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Digital Platforms and the Reconfiguration of Politics: The Formation of New Political Actors in
the United States

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MA Thesis

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April 23, 2020

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Introduction:

Digital Platforms, American Politics, and Actor-Network Theory

Overview

This thesis will investigate how new communications technologies, specifically digital platforms, affect the American political landscape, looking at the period of the 2016 presidential election to the present. Existing approaches to studying digital platforms and politics have focused on how “fringe” actors on the far-right and left sides of the political spectrum have used social media to gain wider publicity for their ideas and values (Daniels 2018; Barnes 2020), leading to particular “offline” consequences as well; the economic imperatives underlying the construction of platforms (Terranova 2004; Couldry and Mejias 2019); or the need for digital platforms to be regulated by lawmakers in order to protect American democracy (Hawley and Cruz 2019). However, this thesis will argue that each of these perspectives is only giving a glimpse of the overall picture. Digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook cannot be viewed as passive tools for human actors to make use of, nor are they neutral infrastructure through which social relations are channeled. While platforms are owned and operated by private corporations for profit, the relations they give rise to exceed the relationship of user data exploitation and extraction. Furthermore, a closer examination will show both platform users and platform owners do not make sense of this relationship in solely economic terms either. Finally, debates about how best to regulate social media miss the question of what exactly *is* to be regulated. This thesis will argue that digital platforms fundamentally reconfigure the materiality of politics, giving rise to new techno-economic formations that human actors must struggle to make sense of. In following key tenets of actor-network theory (ANT) as put forth by Bruno

Latour (1990; 1996; 2005), this thesis will also animate digital platforms as actors, operating on the same level as human actors. It will seek to open up the black box of digital platforms as actors, analyzing the many contingent parts and associations of which they are composed. Viewing digital platforms in this way makes it possible to see how they actively reconfigure the material composition of what is thought of as the “political.” As this reconfiguration unfolds, human actors struggle to make sense of a changing materiality, leading to debates and controversies in which humans contend to make their own understandings dominant over others. However, rather than seeking to resolve these controversies, this thesis will take Latour’s approach of “following the actors” to see how they themselves make sense of these debates and their own place within them (Latour 2005, p. 12), a process which itself is constitutive of this fundamentally new type of politics.

Research Problem

Viewing humans and technology as actors composed of complex, highly contingent assemblages raises the question of whether it is even possible to study the “role” of digital platforms in politics simply because, conceptualized in this way, all variables are fluid; they can never be held constant. If, as this thesis will argue, ANT reveals the world to be an inherently unstable reality, how can using it contribute to any ordered understanding of what exists?

Analyzing human and technological actors as complex assemblages allows for analysis of their constitutive parts, making possible an empirical description of how what appears as the political is put together. Because objects are often overlooked as having agency in their own right, animating them as actors reveals how the work humans take credit for is actually the result of new chains of associations linking humans and nonhumans coming into being. “Following the

actors” will show how they seek to make sense of this ever-shifting reality. For example, studying the discourses surrounding the “freedom of speech” and social media reveal how this concept, rather than referring to a stable concept, is being adapted to a world that is governed by fluid assemblages. Highlighting the contingent nature of associations between technology and humans can illustrate how an understanding of “reality” is produced through the narratives that journalists, lawmakers, platform owners, and platform users alike employ to render these associations stable, often by attempting to fit old concepts and analogies to a fundamentally new materiality. As discussed below, many approaches to studying social media and politics conceptualize the realm of “politics” as a separate, independent sphere on which digital platforms, initially external to this sphere, have an effect.

Therefore, by examining the timeframe from roughly the beginning of the 2016 presidential election cycle leading up to the present in the United States, this thesis seeks to answer the question of how digital platforms have reconfigured the material composition of the American political landscape. The conclusions from such an analysis also could point to broader implications for technology’s active role in reshaping politics, beyond the scope of the United States, and beyond the limits of digital platforms.

Social Media and American Politics

Approaches to studying digital platforms and politics generally involve studying how human actors make use of platforms as tools for advancing their political goals. Viewed as neutral infrastructure, the internet has allowed the “rise” of radical political actors, allowing a nebulous “alt-right” movement to “inject” its ideology into mainstream media discussion (Hemmer 2016; Heikkila 2017). On the left, actors have made use of digital platforms to make

their ideology more accessible to a wider audience, directing unprecedented numbers to join the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in the wake of Bernie Sanders' campaign for the Democratic Party nomination and as backlash to the election of Donald Trump (Barnes 2020). Finally, the role of social media and "big tech" in American democracy has become a key issue at the legislative level, as lawmakers grapple with how to best govern platforms that are privately owned but appear to function as public spaces (Brody 2019; Culliford 2019). Such debates recognize the outsize power that technology companies and their executive leaders exercise over the billions of individuals who regularly use their platforms. Analysis of the political economy of social media further illustrates how digital platforms are not passive tools for human actors to instrumentalize; rather, they are artifacts specifically engineered for the purpose of creating profit from user data. Discussed in greater detail below, this scholarship points to a need for further theorization on how digital platforms actively are reconfiguring "political" actors and their constitutive actions, both at the individual and collective level.

Digital media, collective action, and political institutions

Scholarly and popular writing has sparked wide discussions about the rise of new political actors and collectivities on the fringes of the mainstream, gaining in popularity and prominence due to their use of digital media. On the one hand, the "alt-right" movement is often portrayed as emerging from the depths of the internet, using social media to spread its white nationalist ideology and leveraging traditional legacy media coverage to inject its views into mainstream discourse. Following Hillary Clinton's August 2016 speech in Nevada, the first time a candidate explicitly named the movement, CNN wrote, "previously confined to the darker corners of the internet, the alt-right is moving into the spotlight" (Kreig 2019). This, along with Donald Trump appointing Steve Bannon of *Breitbart* as his campaign CEO are often pointed to

as pivotal moments for the alt-right movement (Hemmer 2016). The online magazine *Breitbart*, of which Bannon was the chairman from 2012-2018, is itself considered a key to the alt-right's power in the election (Hemmer 2016), serving as a bridge to more mainstream outlets, most notably FOX News (Benkler et al. 2018). Gourarie (2016) highlights the importance of the nebulous movement's digital practices, recounting an incident in which thousands of alt-righters spammed Clinton's Instagram page with "spicy boi" comments, a collective action coordinated through instructions posted in a shared image file. These and other instances illustrate the alt-right's focus on meme-able content, interest in pop culture, and the importance of aesthetics (Heikkila 2017, p. 9). However, the real-life impacts of these online activities have more serious consequences. Daniels (2018, p. 61) points to the Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally, where one counter-protester was killed and many more injured, as a "watershed moment in the algorithmic rise of White nationalism in the U.S." The alt-right, Daniels (2018, p. 62) argues, should be viewed as a continuation of centuries-old racism in the country as well as part of an emerging ecosystem powered by algorithms. Thus, these accounts focus on the impact of algorithmically spread white nationalism on "real world" events, the digital practices that are constitutive of the alt-right movement, and the far-right media ecosystem's relationship to mainstream outlets.

On the other hand, actors on the left-wing received much media attention due to Bernie Sanders' open embrace of the "democratic socialist" label in his campaign for the Democratic Party nomination. The most visible marker of the increased prominence of leftist actors was the unprecedented growth of the DSA, a group that endorsed Sanders early on and saw its membership rise from around 6,000 in 2014 to around 60,000 by 2019 (Sernatinger 2019). Many within the organization saw the Sanders campaign as a "gift from the socialist gods," as DSA

vice chairman Joseph Schwartz put it (Nicholas 2015), legitimating the long-taboo label of “socialist” and sparking important national conversations about issues like universal healthcare and raising the minimum wage. Commentators have drawn parallels between this millennial-led revitalization of socialist politics, which is critical of Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party establishment she represents, to the Old Left of the 1930s, which was critical of New Deal liberalism for the compromises it made with capitalism (Hartman 2017). One major difference between the past and present, however, is the role digital platforms are said to have played in raising the DSA’s profile and directing more people to join. For instance, DSA National Director Maria Svart has acknowledged the importance of Twitter as a recruiting tool, enabling a wider audience to have encounters with broad socialist discourse, not limited to accounts officially affiliated with the organization (Barnes 2020, p. 36). Members have also noted the influence of the @LarryWebsite account in compelling them to get involved (Barnes 2020, p. 37). In her 2017 article about the DSA, Heyward (2017) reports @LarryWebsite was responsible for as much as 10 percent of new members, and the person behind the account explained how he had refined a recruitment strategy by posting pictures of food and memes about Marxism (Heyward 2017).

Thus, on both the left and right side of the political spectrum, formerly “fringe” actors have gained in prominence. While in the case of the alt-right, this fringe movement seems more amorphous and lacking in formal institutionalization, collective action on the left has been funneled through the DSA, an institution that has existed since the early 1980s. However, further theorization is needed to understand the ways in which digital platforms are agents within these collectivities, actively structuring action, calibrating relationships, and taking part in new forms

of political action that were not formerly possible. More attention also needs to be given to how these collectivities, when integrated into existing institutions, transform such institutions too.

