THE PROMISES, PROBLEMS, AND POSSIBILITIES FOR ALT-NETWORKS

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Introduction

Social media has become a central facet of contemporary life and that centralization has narrowed our perspectives and lessened our possibilities (Pariser, 2011; Vaidhyanathan, 2018). This centralizing of social media networks happens for their individual users, but also at the level of how social media informs our discourses through journalistic practice, government institutions, industry sectors. Because of the role that social media now play, we have become acutely aware of their shortcomings. Their platforms not only host but actively cultivate toxic and abusive environments for many of its users. In addition to their functions of interaction, they also provide avenues for increasing governmental control through surveillance or gatekeeping. Given the lack of adequate response from tech companies to these long standing issues, it was inevitable that something had to happen.

In response to these conditions, tech advocates, activists, students, and scholars have launched numerous alternatives to mainstream social networks. These networks rethink what social media can and should do in times of over reliance on monolithic digital platforms. Some networks redesign the user's experience to lessen or eliminate

harassment; some networks focus on data privacy responsibilities; some create spaces where non-centralized networks can persist even against oppressive governmental regimes. Given the rise and differentiation of alt-networks, there is a need to study and examine the proliferation of alt-networks.

This panel offers four presentations varied in objects, different in methodological approaches, and diverse in their claims. In examining alt-networks, this panel will explore how these redesigned digital platforms respond to demands of scalability, how political activists develop and deploy alt-networks for protests, how researchers could cultivate a games theory approach to studying alt-networks and, finally, how the lack of certain features in alt-networks may doom their survival. The methods being explored will include critical theory, social science research, methodological discussion, and critical analysis through a rhetorical lens. Ultimately, our panel hopes to join in on emerging conversations about the ecology of networks and contribute valuable insights for internet research.

A Network of Alt-Networks

These papers have been carefully assembled to represent a substantial spectrum of the promises, problems, and possibilities for Alt-Tech today. In the first presentation, the paper develops a games theory approach to studying alt-networks, in this case, Mastodon instances. This is an important development as mainstream social media networks have benefited from years of research approaches, new networked objects create new networked questions requiring new methodological considerations. Related to this problem, the second presentation examines how and when alt-networks engage or resist the inevitable need to scale their operations. Such a study is important because mainstream social media impose a will to scale in ways that make it seem natural and unstoppable. The third presentation engages activists and how ad hoc alt-networks allow for platforms that avoid and leverage themselves against oppressive regimes. Finally, the fourth presentation will explore why alt-networks have so far failed alt-right political actors. This argument will look at how micro-interactions on platforms inform and drive a dangerous cycle of political antagonism.

As a set, these presentations will give AoIR attendees a comprehensive survey of sites, methods, and sources for engaging and analyzing alt-networks. While the papers all draw heavily on critical theory and analysis, each differs in how they approach their objects of analysis. Using technical approaches, social science methods, speculative means, and rhetorical analysis the papers also demonstrate a wide swath of ways to encounter the alt-network. Finally, the sourcing and discourse engaged by each presentation activates multiple academic discussions while also sticking close to shared themes and concerns.

The Possibilities of Alt-Networks

This panel builds on recent work concerning the disappointment with mainstream social networks but also the promise of alternatives (Gehl, 2015, Tufekci, 2017). The adherence to tech industry's unfair labor practices, the inability to respond to users' needs, the lack of clear and consistent privacy responsibilities, the weak submission to governmental control— these concerns with social media have all been written (Noble, 2018; Roberts, 2019). The rise and proliferation of Alt-Networks is an important development for internet researchers because those innovations rekindle the earliest aims of the internet itself. Namely, the construction of a system whose topological configurations resisted centralization and allowed for its users to

develop multiple ways of communicating knowledge to one another.

