AAAAARG.org, and instigator of 'The Public School'. Both of these enterprises are examples of platforms in the broad sense of the term: Telekommunisten is an organisation that operates as a platform for a range of what might be called network art projects, , such as Thimbl, R15N and DeadSwap, which work with existing technologies to re-imagine and reengineer network culture – as well as serving as the seedbed for Kleiner's 'Telekommunist Manifesto'. All of these projects are run under the 'Telekommunist' banner using its web portal as a nexus. In his interview Kleiner explains the logic behind these artworks, and the importance of copyright as the machinery of commodification in contemporary capitalism, as well as his concerns about the 'creative commons' as an alternative regime. In his interview Sean Dockray describes the beginning of AAAAARG.org as a simple platform for the exchange of reading material and, more importantly, for the building of communities of readers; never considering sharing as an issue of copyright, but rather as a space of secondary circulation, closer to a library than a pirate operation. Yet, as it has grown, AAAAARG.org has become about the latter 'retroactively', so to speak. Both Telekommunisten and AAAAARG.org are attempts to activate a commons, in the sense of the commons as a mutually constituted process of the 'becoming common of those who are involved', but also in the sense of building actual spaces that constitute the commons for the sharing or, as Sollfrank puts it, 'giving (of) what you don't have'. This phrase implies not the 'theft' of proprietorial goods, in the mode of piracy, but the eschewing of 'having' altogether, which perhaps evokes the logic of Erich Fromm's entreaty to 'be' rather than to 'have'. In that sense to be is precisely to share freely one's time with the expectation that this will not then be exploited for financial gain. But

often - as Kleiner argues and Dockray is also very aware of - such forms of giving quickly become commodified as 'department one' commodities, that is commodities that are used in the production of more commodities. As such, free access to department one commodities is actually helpful to capital, and therein exists yet another route for capital to valorise platforms. Nevertheless, both of these projects work to find ways to escape this logic. Kleiner does this by creating artworks and developing practices that are, to a significant degree, useless (or, better, non-exchangeable or valueless), and Dockray by creating commons in which already commodified objects and practices can be reproduced and reframed as public goods. Such uselessness and repurposing is in many respects a version of disappearance or 'exodus' from capital that is discussed by Hands and that is part of the opportunity that Dyer-Witford considers K-ommunism to represent.

The hope of the editors of this issue is therefore that a specific politics of platforms can begin to be understood and theorised, not primarily in the electoral or formal sense of the term, or even in the way of movement building, but rather as the context for and frame of current and future politics as a whole. The question as to whether this becomes increasingly contested, and/or subject to the iron rhythms of the 24/7 cycle of digital capitalism (2013), as Jonathan Crary puts it, will likely be one of the most important questions of the coming decade.

Notes

¹ The project originated in the conference 'Platform Politics', which took place at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, on the 12-13 May 2011, and was organized by Joss Hands and Jussi Parikka as part of an AHRC funded network 'Exploring New Configurations of Network Politics'. See www.networkpoltics.org for more details.

² The project was commissioned by the Post-Media Lab, Leuphana University, Lüneburg, Germany. Other interviews in the series include: Kenneth Goldsmith (ubu.com), Marcell Mars, The Piracy Project; still others are being planned.

References

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