Political economy of digital platforms

Theorizations of the political economy of social media begin the task of opening up the black box of digital platforms, revealing how they are not neutral tools for human actors to make use of, but instead are constructed to serve specific economic imperatives. As Andrejevic (2011, p. 286) notes, “the affordances of the internet and the services that run on it... change in accordance with the priorities of those who control this infrastructure, and what is taken for granted one day... may well disappear the next.” Terranova (2004, p. 94) observes that individuals’ everyday engagements with social media represent a type of “free labor,” in that it is willingly given and not compensated, despite the monetary value in the form of user data it produces for technology corporations. In this way, digital platforms are part of a longer, historical process of extensive commodification, referring to “the way in which market forces shape and reshape life, entering spaces previously untouched, or mildly touched, by capitalist social relations” (Cohen 2008, p. 7). Couldry and Mejjias (2019, p. 338) theorize the extraction of personal data by technology corporations for profit as “data colonialism,” arguing that before data can be appropriated, human life itself must first be configured through digital platforms so as to render it into a form that is extractable. This process of the datafication of all aspects of life is unprecedented, as are its consequences. They write, “The extraction of data from bodies, things, and systems create new possibilities for managing *everything*. This is the new and distinctive role of platforms and other environments of routine data extraction” (Couldry and Mejjias 2019, p. 343). Thus, to recognize that digital platforms are more than passive tools for human actors to make use of is to recognize the monumental ways in which they are

reconfiguring human life itself. However, this then calls for an empirical account of how this reconfiguration is carried out. By which actors and what associations between them is the appearance of “data colonialism” assembled? How is extensive commodification carried out? These processes, rather than a cause of action, are the result of it. Answering these questions requires “following the actors” to see how these new dynamics of power are performed, why certain actors continue to perform them (according to their own accounts) and how these actors make sense of these new dynamics and their positions within them in relation to others.

Regulating technology companies and their platforms

The status of digital platforms as privately owned and operated is at odds with the democratizing discourse of the internet, which constructs platforms as spaces of free and open debate. While this discourse is ostensibly promoted by corporate executives to market their platforms, it is also perpetuated by popular commentary and certain academic theorizations of the internet. In response to criticism of Facebook’s purported role in circulating “fake news” during the 2016 election, CEO Mark Zuckerberg unveiled a new mission statement in 2017 to “give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together” (Constine 2017). The goal behind the new mission was to empower people to solve the world’s problems, such as ending poverty, curing disease, stopping climate change, spreading freedom and tolerance, and stopping terrorism (Zuckerberg 2017). Similarly the CEO of Twitter, Jack Dorsey, tweeted out a new initiative in 2018 that committed Twitter to “help increase the collective health, openness, and civility of public conversation” (Dorsey 2018). Scholarship on social media, especially in its nascent days, also promoted the democratizing potential of digital platforms. In his seminal 2006 book *The Wealth of Networks*, Benkler (2006, p. 10) wrote about a new “networked public sphere” that allows more individuals to communicate their viewpoints

to many others, thus enabling decentralized approaches to political participation and organization. Similarly, Castells (2008, p. 90) notes that this networked public sphere allows individuals to bypass the traditional gatekeepers of the mass media as well as government control. For Castells (2008, p. 90), digital communications technologies have led to the rise of a global civil society, where the power of public opinion can be harnessed through the internet and is the most effective way to broaden political participation. Thus, though social media operate to generate massive profits for private entities, they have been constructed by many as public forums for free expression and open discussions.

The contradictions of social media as privately-owned yet functioning as public spaces have posed challenges to lawmakers who have begun to recognize the vast power technology corporations wield over the billions of individuals who use their platforms. The extent to which bots, false political ads and the sharing of “fake” news influenced the 2016 election is contested among scholars (Benkler et. al 2018; Chadwick 2017), but the consensus among American lawmakers is that something needs to be done about the outsize power companies like Facebook, Twitter and Google have over the content people consume on a daily basis. However, what exactly is to be done is also hotly contested. In July, Republican Senators Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley wrote a letter to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), asking it to investigate how Facebook, Twitter and Alphabet (Google’s parent company) curate their content (Cruz and Hawley 2019). The senators write that these companies “control the ads we see, the news we read, and the information digest. And they actively amplify other content based on algorithms and intentional decisions that are completely not transparent” (Cruz and Hawley 2019). Republicans, including Trump, have been alleging that social media sites operate on anti-conservative bias, though Cruz himself has said that such assertions are based on anecdotal

evidence rather than hard data because of the opacity of these companies (Brody 2019). On the other hand, Democrats like Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have voiced criticism of Facebook for its policy regarding political advertisements. In a congressional hearing with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez questioned Zuckerberg about the company's policy of not fact-checking political advertisements, allowing for the proliferation of false information ("Representative Ocasio-Cortez Questions Mark Zuckerberg" 2019).

Additionally, Democratic presidential candidates in the 2020 race like Senators Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders have made breaking up "big tech" part of their platforms (Culliford 2019). On their part, executives from Facebook have tried to walk the line between these two sides of criticism (Newton 2019). Thus, there is a need to further theorize the contradictions of digital platforms as privately owned public spaces. What are these spaces materially composed of? What actors is this space productive of? What dynamics of governance does it produce? And finally, what are the economic and legal implications of these questions?

Methodology

This thesis will depart from the understandings of digital platforms outlined above by adopting the perspective of actor-network theory, which argues that platforms like Facebook and Twitter cannot be viewed as unified categories or as passive tools for humans to make use of. Instead, ANT elevates objects to the status of "actors" in their own right, acting alongside human actors to alter a given set of affairs (Latour 2005, p. 70). Thus, through ANT's key assumptions that are explained below, this thesis will seek to open up the black box of the actor, both human and technological, to analyze the many contingent parts and associations of which they are composed. Taking this approach will show how digital platforms actively reconfigure what

appears as the “political.” Throughout the process of this reconfiguration, human actors struggle to make sense of this changing materiality, leading to controversies such as the debate over how to regulate “big tech” or over users’ rights to “free speech” on social media. ANT’s philosophy of “following the actors” will center actors’ own accounts of these controversies, emphasizing how they themselves make sense of these debates and their own place within them (Latour 2005, p. 12), a process which itself constitutes a fundamentally new materiality that constitutes a new type of politics.

Actors as actor-networks

As Latour (1996, p. 369) argues, ANT is as much an ontology as it is a sociology, positing that what appears as the “social” is made up of chains of traceable chains of association between different actors. For Latour (2005, p. 7) the social is “*a type of connection* between things that are not themselves social,” rejecting the supposed force of “social ties” between actors as “at best, a convenient shorthand and, at worst, nothing more than a tautology” (p. 69). In order to empirically account for these ties in a way that does not resort to the “social,” it is necessary to open up the actor itself as a complex assemblage of various moving parts. Using the metaphor of the stage actor, Latour argues the actor is never on stage alone; one also must take into consideration the lighting, the backstage crew, the playwright’s intended message, and audience reaction. “Thus, the very word actor directs our attention to a complete dislocation of the action, warning us that it is not a coherent, controlled, well-rounded, and clean-edged affair. By definition, action is *dislocated*” (Latour 2005, p. 46). What appears as a unified entity is in fact made up a chain of associations between a diversity of other entities. In this way, the “network” in ANT refers to a string of actions where each participant, both human and nonhuman, is treated as an agent making other participants act (Latour 2005, p. 128). Accepting

this ontology reveals how digital platforms, as they become integrated into chains of actions, fundamentally change the composition of political actors, making new types of actors possible.

Non-human objects as actors

Another important tenet of ANT that this thesis will adopt is to treat nonhuman objects as fully blown actors. Giving digital platforms an equal place with humans in the account is to allow for a full description of the ways in which they modify a given state of affairs, rather than treating them as passive tools for humans use. Technologies exert a force of their own to reconfigure whole fields of relations between humans and other nonhuman objects. Importantly, ANT argues that it is nonhuman actors that account for the asymmetries of power that researchers often wrongfully ascribe to “social ties” or “norms” (Latour 2005, p. 69). Instead, Latour (2005, p. 66) says, “it’s precisely because it’s so difficult to maintain asymmetries, to durably entrench power relations, to enforce inequalities, that so much work is being constantly devoted in shifting the weak and fast-decaying ties to *other types* of links” or, in other words, associations with objects. Thus, explanations of digital platforms need to go beyond their embeddedness in capitalist logic (Paulussen 2012) because, as Mitchell (2002) argues, “capitalist development also covers a series of agencies, logics, chain reactions and contingent interaction.” For example, this would be to turn Couldry and Mejias’ (2019) theorization of “data colonialism” on its head. Rather than seemingly invisible logics of colonialism or imperatives of capitalism propelling action, what *appears* as overarching logics and imperatives are actually the result of action played out between human and non-human actors. In this view, power and domination are the final products that occur after the stabilization of actors’ efforts at rendering others’ behavior more predictable (Latour 1990, p. 123), meaning power and domination in themselves are not sufficient explanations for the dynamics of relations between actors. This line

of argument will be used in chapter two investigating the political economy of digital platforms, demonstrating first how Facebook and Twitter are themselves complex actor-networks composed of technology, corporate executives, content policies, and more. Secondly, it will be used to show how, as digital platforms are integrated into the chains of association of other actors, they actively do work necessary to bring new relations of power and domination into being. Importantly, for these relations to be upheld, this work must constantly be performed.