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FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION ON THE MASTODON SOCIAL NETWORK: AN ECOLOGY OF GAMES APPROACH

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Introduction

Created in 2016, the Mastodon social network was built as a response to the increasing dissatisfaction with Twitter's often-hostile environment. Touted as a friendlier alternative to corporate social media, Mastodon has a federated (decentralized) topology and open-source code that allows users to develop autonomous communities. These communities are built around topical interests and may connect to others across the "Fediverse" (a term used to describe the universe of communities that can connect via the ActivityPub protocol). The digital infrastructure, content, and social norms of each Mastodon community are negotiated among members. Estimates vary, but the number of Mastodon users likely exceeds 4 million.

As such, Mastodon is a complex system, with a diversity of users, technologies, and cultural norms that bear some similarity to now-standard corporate social media but are worthy of investigation in their own right. The question is: how can researchers conceptualize this complexity? In this theoretical presentation, we suggest the Ecology of Games framework, a theory first offered to understand local community politics, as a

viable approach. And, given the importance of current debates about moderation, deplatforming, and what to do about hate speech, we will use this framework to explore "Freedom of Expression" games on Mastodon.

The Ecology of Games Framework

In 1958, political scientist Norton Long conceptualized the "ecology of games" framework to explain local governance and provide an alternative to the pluralist and elite theories that dominated contemporary views of policymaking (Long 1958). Instead of a unitary governance model where a select few community members were responsible for making decisions and allocating community resources, Long argued that a variety of actors participate in multiple, relatively independent policymaking "games" where they compete to achieve different objectives and goals. Within every community exists many territorial domains that contribute to the overall structure of that community, such as a political domain, education domain, banking domain, etc. Each domain has key players with specific skills, resources, and interests that motivate their actions. Many scholars have illustrated the utility of Long's (1958) ecology of games framework in such contexts as transportation planning (Lubell, Henry, and McCoy 2010), education non-profit organizations (Mendel 2003). Similar to the approach we will take, Dutton (1992) adapted the ecology of games framework to illustrate the evolution of telecommunications policy in the United States. In particular, Dutton explicated several prominent "games" that shaped telecommunications in the 1900s, such as the public utility game (efficient telephone services vs. telephone company revenues), the antitrust game (restricting AT&T to ensure regulated telecommunications services), and the regulation game (competition between the government and private corporations over legislation to prevent telecommunication monopolies). Dutton and Peltu (2005) also suggested that struggles over the First Amendment online can best be understood through the ecology of games framework.

Freedom of Expression Games on Mastodon

Although the ecology of games framework has not been explicitly applied to social media platforms, many aspects of social media governance reflect the "game" perspective (Nash 2013). At the fundamental level, Segerberg and Bennett (2011) argued that digital technology and social media function within an ecology of existing social, political, and organizational structures; content decisions and restrictions thus result from a variety of actors competing for policies or practices that best serve their interests.

The social networking site Mastodon is no exception. In our presentation, we will theorize "Freedom of Expression Games" on Mastodon. The major concerns Segerberg and Bennett describe are to be found in Mastodon, and these concerns are found in a variety of games with different players. The developers of Mastodon software are engaged in a "FOSS and Protocological Game," where they seek to develop free and open-source software that can adhere to Internet protocols (specifically, ActivityPub). Mastodon administrators engage in a "Community Building Game;" they install Mastodon software on servers and use its affordances to establish online communities with codes of conduct and cultural practices. They also make decisions about which

other Mastodon installations to federate with. Mastodon users play a recognizable "Social Media Game," coming to the platform for a variety of reasons and select a specific installation so they can engage in social media activities.

We will use the Ecology of Games framework to map the relationships between these players, all of whom have goals that sometimes overlap, sometimes diverge, and sometimes clash.

This theorization of the "Freedom of Expression Games" on Mastodon can inform future research on social media, including future work on Mastodon, but also on similar FOSS platforms (e.g., Pleroma, Movim) as well as more "traditional," corporate social media, such as Facebook or Twitter.