Deploying digital platforms as multiple

As outlined in the literature review, various lawmakers, politicians, executives, and social media users themselves are divided on the laws and regulations that should apply to social media platforms in the name of protecting American democracy and its core principles such as the freedom of expression. ANT argues that rather than taking this as “multiple points of view about the same thing... *it is the thing itself that has been allowed to be deployed as multiple* and thus allowed to be grasped through different viewpoints, before being possibly unified in some later stage depending on the abilities of the collective to unify them” (Latour 2005, p. 116). Following this view, I will not attempt to pin down the role social media or should play in politics or adjudicate the value of any legislative proposals and judicial precedents set forth. Instead, I will follow the actors through tracing these precedents, proposals, and debates to describe how these different actors are trying to stabilize the controversy

Importantly, this means when analyzing debates around “free speech” on digital platforms, the researcher will not apply a definition or normative conceptualization of “free speech.” Instead, ANT requires the researcher to first look at the material composition of what actors are referring to as “free speech.” What are the traceable chains of association that various actors then seek to impose a label on? How does one actor’s application of a label conflict and/

or complement other actors' application of different labels? Thus, definitions and norms are not imposed on the analysis by the researcher; rather, they are extracted from the actors' own efforts to render each other predictable (Latour 1990, p. 123).

Outline of chapters

The objective of this thesis is to explore the ways digital platforms, as actors acting in tandem with human actors, are reconfiguring the political. In order to do this, the first chapter of this thesis will explore how digital platforms constitute a new domain of privately-owned public space. Executives of technology corporations have long presented their platforms as spaces of public discussion and debate, with former Twitter CEO Dick Costolo going as far as to call the platform a “global town square” (Leetaru 2017). These analogies are more than marketing strategies, though; defining digital platforms as public spaces also implies particular legal protections for users and regulations that platform owners would need to face, according to precedents set in the American courts. In the past several years, there have been many controversies surrounding “free speech” on digital platforms, with President Trump himself accusing platform owners of having content moderation policies that are biased against politically conservative viewpoints (Roose 2019). However, as this chapter will argue, digital platforms have altered the materiality of what constitutes speech in the first place, bringing a new techno-economic formation into being. Thus, when considering debates over free speech online, concepts such as “free speech” and a “public forum” do not refer to transhistorical, immutable categories; instead they are terms that express a particular actor's rendering of a specific arrangement of technological and human actors.

The second chapter will look at the political economy of platforms and the new types of actors and sets of relations they give rise to. The chapter will argue that as privately-owned public spaces, digital platforms have brought new relations of power and domination into being, where founders of platforms exercise near absolute authority over not only the corporate apparatus of their companies, but also the lives of their millions of platform users and their daily interactions with each other. While these company executives seek foremost to maximize the profitability of their platforms through extracting user data, the relations between platform owners and platform users is understood by both parties in terms that exceed these solely economic relations. Instead, executives' need to regulate behavior on their platform in order to maximize profitability leads to new relations of governance, in which platform users have become "citizens" of the platform. In this relationship of governance, users give up certain rights, foremost their right to privacy, in exchange for others. As this chapter will explore, platforms are productive of a new form of trackable and manipulable social capital in the form of likes, retweets, views, etc. that users can monetize for their own personal gain (Schwarz 2019, p. 135). Their rights to this platform-specific social capital is contingent on their behavior as a "good citizen" of the platform.

Finally, after exploring the formation of new relationships between platform owners and individual users, the third chapter will turn to how digital platforms change the way collectivities come into being, impacting long standing political institutions that absorb these collectivities. Taking the DSA as a case study, the chapter will analyze how digital platforms are integrated into new repertoires of political action which, rather than being neutral tools for human actors to adopt at will, actively shape what it means to be a member of a collectivity, in some ways reflecting how "the medium is the message" (Chadwick 2007, p. 286). Accounts of the DSA's

massive growth since 2016 attribute it to the popularity of the Sanders' campaign, backlash against Trump's victory, and highly publicized victories of other democratic socialists in the congressional midterm elections in 2018, most notably Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York. DSA members have credited social media sites like Twitter for making socialist discourse accessible to a wider audience, allowing more people to find out about the organization (Barnes 2020). While these factors scratch the surface of the DSA's transformation, a deeper look suggests that digital platforms play an integral role in bringing new organizational structures and modes of political action into being. As this chapter will argue, the forms of digital action individuals adopt inform how collectivities are assembled and sustained, bringing "fringe" organizations like the DSA into closer proximity with mainstream institutions and campaigns, lending it greater visibility through digital interpersonal networks to actors who otherwise might not have been exposed to the organization and its ideals. Thus, through these chapters, this thesis aims to illustrate how digital platforms reconfigure the political, bringing new formations of actor-networks into being.

Chapter 1:

Making Sense of the Digital “Town Square”

Overview

Social media companies have long presented their platforms as spaces for connecting people, facilitating open and free discussion, and overall providing a service that is for the public good. Users of digital platforms often express their belief in their right to use their social media accounts to express their political opinions, implicitly and often explicitly invoking their First Amendment rights to free speech, despite the fact that First Amendment protections generally apply to actions the government can and cannot take to restrict speech that takes place on public property. Furthermore, laws regulating social media companies' responsibility to moderate content on their platforms give corporations broad latitude to enact content moderation policies that do not adhere to First Amendment standards. While there is legal precedent for treating some privately-owned property as public space, analogous to corporate-owned towns, and therefore subject to free speech protections, recent court decisions have been ambivalent about where digitally privately-owned public spaces stand.

Rather than seeking to settle debates about the role social media play in society-- whether they should be treated as public forums for free speech, how they should be regulated by government, and to what extent corporations can “censor” users' speech-- this chapter will view these controversies as windows into viewing how digital platforms, far from being neutral forums or infrastructure, become integrated into chains of action that alter how terms like “free speech” and “public space” themselves are materially composed. Different human actors such as executives of technology companies, legislators, judges, and platform users deploy these terms in

their attempt to render their own account of what digital platforms are dominant in relation to others' diverging accounts. Thus, these debates actually constitute a new arena of politics where these terms, rather than referring to immutable categories and concepts, refer to constantly changing techno-economic materiality. The gap between old conceptions of these terms and this new materiality is productive of a new arena of politics, where new actors are in the process of coming into being, as will be sketched briefly by the events below.

Diamond and Silk go to Congress

Sisters Lynnette Hardaway and Rochelle Richardson sat in front of the House Judiciary Committee on April 26, 2018. For them, it was the next step in an escalating fight with Facebook, specifically its CEO Mark Zuckerberg, over what they claimed was “censorship” of their popular page that features political commentary enthusiastically supporting Donald Trump. More famously known as the duo “Diamond and Silk,” the sisters had gone viral for their support for the Trump campaign in 2016 and their vocal backing of him following his election. Since September 2017, they had been in correspondence with Facebook about its “bias censorship and discrimination against” the Diamond and Silk brand and page, resulting in greatly reduced page reach, according to a statement they posted on their Facebook page. This correspondence came to a head on April 5, 2018, when the company sent an email to the sisters allegedly stating that Facebook’s policy team “has come [sic] to the conclusion that your content and your brand has been determined unsafe to the community” (Diamond and Silk 2018).

The sisters’ accusations against Facebook rest on the claim that the company had violated their right to free expression, a right that most Americans assume as a constitutional guarantee. Accusing Facebook of “deliberate bias censorship and discrimination,” the sisters implicitly

allude to this guarantee, asserting their right to express support of Donald Trump. However, while invoking violations of their right to free political expression, their claims also largely rested on the status of Facebook as a private company and the harm its “censorship” had allegedly caused to Diamond and Silk, not as individuals with free speech rights, but as a “brand and page.” This perspective is summed up in the fifth item on a bullet-point list in which the sisters enumerate their complaints: “If our content and brand was so unsafe to the community, why is the option for us to boost our content and spend money with FB to enhance our brand page still available? Maybe FB should give us a refund since FB censored our reach” (Diamond and Silk 2018). Thus, Facebook’s digital platform had become integrated into the sisters’ seemingly dual roles as citizens enjoying certain Constitutional rights on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a brand entitled to compensation for entering into what was perceived as an unfair deal with another business.

At the time, the sisters’ complaints largely reflected the attitudes of Republican officials and conservative pundits towards social media. While Democrats in the hearing referred to the proceedings as “stupid and “ridiculous” (Robertson 2018), Republican Representative Marsha Blackburn defended the sisters’ claims, arguing that technology companies do indeed target conservative content for censorship. Blackburn had experienced her own issues with social media. In October 2017, Twitter had not allowed her to promote her campaign launch video due to “inflammatory” language concerning Planned Parenthood (she boasts about her track record of “stopping the sale of baby body parts”), though the company later reversed its decision. Similar to Diamond and Silk’s case, the controversy centered not on whether or not Blackburn could post such content on Twitter, but whether or not she could pay to push the video to greater publicity, though the issue was framed around allegations of censorship and discrimination, a subtle

difference that refocused the debate on protected free expression rights instead of business complaints.

Fast-forwarding a year later in July 2019, Trump hosted a social media summit at the White House for right-wing personalities to air their grievances against technology companies. While controversial figures such as James O’Keefe of Project Veritas, Qanon conspiracy theorist Bill Mitchell, and people from the Heritage Foundation and Turning Point USA were invited, representatives from Twitter and Facebook were ostensibly not (Roose 2019). Two months before the summit, the Trump administration had launched an online form to collect stories from people who had experienced unjust “censorship” on social media platforms. The tool, hosted by Typeform, allowed users to submit screenshots and links to the offending content, and write a brief description of the disciplinary action taken against them. The Typeform webpage, though no longer accepting submissions, still reads: “SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS should advance FREEDOM OF SPEECH. Yet too many Americans have seen their accounts suspended, banned, or fraudulently reported for unclear "violations" of user policies” (White House Typeform 2020). Despite the summit attendees’ outrage at being “silenced” on social media platforms, a *New York Times* reporter noted the irony of complaining about persecution from the “cushy perch of a White House summit” (Roose 2019).