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NONSCALABLE NETWORKS

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Introduction

From the standardization of packets of information in Internet protocols to the APIs that treat social media content as modular and fungible, the insistence on standardized tools drives Internet communications technology. These protocols and technologies worship at the altar of "scalability." Any networked software tool attempting to gain traction (attention, venture capital, etc.) must have a plan for scalability - it must be usable by as many people as possible without much significant alteration. This paper analyzes how some Internet communities have responded to the ideology of scalability by building alternative networks that cope with and sometimes resist that scalability. These networks serve to protect communities, to make decisions collectively, and to resist the "always connect" logics of a scalable network that is often hostile and is driven by profit motives and data extraction. I examine three applications from the "Fediverse" - a collection of somewhat independent, yet interconnected Internet servers that facilitate microblogging, video sharing, and other services - in order to theorize alternate approaches to networked life and Internet research. Drawing on Anna Tsing's articulation of "nonscalability theory," this paper seeks to understand some of the strategies used by these federated networks and to rethink certain commonplaces in the field.

Nonscalable Networks and the Fediverse

Who would argue for nonscalable software? Internet artist and researcher Darius Kazemi offers a compelling answer to these questions in his essay "How to run a small social network site for your friends." Kazemi argues that a small social network should not necessarily be scalable and that nonscalability is actually sometimes preferable (Kazemi, 2019). Nonscalable, bespoke software speaks to the immediate needs of a community without worrying about having to be everything to everyone. But nonscalalbe networks do not only live on federated servers maintained by those with relatively sophisticated technical skills. From Discord servers to group chats to Facebook groups, the Internet is filled with small networks that use a range of tools - codes of conduct,

customized configurations of corporate social media platforms, content moderation policies, and more - to manage their borders. Such small networks live within scalable networks, but they themselves are not always necessarily scalable.

Tsing argues that scalability blocks "our ability to notice the heterogeneity of the world; by its design, scalability allows us to see only uniform blocks, ready for further expansion" (Tsing, 2012, p. 505). Further, she argues that "nonscalability theory" allows us not only to rethink our objects of study but also our methods of analysis: "To pay attention to articulations between the scalable and the nonscalable requires rethinking our knowledge practices, which have been shaped within the history of remaking the world for scalability" (Tsing, 2012, p. 522). This paper uses this nonscalability theory to examine the technical and social practices of Bookwyrm (a social reading and reviewing service), Glitch.social (a fork of the Mastodon social networking software), and PeerTube (a video sharing service). While each of these services (as well as the multiple other federated services that use ActivityPub) has distinct features, they are each an example of efforts to offer alternatives to the scalable networks that dominate much of the Internet.

From codes of conduct to customized software modifications, these services demonstrate what networked life can look like if connections between individuals and communities are not the default but are instead the result of deliberation and decision. If connection is more difficult, it forces a consideration of the costs and benefits of that connection to the individual and to the community. This introduces friction into a situation that is often dominated by the smooth "always connect" and "public sharing as default" assumptions that drive scalable networks. While users can replicate services like those examined in this paper (indeed, each of these services shares their code for those interested in setting up their own instances), that replication does not assume the plug-and-play of corporate, scalable software. Instead, it assumes that each instance of those services will involve careful attention to the needs of individual communities.

Learning from the Fediverse

It is clear that while there is no one model for federated servers, they do share a certain set of commitments, obligations, and values. This paper aims to lay out those shared values in order to understand what these networks teach us about the limits of scalable networks and the utility of building alternatives to it and within it. It also asks whether the lessons learned form such an analysis can refram longstanding debates amongst Internet researchers. For instance, the collective approach to decisions about how or whether to build connections between users and between communities offers a useful approach to debates about "filter bubbles"(Bruns, 2017; Pariser, 2011). If determining how or whether to connect is a deliberative decision, then the question is not "Are individuals stuck in a filter bubble?" but is instead something like "How are communities working to determine what their network looks like?" Similarly, questions of online extremism might consider how the practices of nonscalable networks might address the problems we know are pervasive on scalable networks, such as how recommendation systems feed radicalization (Gaudette et al., 2020). Finally, research on harassment might better address current tools, such as blocklists on Twitter, which aim to address

harassment "at scale" but instead act as blunt tools that ignore the nuances of online abuse (Jhaver et al., 2018).

The goal of this analysis is not to co-opt the tactics of nonscalable through the plug-and-play logic of scalable networks, merely treating these ideas as new functions to be deployed widely. Instead, the aim is to learn from these alternate networks in an attempt to imagine a more just Internet and to offer fresh approaches to longstanding research questions.

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SUNNY, SWARMY DEMOCRACY: vTAIWAN AND THE POTENTIAL OF DIGITAL COLLECTIVES

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Introduction

People are showing up and demanding change. Self-labeled patriots in the United States. Farmers in India. Day-traders on Robinhood's doorsteps. Britney fans in courtrooms. The political, economic, social, and conspiratorial dimensions motivating them are diverse, but they have all been moved in some manner by networked affordances of the internet. In response to the January 6th siege of the United States Capitol, Roger McNamee, Silicon Valley investor and author of the book Zucked: Waking up to the Facebook Catastrophe, argues that "Facebook and Google and

Twitter, created the environment, they radicalized the people, and then gave them a platform for organizing this attack."(Barreiro). His conclusion is supported by a 2016 internal Facebook presentation that reported that "64% of all extremist group joins are due to our recommendation tools" and concluded that "[o]ur recommendation systems grow the problem."(Horwitz and Seetharaman). The narrative of polarization exacerbated by U.S.-based social media platforms has become commonplace, and this is just one narrative that troubles the connection between democratic participation and the internet.

In this paper, I follow the story of another group of people who showed up, occupied government buildings, and with the help of digital networks worked to make a government more democratic. This is the story of the Sunflower Movement and the subsequent establishment of vTaiwan, "an open consultation process that brings Taiwan citizens and government together in online and offline spaces, to deliberate and reach rough consensus on national issues, and to craft national digital legislation." (Hsiao et al.). By examining the mix of people, practice, and technologies of vTaiwan, I articulate a perspective that reclaims both the demos in democracy and the techne in technology. In other words, I argue that there is both potential in the agitated mob and the practice of digitally networked governance.

Flowering Swarms

Some new media theorists doubt the political potential of digital masses. Byung-Chul Han concludes that although digitally-enhanced "[w]aves of outrage mobilize and bundle attention very efficiently, ...their fluidity and volatility make them unsuited to shaping public discourse or public space."(Han). This is in part because "[t]he digital swarm lacks the soul or spirit of the masses. Individuals who come together as a swarm do not develop a we."(Han). Similarly, Wendy Chun argues that "networks do not produce an imagined and anonymous 'we' (they are not, to use Benedict Anderson's term, 'imagined communities') but rather, a relentlessly pointed yet empty, singular yet plural YOU." In lieu of "reading the morning newspaper," Chun sees digital networks as "[relying] on asynchronous yet pressing actions to create interconnected users."For Chun, we are united in the habit of our doomscrolling, not in the content of our doom. Chun still thinks it worth asking, "Can we—by inhabiting the habitual [patterns of neoliberalism]—change society?"(Chun, xi). However, both Han and Chun cast doubt on the potentials and practices of the digital collective.

The Sunflower Movement in Taiwan troubles assessments, like Han's and Chun's, that question whether digital networks can create and sustain political collective action. In March of 2014, a group of young Taiwanese citizens occupied the Parliament for 24 days to protest the anticipated passage of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA). The CSSTA was a free trade agreement with China that created discontent over "how economic integration with China may affect Taiwan's economy and political future" and resulted in the occupation of the Taiwanese Parliament.9 Protestors "shared directions to climb over walls or through underpasses by word of mouth or smartphone messaging." When police tried to remove the students, they "[built] blockades and [assembled] their own press center." One group of students advanced on another government building and were met with police wielding a water cannon. On March 29th,