As journalists have pointed out, when Trump and conservatives complain about their freedom of speech being violated, what they are actually talking about is the extent to which their speech is able to reach a larger audience on social media platforms. In other words, critics have argued that while conservatives have the right to say what they want on social media, they do not have the right to have the visibility of that content boosted by Facebook’s and Twitter’s algorithms so that it appears in more people’s newsfeeds (Diresta 2018). However, what their

complaints do shed light on is the way in which the very concept of “speech” itself has been drastically reconfigured by digital platforms and their constitutive algorithms. Though made distinct from each other, “speech” and “reach” are intricately intertwined. Does speech on social media mean anything if it does not reach anyone to hear it? Yet “reach” is not reflective of a naturally occurring phenomenon in the offline world. Rather, it is algorithmically determined, with algorithms being engineered by employees at Twitter and Facebook and refined with continuous user input. Thus, not only has the nature of “speech” been transformed, but the public space in which it is occurring is now largely privately-owned digital platforms governed by technology companies and their algorithms. This illustrates that these debates are not only about social media users’ rights to freedom of speech; at the core, these debates are about what constitutes “speech” and “freedom” in the first place. The conflicting attempts of various actors to fit old concepts to a new technological material reality are productive of such political debates.

The following sections of this chapter will explore the debate around “free speech” on digital platforms in order to show how the concepts of “public space” and “speech” have been reconfigured and (re)engineered by digital platforms. As the story of Diamond and Silk illustrates, the role of social media platforms in promoting free expression and democracy is highly contested, with users, corporate executives, and government officials divided over what exactly platforms *are* and how the technology and corporate parts should be governed. Rather than referring to immutable categories, the concepts of free speech, public space, and the speaker as a political subject reflect a specific techno-economic materiality that is composed of many contingent and constantly moving parts, including platforms themselves, the algorithms that constitute them, platform users, and government policies and regulations. Thus, the gap between this new material reality and the old conceptualizations of such terms is generative of a new kind

of politics, in which public debate over how to fit this reality into old categories plays out at the highest levels of government, as well as between users over digital platforms. As demonstrated by the story of Diamond and Silk, these two realms have also become interconnected, as seemingly disparate figures such as the president and obscure social media personalities connect in the offline world to make their case for “free speech” rights. This shows the ways in which digital platforms flatten the topology of society by rendering elements seemingly separated by spheres, layers, or levels actually quite close to one another when their connections are examined (Latour 1996, p. 371).

In order to illustrate these points, this chapter will first show how social media have been constructed as the natural places for political expression, emphasizing the role of law and government policy in doing this and then briefly discussing how technology companies themselves perpetuate this discourse. Secondly, this chapter will give an overview of court decisions and legal precedents for free speech protections within privately-owned “public” spaces, revealing the ambiguous relationship between how social media are constructed and how they are actually regulated. After that, the chapter will explore how digital platforms are integrated into a new political arena in which new types of actors and action are made possible. Finally, the gap between this new reality and the old understanding of terms like “free speech” and “public space” will be explored, demonstrating how this gap produces a new kind of politics in which different actors, from tech executives, social media users, and politicians are actively attempting to define and stabilize their positions and identities in relation to the others.

Constructing Social Media as a New Public Forum

Popular understandings of social media platforms as spaces for open and free discussion stem from technology executive's own efforts to market their platforms as social infrastructure or digital town squares, digital spaces analogous to physical spaces where people congregate to debate matters of public concern. Such efforts are also rooted in democratizing discourse of the internet in general, which has in part been constituted by scholars' own attempts to study and theorize digital platforms. Attempts to analogize digital platforms to physical public spaces points to a mismatch between old conceptions of public spaces, their connotations, and their associated First Amendment protections, and how digital platforms are actually governed, by the companies that own them, judicial precedents, and legislative regulations.

For many scholars the internet in general and social media in particular offered new potential for democratization due to the technologies' ability to facilitate conversation across broader swathes of society, as compared to the age of mass media. In his seminal book, *The Wealth of Networks*, Yochai Benkler (2006) discusses the new networked public sphere, where the internet allows more individuals to communicate their viewpoints to many others. The networked public sphere, according to Benkler (2006, p.10), encourages decentralized approaches to political participation and organization, and the individuals communicating are less likely to be corrupted by money, compared to mass media. Similarly, Manuel Castells (2008, p. 90) notes the mass self-communication that occurs in this networked public sphere entails many-to-many sending and receiving of information that often bypasses mass media and government control. For him, new information and communication technologies have led to the rise of a global civil society, in which harnessing the power of public opinion through internet networks is the most effective way to broaden political participation (Castells 2008, p. 90).

Access to conversation is vital for building a strong public sphere, made vastly easier by the affordances of social media, according to Clay Shirky (2011, p. 32). Thus, it is the responsibility of the government to promote a free internet policy in which social media can foster open discussions among citizens (Shirky 2011, p. 32). These approaches to studying digital communications technologies view them as social infrastructure for channeling interpersonal relations, thus leading to broader possibilities for fostering democracy.

While these accounts advance knowledge on how digital platforms have made greater connectivity among once disparate individuals possible, the point that they miss is that these platforms fundamentally change the types of conversations that are possible, and the ways in which the individuals having these conversations are transformed as platforms become inextricably integrated into their modes of action. As demonstrated by the debates unfolding at the legislative level in the United States, digital platforms are entities that enter the equation in their own right, technological forces that drive and steer action on the one hand, and must be made sense of by competing human actors on the other. Contrary to concepts of the “networked public sphere” (Benkler 2006), in which communications technologies connect individuals, these debates about the status of platforms show that they are not neutral infrastructure for channeling pure human relations. In fact, platforms themselves enter the meta-discourse, with technology executives actively shaping understandings of what platforms are, and as a result, the legal implications for corporations and users of these platforms. Drawing heavily on the democratizing discourse of the internet, of which the above scholarship is a part, corporate executives attempt to construct their platforms as open and free communicative spaces. However, as will be shown, these accounts are always open-ended and contested as platforms give rise to a new kind of politics and political actors.

Drawing on the democratizing discourse on the internet in general (Gillespie 2010, p. 352), social media companies like Twitter and Facebook discursively construct their platforms as online spaces analogous to public forums, promoting these platforms as communicative spaces that bring people together. As Gillespie (2010, p. 350) has written, the label “platform” as applied to these sites draws not only on the word’s computational definition (i.e. a program from which to run other applications), but other connotations of the word that suggest social media platforms are “progressive and egalitarian arrangements” that provide users the opportunity to communicate, interact, or conduct business. Thus, the label “platform” becomes a “discursive resting point” that misrepresents how these companies actively shape public discourse about their platforms (Gillespie 2010, p. 349). Importantly, painting their platforms as tools for public good is necessary for these companies to pursue their underlying commercial goals. In the wake of “fake news” controversy surrounding the 2016 election, Mark Zuckerberg rolled out a new mission statement for Facebook the following year that sought to “give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together (Constine 2017). Similarly, former Twitter CEO Dick Costolo once spoke of his vision to make the platform a “global town square” similar to the ancient Roman Agora, where information exchange was unfiltered, and news came directly from the people living it (Leetaru 2017). On its investor relations page, Twitter states its business and revenue will always strive to “improve -- and not detract from -- a free and global conversation” (Twitter 2020). Through this discourse, social media companies present their platforms as spaces for people to meet and discuss topics that are important to the general public, serving a role analogous to the role public squares and common physical spaces have historically served in advancing citizens’ constitutional right to free expression.

Conceptualizations of social media platforms in this way also implicitly draw on historic notions of what a “public forum” is and what a public forum’s function for the greater good of society has been conceived as. In the context of American legal doctrine, a “public forum” usually refers to government-owned property such as parks, streets, and sidewalks, where individuals are generally free to exercise their First Amendment right to free expression. On such property, individuals have greater protection from censorship than on private property, where certain restrictions on speech may be imposed (Hudson 2020). Public forum doctrine can be traced back to a case in 1939, *Hague v. Committee for Industrial Organization*, in which Justice Owen J. Roberts wrote in his ruling:

“Wherever the title of streets and parks may rest, they have immemorially been held in trust for the use of the public and, time out of mind, have been used for purposes of assembly, communicating thoughts between citizens, and discussing public questions. Such use of the streets and public places has, from ancient times, been a part of the privileges, immunities, rights, and liberties of citizens” (Hudson 2020).

While the courts have ruled that the government can place reasonable restrictions on speech based on time, manner, and place, the government cannot restrict speech on content-based judgements. In other words, the government cannot block speech based on the message it is delivering (Hudson 2020). Generally, however, the view of the American courts has been that public forums are essential for the maintenance of robust public debate, which the First Amendment is meant to promote and protect.

Thus, social media companies draw on the democratizing discourse of the internet as well as traditional legal conceptions of the “public forum” in order to construct their platforms as places of open, free expression, analogous to an online town square. These statements are also the way social media companies “sell” their services to users; the main utility for the average person is the platform’s ability to connect that person with other users. Articulating their services

in this way also allows these companies to divert attention from the commercial incentives that underlie the platforms' designs, most notably the imperative to collect users' personal data to sell to advertisers. However, as the debate unfolding at the highest levels of government and among platform users themselves show, there are huge gaps between old conceptions of terms like "free speech" and "public space." The aim of this chapter is not to argue that there is a "right" or "wrong" definition of these terms. Instead, as different actors deploy these terms in debates about and constructions of digital platforms, it becomes clear that terms like free speech and public space are constantly shifting categories, referring to changing techno-economic material realities that continuously must be made sense of. This gap between old concepts and new configurations is generative of a new kind of politics, in which various actors: lawmakers, corporate executives, platform users, and even the president himself, are attempting to render their own interpretations of these categories stable in relation to others' interpretations. Thus, to further illustrate the gap between old understandings of these terms and this new materiality, the following section will explore how American courts have sought to define digital platforms, and the consequences this has had for the rights and responsibilities afforded to technology companies and everyday platform users.