a song recorded inside the Parliament, "Island Sunrise," that used metaphors of darkness to represent "black box democracy" was released on the internet. On March 30th, 700,000 people responded to the students' calls to protest by taking to the streets, and "activists promoted their cause through new social media outlets." The head of the Parliament "promised that the Parliament would put the review of CSSTA on hold," and on April 6th, "each with a sunflower in their hands, the protesters declared victory and left the Parliament, bringing to an end 24 days of occupation." The activist movement would come to be known as the Sunflower Movement. The interpretations and legacy of the Sunflower Movement are, as with many social movements, contested. The movement contained elements of "anti-China Taiwanese nationalism; leftist anti-free trade sentiment; demands for democratic reforms; and generational justice." Some scholars have "defended the Sunflower Movement through the discourse of civil disobedience, legitimizing its liberatory politics and nationalist concerns," while others have judged some of the movement's positions, such as its anti-China arguments, "worrying." But according to a group of scholars based in Taipei and New York, including Audrey Tang, the current digital minister of Taiwan, "The Sunflower Movement led to a revival of citizen participation" that manifested in "many projects to include citizens in decision-making processes," including vTaiwan. Thus, the Sunflower Movement could be understood as being both a digital swarm and political collective and as benefiting from digital networks to both organize and govern. In the next section, I outline the practices of democracy adopted by vTaiwan.

Practicing Democracy

The practices of vTaiwan mix the affordances of technology with the ideals of democratic participation. This blend of techne, or teachable arts based on principles, grounds both the technology and the participation in an ongoing process of "invention, evaluation, and judgment." In doing so, vTaiwan offers a possible understanding for an ensouled digital "we." The paper details five principles that support vTaiwan's enactment of a digitally-networked democratic collective.

1. vTaiwan recognizes that technology alone will not solve civic problems. vTaiwan is not just a suite of tools. It is a process that "consists of four successive stages: proposal, opinion, reflection and legislation."

2. vTaiwan is an effort supported by the Taiwanese government. In the December following the Sunflower Movement, a government official attended a hackathon and asked those present "to build a platform that would allow the entire Taiwan society to engage in 'rational discussion' of public matters at a national scale." This request culminated in the creation of vTaiwan, with the "v" standing for "vision," "voice," "vote," and "virtual." This principle is particularly important because "civic networks" are "unable to cover costs through advertising and most cannot rely on venture capital investment to grow their communities until they are viable."

3. vTaiwan recognizes the alternative networks to which it responds. It "aims to go beyond political polarization, to break out of echo chambers generated by social media."

4. vTaiwan works with and from theories and possible practices of democracy. Those who help build and maintain vTaiwan reflect on concepts such as a "democracy of proposition" and a "recursive public." In the facilitation stage, the facilitator draws from the "focused conversation method."

5. vTaiwan values participation most. The process has three "key mechanisms for public participation —interpretation, facilitation and documentation—supported by a selection of collaborative open source engagement tools." The participation is understood as creating a "culture" influenced by "an adhocratic model. The defining feature of this model is that it values action over formal authority."

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THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ALT-RIGHT'S ALT-TECH EMPIRE

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Introduction

For the last several years, far right conservatives throughout the United States have bemoaned their treatment on major social media platforms, notably Twitter, Facebook, YouTube. Resistance to being moderated, fears of being shadow-banned, and outrage over being de-platformed have fueled anti-establishment sentiment against the major platforms in social media. Of course, it should be of no controversy that all platforms moderate the activity taking place on that platform, or, as Tarrelton Gillispie has argued, "all platforms must moderate while disavowing it" (Gillispie, 2018). It is perhaps this surface level disavowal that has created the conditions in which conservatives can argue for less censorship (if companies are disavowing it....then why engage in it) but also point to as evidence of special prosecution of conservative thought. Concerns such as these that led conservative to seek out alternative broadcast media (e.g. FoxNews) to great success but seeking out alternative social media has not yet been not as fruitful. This project seeks to offer a critical analysis of social media platforms, arguing that while quantitative reach is important, a more important but less discussed qualitative experience (the ability to cultivate micro-fascisms through micro-interactions) is necessary for far-right discourses that cannot be offered on Alt Tech platforms. Ultimately, what this project proposes is that there is no viable alternative for alt right discourse and questions the possibility of any alternative for other users.