Digital Platform as an Online Company Town?

There is much tension between this image of social media platforms as public forums and the legal status of these platforms that determine the ensuing protections they and their users enjoy. Several legal scholars have made the case for the courts to apply public forum doctrine to sites like Facebook and Twitter, while court decisions have often been ambiguous on the issue. At the heart of this debate is, if treated as a public forum, then social media companies' terms of

service and content moderation policies would need to comply with First Amendment protections, which some argue would vastly undermine their ability to remove hate speech and misinformation, or how, at the root of it, First Amendment doctrine should be adapted in general for the internet age (Beausoleil 2019, p. 2143).

Legal scholars have also argued that there is strong precedent in case law for treating social media in particular like town squares, or in other words, as public spaces for free expression despite being owned by private companies, reasoning that as platforms like Facebook and Twitter “thrust themselves into the public light... they discard their private rights” (Everett 2018, p. 122). This precedent comes from the landmark case *Marsh v. Alabama* (1946), in which the Court ruled a corporate town, though privately owned, fulfilled a “public function,” thus endowing it with the responsibilities of government (Puetz 2015, p. 397). Because of this, the company could not forbid a resident from distributing religious materials in the town, as it had tried to do, because this was a violation of that resident’s First Amendment protections. From this, legal scholars have reasoned that Facebook plays the role of an online corporate town, a place where users can create a social identity with which they interact with other social identities. Within this online corporate town, social identities also encounter everything from entertainment, business, news and more (Puetz 2015, p. 403). In this analogy, platform users occupy the space of employee-residents in the corporate town because their social identities not only inhabit it, but their activity also generates data that Facebook extracts for profit (Puetz 2015, p. 403). The conclusion to be drawn from classifying Facebook as a corporate town (and therefore a public forum) is that its content moderation policies must not restrict its users’ First Amendment rights, a point in itself that has generated much controversy both among scholars, legislators, and the general public.

However, the courts have been ambivalent when it comes to classifying social media platforms as public forums. The Supreme Court ruling in *Manhattan Community Access Corp. v. Halleck* in June 2019, though not directly discussing social media, was seen to have potential ramifications for social media companies' responsibilities under First Amendment law ("Manhattan Community Access Corp. v. Halleck" 2019, p. 289). The question at issue in the case was whether a privately operated community access television channel is considered a state actor, and therefore can be sued on First Amendment grounds (Higgins 2019). As some noted, if the Court had ruled that it could be considered a state actor, the decision could potentially be applied to social media and thus advance Republicans' allegations of censorship on social media. However, the Court ruled that the nonprofit operating the community access channel was a private actor, and thus had no constraints on its editorial discretion (Kavanaugh 2019). Writing for the majority, Justice Brett Kavanaugh wrote, "Moreover, a private entity such as MNN who opens its property for speech by others is not transformed by that fact alone into a state actor" (Kavanaugh 2019). While the ruling was narrowly applied to public access television, scholars have noted the unclear implications for future cases regarding free speech on social media ("Manhattan Community Access Corp. v. Halleck" 2019).

Furthermore, existing laws that regulate social media companies have become the subject of debate among legislators due to their perceived inability to effectively hold these companies accountable for what is posted on their platforms, again marking a contradiction between how social media are popularly conceived and constructed by the companies themselves and their legal status. The famous "26 words that created the internet" are Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act passed in 1996, which states that, "no provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information

provided by another information content provider" (Bolson 2016, p. 3). Congress' original intent for the law was to encourage interactive computer service providers to moderate content on their platforms without fear of being sued for content posted by third parties on their platforms (Pagano 2018, p. 532). This concern stemmed from previous cases that had suggested if interactive computer services attempted to moderate content, they would assume the role of a "publisher" exercising editorial discretion, and thus be liable for every message posted on their platform (Bolson 2016, p. 5). Thus, the intended purpose of this law was to encourage these companies to actively monitor and remove offensive content, suggesting that these companies had the right to censor users' speech according to their own policies. In fact, some have argued that the explicit purpose of the law was to encourage content moderation by freeing companies from the fear of being sued if they began monitoring posts (Robertson 2019). However, after the passage of Section 230, the case *Zeran v. America Online, Inc.* (1997) had the opposite effect by setting a precedent that broadly immunized computer service providers from liability for any content posted by third parties (Pagano 2018, p. 522). Debates over how broad of immunity platforms should enjoy, as well as the outdated status of Section 230 have become hotly contested, with technology companies clinging to the legal protection the label of "platform" provides them, and opponents claiming these companies must face greater accountability for how their platforms are used (Gynn 2020).

Thus, the intricacies of Facebook, Twitter, and other digital platforms' legal status is far from settled. It is unclear to what extent they should legally be treated as public forums, though both Democratic and Republican politicians have been calling for technology companies to be held to greater accountability for how their platforms are run and how content is moderated. What this debate reveals is that there is a wide gap between social media as public spaces,

popularly constructed as such, as well as in the function they serve, and the actual ways in which they operate and are regulated. This gap is productive of a new kind of politics, where the efforts of each actor involved to render their own understanding of digital platforms hegemonic is constitutive of new political actions and discourses that did not formerly exist.

Deploying Digital Platforms as Multiple

It is worth noting that while debates over how to regulate social media platforms and how to hold companies accountable have been unfolding, there is little challenge raised to the underlying structure of a privately-owned public space. Senator Ted Cruz, a vocal Republican lawmaker in the crusade against perceived censorship of conservative voices online, laid out his complaints and a plan of action in a letter to the Federal Trade Commission, co-authored with Senator Josh Hawley in which they call for greater transparency in Google, Facebook, and Twitter's algorithms and decision-making (Cruz and Hawley 2019). Stopping short of suggesting alternatives to privately-owned public spaces, they instead request that the FTC investigate these companies (Cruz and Hawley 2019). On the Democrats' side, legislators have shown varying support for breaking up "big tech," with Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren calling for stricter antitrust enforcement than others (Culliford 2020). Generally, calls for better regulation of hate speech and misinformation online are predicated on technology companies taking an even more active role in moderating content and enforcing company policies. In the case of Diamond and Silk, their allegations of Facebook's censorship again do not take issue with the fact that the platform is privately owned. In fact, a major part of their complaint centers on their assertion that Facebook did not properly carry out its role as a regulator by unfairly censoring their page, questioning the company's ability to adhere to its own policies and

community standards. Thus, there is a level of tacit acceptance for privately-owned public spaces in the form of digital platforms, which rather than representing an inherent state of reality are a specific techno-economic material assemblage, at the same time both highly contingent and purposefully engineered and discursively constructed by tech companies for their own profit.¹ Thus, debates over how to match old concepts of public space and the freedoms associated with it to this new private-public forum generate a new kind of politics, political actors, and speech.

The gap between the legal status of digital platforms and their use and construction as sites of public discourse has created a new and distinct formation of privately-owned public spaces in which public debate is steered and its parameters are set by platform owners. Despite appealing to an image that paints platforms as empowering spaces of discussion and expression, upon closer examination it becomes evident that technology companies themselves do not necessarily claim to be “neutral” channels; the discussions and debates that users are empowered to have must always occur within standards that are implemented top-down by Facebook and Twitter. For example, when Jack Dorsey laid out Twitter’s mission of developing a “systemic framework to help encourage more healthy debate, conversations, and critical thinking,” he explicitly continues to detail the metrics by which the “health” of conversation would be measured, which had been developed by two other artificial intelligence and data science startups (Dorsey 2019). Similarly, Zuckerberg’s mission of “building a global community” on Facebook made the case that the change would start “local” with everyday users, though he goes on to discuss the Meaningful Communities project, which would be driven by improved artificial intelligence that could recommend better Groups for users to join (Zuckerberg 2017). These instances represent examples of what van Dijck (2013, p. 12) has called technology companies

¹ For an alternative model of social media ownership, see Evan Malmgren’s “Socialized Media,” <https://thebaffler.com/latest/socialized-media-malmgren>

“making sociality technical,” in which actions that are conceptualized as “social,” such as engaging in discussions or being a part of a community are rendered formal, manageable, and manipulable by technology for the purpose of the company’s economic profit. This purposeful engineering of public space by private entities represents a new social-technical-economic formation. The debate over how to identify and govern this specific formation is constitutive of a new arena of politics, which has in turn made possible new formations of speech and speaker.

Digital platforms and their constitutive algorithms transform the nature of the speaker and speech in question by becoming an essential part of the articulation of both. Both the computational workings of algorithms and what Taina Bucher (2017) has termed the “algorithmic imaginary” have become integrated into the formation of political speech and the speaker(s). As Bucher (2017, p. 31) explains, the algorithmic imaginary refers to “the ways in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms and what these imaginations make possible.” This, for example, is manifested in Diamond and Silk’s accusations that Facebook is censoring their page through its algorithms, which led to their high profile Congressional hearing. As demonstrated by their opening story, the algorithmic imaginary was a powerful force that was generative of Congressional hearings, a White House summit, and a slew of other “real world” consequences. Actors did not need to have access to “the thing itself,” meaning knowledge of Facebook’s actual codes, in order to perceive it in a certain way (Bucher 2017, p. 32). On a computational level, algorithms that drove and were driven by clicks, shares, and follows propelled Diamond and Silk to virality, allowing their formerly obscure channel to explode in prominence to the point where they became featured on the Trump campaign trail, guest commentators on Fox News, and subjects of interviews at other mainstream outlets such as the *Rolling Stone* and CNN with Don Lemon. Thus, algorithms have the power to steer and

engineer action beyond their respective platforms. In unpredictable ways, platforms also become integrated in chains of action that span into the offline realm, demonstrating the way action is dislocated throughout complex assemblages of actors. As Latour (2005, p. 55) puts it, there are “simply different ways to make actors *do* things, the diversity of which is fully deployed without having to sort in advance the ‘true’ agencies from the ‘false’ ones” (Latour 2005, p. 55). Thus, rather than seeking to adjudicate if Republicans’ allegations against technology companies are true, if they are based on genuine political convictions, or put forth for ulterior motives, it becomes more insightful to analyze how algorithms, both in their computational and imaginary capacity, are giving rise to new types of actors and agencies.

In order to fully grasp the “effect” of digital platforms on politics, it is necessary to open up the black box of the actor. Rather than viewing individuals acting as unified entities, breaking them down into their constitutive chains of associations into which platforms are integrated reveals the multiple forces operating behind the scenes to make the actor act in certain ways. By this view, digital platforms can be seen as complex actors in their own right, affecting chains of action just as much as the humans who create and use them. Thus, the outcome of the new techno-economic formation of digital platforms is not a “global town square” or an online corporate town. The disjuncture between these terms and the new techno-economic materiality of a privately-owned public space is productive of a new political arena in which judges, legislators, platform users, and technology executives are actively competing and contesting the management and governance of this arena. Thus, these are analogies that various actors deploy in their struggle to render the new formation stable, while the actual outcome is the new actor-networks themselves, which are composed of individual users, algorithms in the computational

and imaginary sense, varying economic imperatives, and existing judicial and legislative structures.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how the digital platform itself has become an integral link in the chain of associations that makes up the speaker, speech, and public space broadly conceived. The tension between the legal categorization of social media companies as private entities and the construction of digital platforms as public spaces for debate and free expression constitutes a new techno-economic materiality in which the actors in question are constantly reacting and adapting to the others' efforts to render interpretation of these categories stable. As this account has shown, this is less about different points of view of what digital platforms *are*, as though they have an inherent nature outside of how different actors perceive them and put them to use, but is rather a question of how digital platforms themselves have “been allowed to be deployed as multiple” (Latour 2005, p. 116). In this way, Facebook is both a public forum and a private company, and its status shifts and is deployed in many, often diverging ways depending on whether the actor in question is, say Mark Zuckerberg versus Diamond and Silk. Debates over these terms reflect the contestation between different actors with different interests in their pursuit to re-engineer what these terms are understood to mean. Thus, when considering debates over free speech online, “free speech” and the “public forum,” rather than referring to immutable categories are normative terms that express a particular rendering of a specific arrangement of technological and human actors.

Chapter 2

Social Capital and the Political Economy of Platforms

Overview

As privately-owned public spaces, discussed at length in the previous chapter, digital platforms have given rise to new relations of power and domination, where technology executives exercise authority not only over the corporate apparatus of their companies, but also the lives of platform users and their daily interactions with each other. In economic terms, many scholars have noted these dynamics of economic exploitation within the greater context of capitalist processes. However, relations between platform owners and platform users are understood by both parties in ways that exceed pure economic relations. In order to maximize the profitability of their platforms, technology executives must actively govern their users by policing and conditioning desirable behavior (Schwarz 2019, p. 119). On the other side of this equation, platform users are then configured as economic actors in their own right, able to capitalize on the social capital they accumulate on digital platforms. The ability to convert likes, followers, views, retweets, and other concrete metrics into monetary profits, access to traditionally powerful institutions, and other resources has led to the a new actor, here referred to as a “political entrepreneur,” who is able to commodify not only political speech but the *self*. This platform “self” is thus an economic actor and political subject, exploited and governed by platform owners yet also exercising and demanding certain rights associated with membership in the platform community.

This chapter will trace the formation of these new actors: the autocratic corporate executive and the platform citizen-political entrepreneur, illustrating how these new relations of

governance, power, and domination are assembled. First, existing approaches to the political economy of digital platforms will be reviewed, highlighting where these critiques overlook the extra-economic relations that arise. After that, through expanding on Weihe's (2017) formulation of "founder primacy" (Weihe 2017), this chapter will examine how the power of technology corporation executives is assembled, not just as an economic force but also as a political one. Then, the chapter will turn to the "political entrepreneur," revisiting the story of Diamond and Silk in greater detail to sketch the relations of governance, power, and capitalization that become possible as digital platforms are integrated into new chains of action. Finally, the chapter will end by drawing some conclusions about these novel political-economic formations and the relations of power that are carried out between them.

Beyond Exploitation and Extraction

Free labor, provided by platform users for platform owners, is a constitutive aspect of the digital economy. As Terranova (2004, p. 74) has noted, the internet in general is animated by ongoing technical and cultural labor that is immanent to the flows of network society. Users' engagement with social media platforms represent a type of "free" labor in that it is both willingly given and non-compensated, despite the monetary value it generates for technology corporations (Terranova 2004, p. 94). This free labor can also be conceptualized as immaterial labor, which Hardt (1999, p. 94), drawing on Lazzarato (1996) defines as "labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, knowledge, or communication." For example, these activities carried out over social media can include filling out a user profile, uploading photos and videos, and liking content from other users, all of which generate monetizable data points for technology companies, and, as noted, go uncompensated for platform users (Cohen 2008, p. 8). Immaterial

labor also produces intangible products such as feelings of satisfaction and well-being, passion, and “even a sense of connectedness and community,” thus making production communicative, affective, and “elevated to the level of human relations,” although it occurs within a field that is dominated by and immanent to capital (Hardt 1999, p. 6). As Cohen (2008, p. 7) puts it, digital platforms are part of a longer, historical process of extensive commodification, or in other words, “the way in which market forces shape and re-shape life, entering spaces previously untouched, or mildly touched, by capitalist social relations.” Importantly, this process as carried out by digital platforms leads to the intensification and normalization of constant surveillance by private companies (Cohen 2008, p. 8). Thus, as defined by the Marxist critiques outlined above, the relationship between platform users and platform owners is constitutive of a new set of exploitative labor relations, which is part of ongoing processes of capitalism.

Other approaches place less emphasis on the exploitation of labor and focus more on the extraction of data, arguing that platforms reconfigure life itself into a resource that can be appropriated, managed, and sold by private corporations (Couldry and Mejias 2019). Though the appropriation of data is also situated within longer processes of capitalism, this approach departs from those above by conceptualizing the relationship between platform users and platform owners as one of “data colonialism” in which life itself is appropriated as a raw material “whether or not it is actually labor, or even labor-like” (Couldry and Mejias 2019, p. 338). Rather than an expansion of the labor process, the analogy here is with the historical appropriation of physical nature by colonial powers, which set the stage for industrial capitalism. Thus, data colonialism sets the stage for a new, unprecedented stage of capitalism, in which digital platforms serve as the technological means to produce a new type of “social” that can be “continuously tracked, captured, sorted and counted for value as “data”” (Couldry and Mejias

2019, p. 341). This datafication of all aspects of life creates new possibilities for managing everything, leaving nothing outside of capitalist production (Couldry and Mejias 2019, p. 343). Thus, the only way to resist data colonialism is to reject its core logics, which means to question the underlying rationality that makes continuous appropriation seem natural, necessary and an enhancement to human development, and to reject data processing as a naturally occurring form of social knowledge rather than a commercially motivated form of extraction (Couldry and Mejias 2019, p. 346). However, taken from the perspective of actor-network theory, the question then becomes how data colonialism, rather than an *explanation* for new power relations between platform users and owners, is the *result* of the continuous work carried out by both, in conjunction with the work done by platforms themselves to uphold these dynamics.

These approaches go a great distance in showing how digital platforms are economic and ideological projects rather than the natural channels for social relations. Importantly, as Andrejevic (2011, p. 286) notes, “the affordances of the internet and the services that run on it... change in accordance with the priorities of those who control this infrastructure, and what is taken for granted one day... may well disappear the next.” However, if “data colonialism” is an analogy used to make sense of the end result of these relationships, then the work put in by human and technological actors can be understood as highly contingent rather than ruled by an invisible force or logic. What appears as data colonialism must be constantly be performed, or else the analogy no longer will hold. Thus, these approaches leave little room for analyzing the particular ways platform users exercise agency within their exploitative/ extractive relationship with platform owners, and how they themselves make sense of this relationship as well as the technology itself. Importantly, as Schwarz (2019, p. 119) has shown, the relationship between platform owners and platform users is often framed by both parties in terms of political relations

of governance rather than in purely economic terms. Platform owners have an active interest in governing human interactions on platforms because they are a source of profit, and molding them to certain behavioral norms can maximize company profits (Schwarz 2019, p. 119).

Corporations also take an interest in governing to ward off attempts by external parties (such as congressional committees or the Federal Communications Commission) to regulate or otherwise interfere in how platforms operate. Furthermore, these approaches also do not take into account how technology can divert human action in ways unintended by technology executives, and perhaps not predicted by capitalist relations.

Thus, while digital platforms do reconfigure social life in new ways, this chapter will also view them as “a set of relations that constantly need to be performed” (van Dijck 2013, p. 26).