The Sound and Fury of Alt-Tech

Alongside the rise of the so-called alt-right (and with it, alt-facts), Alt-Tech social media platforms have risen to host far-right discourses (Rogers, 2020). These platforms--some of which include: Gab, Parler, MeWe, ThinkSpot, 4Chan/8Chan--boast themselves as platforms for unfettered expression and unrestricted speech. Indeed, a tour through any of these social media networks will turn up vitriolic prose that quickly and often turns to promises of violence. It was feared in many circles that such sites would become

breeding grounds and incubators for insurrectionists and incels alike (Zuckerberg & Rajendra-Nicolucci, 2021). While those fears remain, the sustained and lasting success of alternative platforms are in doubt.

However, despite the presence and alternative of these sites for and by conservatives, their use and spread have not grown considerably. The ultimate indication of failure for Alt-Tech occurred when U.S. President Donald Trump was banned from major social media networks (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest) but chose not participate in any of the social networks custom crafted for his politics. The loss of mainstream social networks from Trump and others' reach makes sense given how much those figures relied on them (Ott & Dickinson, 2019). While Parler was used for the US Capitol insurrection, its failure to secure its data and protect its users from self incrimination has been kind of death knell for its continued survival (Groeger et. al., 2021). Shortly after those attacks, ISP (such as Amazon Web Services, and others) de-platformed the platform. It exists again today, but in a much reduced and depleted form, as do many other alt-tech platforms.

The prevailing thought is that Trump and other leading conservatives did not join those lesser networks because those networks lacked the numbers that the others boasted. Indeed, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube lead all networks in recognizability and in quantitative numbers. So, this is most certainly a factor in not choosing instead to log into Gab, MeWe, or BitChute as viable alternatives. Despite obvious indications that these assumptions are correct, I want to propose another reason that figures of the far right fought against being de-platformed when they had viable alternatives at the ready that catered to their stated desires or free thought and unfettered speech.

Mediating Microfacisms

In addition to a quantitative loss from major social networks, the alt-tech platforms failed to satisfy a more important qualitative desire for far-right conservatives. That is, outside of mainstream platforms, far-right tech users were unable to engage in the small, almost imperceptible actions that help sustain the affect force for far-right tactics. These actions operated not so much at the level of traditional political claims or platforms (Indeed, the GOP ran on no platform other than "Pro-Trump" in 2020), but instead on microinteractions afforded by social media. Micro-interactions, in technical sense, allow for a kind of affective assent whereby the technical act of clicking/sharing satisfies a desire on the part of a user (Saffer, 2013). In addition to the affective translation of user experience, these micro-interactions sustain user engagement and allow for users to interact with content in ways that frame how all interaction takes place (Gehl, 2013). In a political sense, however, micro-interactions--seen through screenshots and re-shares and quote re-tweets--allowed far-right users to set into motion a series of affective call-and-responses whose reactions fulfilled a kind of affective pleasure cycle for proponents and opponents alike.

Compounding the technical and user experience of microinteractions, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's analytic of "micro-facisms" provides even more insight on the qualitative dimension for affective action in and through social media for far right conservatives. Micro-facisms are those everyday interactions whereby we enforce

normality on one another and ourselves. These are the micro-practices where we insist on our own repression and participate in others' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988; Lennard, 2019). We see such behaviour rampant on social media, especially by and in reaction to far-right discourse. By looking at micro-interactions as a kind of mechanism for microfascisms, we shall see why the Alt-Right's Alt-Tech empire has waned before it even waxed (Floridi, 2021).

Ctrl-Alt-Delete...or...This Machine Makes Fascists

By using critical analysis informed by the discourses in and around microfacisms, this presentation examines the affective cycle set into motion by micro-interactions on social media through a comparison of those designed micro-interactions in a technical sense. Given the widespread reliance on microfacisms by subjects in a capitalistic system, a part of this discussion questions the difficulty of any alt network reaching escape velocity that does not nurture and sustain the same thing that is killing its users. In fact, it might be even more the case that the use of microfascism by opponents of the alt-right to suspend, ban, and de-platform (and thus stress the alt-tech networks) helps make those fascists claim authority by trumping up accusations of fascism against them. That is, is it possible that the celebration that some alt-right figures show when banned or censored is itself the mechanism through which actual and traditional fascism is made?

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