This means recognizing the complex and contingent ways actors of all kinds attribute meaning to and make use of platforms, and how platforms themselves shape the performance of social acts, not merely facilitate them (van Dijck 2013, p. 29). Thus, they do not simply facilitate relations of exploitation or extraction, though that may be the result of the continuous carrying out of relations between actors. Platforms also become another site of governance, where new forms of power and domination take shape. As will be illustrated below, platform owners have almost absolute power to police and condition behavior on their platforms, which can have tremendous consequences for the “offline” world. On the other hand, as governed subjects, platform users also expect and demand certain rights from technology corporations, just as citizens demand certain rights from their government. These rights, as was explored in the previous chapter, relate to freedom of expression that has typically been protected in public spaces, but it also tied to users’ own economic opportunities, as digital platforms have made political speech and political identity in itself a monetizable commodity. Through this perspective, this chapter goes beyond

the frameworks of the political economy approaches outlined above, seeking to trace how competing economic imperatives of various actors in relation to platforms play out, thus resulting in platforms themselves being integrated into chains of association that construct new relationships of power and domination, which on the one hand could be seen as a continuation of the process of “extensive commodification” of human life (Cohen 2008, p. 7), but on the other hand be seen as new ways of existing and acting as a political, governed subject (Schwarz 2019, p. 119).

This is not to say that forces of capitalism do not “exist,” but it is rather an approach that will analyze the relationship between various actors that does not situate them in a pre-given context. As actor-network theory would advise, this chapter does not seek to analyze human actors as though they are operating at a micro level over which capitalism is a macro structure somehow perpetually existing. As Latour (2005, p. 176) would explain, the “macro” does not describe a wider or larger set of relations than what occurs at the “micro.” Rather, it is “another equally local, equally micro place, which is *connected* to many others through some medium transporting specific types of traces” (Latour 2005, p. 176). Through tracing associations between various human and nonhuman actors, recognizing how actors themselves are complex assemblages, it becomes possible to see where and by what means structural effects are produced, and thus it is possible to explain the arising proximity between actors such as Diamond and Silk, virtually unknown before going viral, and Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook’s powerful CEO. This is not to assert that a hierarchy does not exist among these actors, but it is simply to say “if you wish to go from one site to another, then you have to pay the full cost of relation, connection, displacement, and information” (Latour 2005, p. 176). In the following sections, this chapter will revisit the case of Diamond and Silk and their complaints against

Facebook to further investigate how the relationship between platform users and platform owners is understood by both parties not only in economic terms, but in terms of political rights and governance. As will be shown, the rights of platform “good citizens” to free expression is also tied to rights to free entrepreneurship, in which political speech and status as a political actor on the platform can be monetized or otherwise leveraged for material gain. Thus, the particular contradiction between Facebook as a public forum and, at the same time, a privately owned platform is productive of new types of actors, new relations between these actors, and new types of dominance and agency that previous accounts of the political economy of social media have not taken into consideration.

“Founder Primacy”: A New Autocracy?

With the rising primacy of digital platforms in terms of their sheer market value as well as their integration into everyday life, company founders represent a new figuration of power, exercising outsize control over the platform both as a corporate entity and as a community of users that must be governed. As scholars of corporate governance have noted, this amount of power vested in one individual over an entire corporation is, for the most part, unprecedented and is particular to technology companies (Weihe 2017, p. 182). Founders of technology companies, who also often occupy the position of CEO and/ or controlling shareholder often justify their power in terms of governance, appealing to notions of the public good of the community, whether that be society in general or their platform’s users specifically. The contradictions of a privately-owned public space, as was discussed in the previous chapter, have created new relationships of power and domination, where the near-absolute power vested in technology company founders is assembled from various constitutive parts. The following

section takes Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook as an example, tracing how Zuckerberg has achieved the status of what some commentators have called an autocrat (Farrell et al. 2018) through various sets of relations that are also characteristic of other technology corporations (Molla 2019), but also through business deals that have allowed Facebook to effectively dominate the social media industry, neutralizing threats from competing platforms and their founders.

As technology companies have become economic giants, there has been a trend towards what corporate governance scholars have called “founder primacy” (Weihe 2017). A phenomenon common to technology companies in particular, founder primacy is a mode of corporate governance in which company founders “are afforded significant control that overrides institutional investors, public shareholders, and even the company’s own board of directors” (Weihe 2017, p. 176-177). This new form of governance stand in opposition to notions of shareholder democracy, which puts forth the theory that corporations exist to serve the interest of their shareholders; thus shareholders should have a right to vote in order to determine the outcome of the company board election (Hayden and Bodie 2010, p. 2087). Common models of shareholder democracy usually grant each shareholder one vote per each share they hold, thus giving their voice power in proportion to the amount of money they have invested in the corporation (Hayden and Bodie 2010, p. 2087). Looking further back into the history of American corporations in the nineteenth century, models of shareholder democracy would also occasionally grant every shareholder one vote, regardless of the amount of shares they possessed (Smythe 2006, p. 1416), further emphasizing how the current trend towards founder primacy is a historically unique formation that represents a new configuration of power.

Founder primacy arises from a structure of multi-tiered classes of stock, in which holders of one class of stock have more voting power than holders of other classes. Facebook provides a case in point example, with Zuckerberg being the board chair, CEO, and controller of the majority of voting power among Facebook shareholders (Stewart 2018). Like many publicly traded technology companies, Facebook's shares operate on a dual class structure, consisting of Class A stock that is openly traded on the New York exchange, and Class B stock that is owned by Facebook executives and other insiders. In terms of corporate governance, Class A shareholders are allocated one vote per share, while Class B shareholders receive 10 votes per share (Stewart 2018). As a result, independent investors have substantially less of a voice in how the company is run. Class B Facebook investors control close to 70 percent of the voting share, with Zuckerberg alone controlling 58 percent (Durkee 2019). Despite the fact that this type of power distribution is increasingly common among technology companies, the amount of power that company founders retain is considered unprecedented (Weihe 2017, p. 182).

Opponents of multi-class stock structures argue that the resulting founder primacy leads to a lack of accountability and poor management. These concerns played out among Facebook shareholders in the wake of 2016's fake news controversy and revelations about the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which the data analytics firm used improperly obtained Facebook user data to build voter profiles. Leading up to the company's annual shareholder meeting in May 2019, many independent shareholders voiced their dissatisfaction with how Zuckerberg was running the company as well as his overall outsize influence (Durkee 2019). Independent shareholders, investment firms, and investor activist groups including Arjuna Capital and the Center for Media Justice launched a "Vote No" campaign to urge the board to withhold their support of Zuckerberg's position on it (OpenMIC 2019). However, even though 68 percent of independent

investors did vote to separate the roles of CEO and board chair, Zuckerberg retained both positions due to his majority voting power. Effectively, the only way to reduce Zuckerberg's power is for him to voluntarily give it up.

Zuckerberg has also assembled his power through acquiring competing platforms, giving him access to their users' data and terminating potential threats to Facebook's dominance. Facebook's high-profile purchases of Instagram in 2012 and WhatsApp in 2014, for \$1 billion and \$22 billion respectively, neutralized potential market competition as Zuckerberg sought to consolidate Facebook's dominance in the social network industry ("Facebook Buys Instagram" 2012; Olson 2014). Though Facebook had plans to develop its own mobile photo-sharing application in 2011, Zuckerberg decided it would be more effective to acquire Instagram, which came with a built-in community of over 27 million users at the time of purchase ("Facebook Buys Instagram" 2012). Similarly, WhatsApp had a vast global user base for its mobile messenger service, with 450 million active monthly users in 2014 (Facebook 2014). In both cases, Zuckerberg vowed the applications would retain their autonomy, with the co-founders of each company staying on to continue running their platforms. However, as pressure to monetize mounted Zuckerberg would walk back this vow, leading to Instagram co-founders Kevin Systrom and Mike Kreiger to resign in September 2018 (Isaac 2018), and WhatsApp co-founders Brian Acton to leave in 2017 and Jan Koum in 2018 (Constine 2018). Acton's departure in particular raised eyebrows, as many commentators noted the contradiction between the WhatsApp founder's stance as a "pro-privacy zealot" (WhatsApp messages are end-to-end encrypted by default) with Facebook's business model that is reliant on selling user data to advertisers (Olson 2018). The initial deal had caused a stir in the technology community, with a \$19 billion pay out to a platform that was not yet monetized seeming like a risky move at best. In

an interview with *Forbes*, Acton claimed he left because he was angry that Facebook had updated its terms of service so that WhatsApp and Facebook user accounts would be linked, after Acton had expressly testified to European Union antitrust regulators that user data between the two platforms would be difficult to blend (Olson 2018). Acton's "lie" did in fact lead to EU regulators to issue Facebook a \$122 million fine, a slap on the wrist for a company whose profits were \$70.7 billion in 2018 (Olson 2018). Zuckerberg's endeavors to find ways to monetize WhatsApp also did not sit well with its co-founders. According to Acton, Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's chief operating officer, presented plans to insert targeted advertising into its Status feature and to sell businesses tools to chat directly with users, with the eventual aim of selling these businesses user data analytics (Olson 2018). Though Facebook has acquired several other businesses, the WhatsApp case in particular is representative of a new business strategy of purchasing competitors not for outright profit, but for access to user bases, and the promise of future monetization based on access to those users' personal data. In this way, Zuckerberg has worked to consolidate his dominance in the social networking industry, which in turn lends him autocratic power over platform users beyond the realm of Facebook's core platform.

Thus, Zuckerberg represents a new kind of political-economic actor, one who is not accountable to other actors within Facebook's corporate structure, giving him the ability to broadly determine the direction of the company and therefore the power to govern the public-private forum that is constitutive of the company itself. Zuckerberg himself has acknowledged the novelty of the power Facebook, and thus himself, wields over the public. In a feature for the *Guardian* in 2017, he mused, "In a lot of ways, Facebook is more like a government than a traditional company... We have this large community of people, and more than other technology companies, we're really setting the policies" (Foer 2017). In a subsequent interview, he

elaborated on these comments, speaking to the company's need to adjudicate disputes within its community (Klein 2018). These comments led to an analysis piece for *Vox* entitled "Mark Zuckerberg runs a nation-state, and he's the king," noting his power to change the "laws of [his] realms" by adjusting the terms of service and algorithms (Farrell et al. 2018). Importantly, the network effects of user lock-in are also significant, meaning even if individual users might prefer a different platform or system of governance, due to the vast amount of other users and daily tasks that rely on Facebook, leaving the network is extremely difficult (Farrell et al. 2018). In these ways, Facebook, and by extension Mark Zuckerberg, seems to exercise autocratic rule over its constituency of over 2 billion users. Thus, founder primacy refers not only to the power founders exercise over the corporate apparatus of their companies, but also over their platform users and the daily interactions that play out over the platform.

While some commentators have compared Zuckerberg to an absolute monarch, he often justifies his status in terms of good governance, implying that his centralized power is essential for the public good and overall best interest of the Facebook community. In defense of multi-class stock structures, Zuckerberg and other proponents have argued that such structure insulates corporate management from being bound to shareholders' short-term financial goals (Stewart 2019). Zuckerberg has said that Facebook's multi-class stock structure is beneficial when looking for solutions to issues like fake news and data security. Because he is not at the whim of shareholders, the company is now able to design products over time that will be in the best interest of the Facebook community (Klein 2018). Here, Zuckerberg's autocratic power is legitimated by framing it as necessary for protecting users from harm that would inevitably arise from shareholders' financial interests, completely overlooking the fact that Zuckerberg himself is the controlling shareholder of the corporation. In defense of Facebook's advertising-based

business model, which requires constant surveillance and data extraction, Zuckerberg has said that it is necessary to keep the platform and its services free to users (Klein 2018). In an interview with Ezra Klein for *Vox*, he again appealed to the best interests of Facebook's community, saying, "the reality here is that if you want to build a service that helps connect everyone in the world, then there are a lot of people who can't afford to pay... if you want to build a service which is not just serving rich people, then you need to have something that people can afford" (Klein 2018). These examples illustrate how technology executives often legitimize the "enlightened despotism" they exercise over their platforms by arguing it is necessary for recognizing user rights, community benefit, and the common good (Schwarz 2019, p. 132).

Thus, founder primacy represents a new figuration of power that vests founders of technology companies with unprecedented authority over their corporations, platforms, and platform users. Firms like Facebook heavily rely on advertising vis-a-vis the extraction and selling of user data, which comes with the imperative for these executives to govern platforms and platform users to maximize this profit (Schwarz 2019, p. 119). Analyzing these new relations as purely economic in nature misses how digital platforms also are constitutive of political relations of governance (Schwarz 2019, p. 119) in which autocratic powers are legitimated by appealing to the public good, and users give up certain rights, most notably the right to privacy, in exchange for the benevolent protection and leadership of the company founder. By moderating "offensive" content, combatting issues such as "fake news" and spam, and even actions as basic as keeping access to the platform free are examples of how technology executives exercise this enlightened despotism. On the other side of this relationship are the governed platform subjects, who are submitted to the power and economic exploitation of the executives, but also exercise and demand their own rights. Digital platforms, while mediating

new forms of extraction and profit for platform owners, also become integrated into a new figuration of the “political entrepreneur,” illustrated by the previous chapter’s discussion of pro-Trump sisters Diamond and Silk, who were able to monetize their political speech through the algorithms and metrics of Facebook and YouTube. However, it is not only political speech that has become monetizable in new ways; as platforms become integrated into the actions of political entrepreneurs, political subjects *themselves* become commodifiable, leading to new modes of political action in which the rights of the platform citizen are also connected to the right to self-monetize.

Platform Subjects and Political Entrepreneurs

Digital platforms offer users new ways to monetize political speech, but this process is extended further: it is the very *self* that becomes commodified through digital platforms in ways that are profitable not just to the corporation but also to the self. In the literature, scholars have related the phenomenon of self-branding and practices of micro-celebrity on social media to the expansion of neoliberal governance in which subjects are empowered to “conceive of themselves as entrepreneurial subjects, responsible for the success or failure of their own conduct, ultimately maintaining the “formal game of inequalities” on which the neoliberal order is based” (Bandinelli and Arvidsson 2012, p. 68). This resonates with the central idea of self-branding, especially as carried out on social media, that just like other commercially branded products, individuals can benefit from developing distinctive selling points and an identity “that is singularly charismatic and responsive to the needs and interests of target audiences” (Khamis et al. 2017, p. 191). The personal brand becomes a crucial asset, the curation of which is essential for establishing affiliation with a particular subgroup, attracting funding, connections, and labor

power (Bandinelli and Arvidsson 2012, p. 68). Thus, as data about platform users is extracted as monetizable data points for the corporation, users are themselves able to incorporate algorithmic design and platform affordances into their own identity construction and actions for personal profit.

However, what these approaches to self-branding overlook is that the relationship between platform users and platform owners articulated in economic terms, but more often in terms of governance as both parties attempt to assert their position in relation to the other. As Schwarz (2019, p. 119) notes, technology companies have a vested interest in governing the human interactions that play out over their platforms. Because these interactions are a source of profit, this profit can be maximized through rational governance, or in other words, preventing users from acting in ways that offend other users, which would discourage them from using the platform, and therefore lower the platform's value to advertisers (Schwarz 2019, p. 120). According to Schwarz (2019, p. 126), the key tool in Facebook and other digital platforms' governance toolkits is the way in which platforms configure human relations into *generalized social capital* over which platforms owners then exercise a monopoly. In other words, social capital, in the typical sense defined as the capacity to convert relationships, group membership, and network position into economic resources, vital information, or political power (Schwarz 2019, p. 123), becomes concrete, knowable, trackable, and manipulable through digital platforms in the forms of friends, likes, shares, retweets, etc. Technology companies have the power, then, to cut individuals off from this social capital, or otherwise impact it in various ways, as this particular kind of social capital does not exist independently of platforms themselves.

To users who actively seek to monetize themselves through self-branding on social media, the threat of losing access to their social capital is detrimental. Their relationship to

platform technology and platform owners is economic in many ways: first, in platform owners' practice of data extraction for corporate profit, and second in users' ability to convert platform-specific social capital into monetary rewards and other resources. However, at the same time it is also a relationship between a governing entity and a governed subject. Platform owners police the platform community, seeking to condition "good citizens" who adhere to certain codes of conduct and content policies so that these good citizens can be as profitable as possible for the company (Schwarz 2019, p. 127). Users' ability to cultivate and leverage social capital, which can have tremendous consequences in the "offline" world is conditional; it is tied to their ability to fulfill the role of a good citizen. Thus, digital platforms make possible new forms of power and domination, as well as new modes of being and acting as a political subject. Importantly, it is not the purpose of this chapter to adjudicate whether or not political entrepreneurs are purely seeking financial gains by cynically instrumentalizing particular political messages. Instead, the aim is to trace through what chains of association this action is possible, and how it is also connected to these new modes of governance and being governed.

Discussed in the previous chapter, pro-Trump sisters Diamond and Silk are exemplary of successful political entrepreneurs, who have been able to convert social capital (again, rendered measurable and manipulable) accumulated on digital platforms into financial gain and access to powerful institutions. Despite becoming famous in the wake of the 2016 election, their YouTube channel had existed since 2014, with videos only garnering around a dozen views each, according to the sisters themselves (Stuart 2016). However, all of that changed on August 5, 2015 when they posted a scathing video criticizing Megyn Kelly's performance as a moderator for the Republican primary debate, which to date has 1.7 million views, and their channel has 265,000 subscribers (Diamond and Silk 2015). Their Facebook page, on which they post links to

YouTube videos as well as share other content, has 1.9 million followers to date and 1.8 million likes. As Khamis et al. (2017, p. 195) have noted, this broader shift towards media convergence is conducive to self-branding as the emotive pull of users' message and identity is sustained more widely across multiple platforms. Even during the period when they claimed to be "censored," a *ThinkProgress* report found that in January 2018, their Facebook page received over 1.3 million reactions, comments, and shares, which was higher than any month in the previous year. The report also found that while video views across Facebook had gone down, the sisters were still faring better than liberal pages. Between March 2017 and March 2018, while MSNBC host Rachel Maddow's video views had declined from 6 million to 1.2 million, Diamond and Silk's views had gone only from 4.1 million to 1.8 million, meaning they actually received more video views than the anchor of the country's most popular cable television show (Legum 2018).

By leveraging the social capital they accumulated on digital platforms, Diamond and Silk were then able to financially benefit, as well as gain access to powerful institutions within legacy media and within government itself, which in turn led to further exposure and greater ability to accumulate social capital on digital media. In a rally in Des Moines during the presidential election, Trump introduced the pair, praising them for becoming "very famous and rich" while stumping for him (Stuart 2016). Indeed, their support for Trump has seemed to prove lucrative. Their website sold "Women 4 Trump" branded hats, tee shirts, and coffee mugs, they are embarking on a speaking tour in 2020 with tickets starting at \$50 and VIP passes going for \$150, and they reportedly are in the process of writing a book (Diamond and Silk 2017). During their congressional hearing in 2018, a point of contention was whether or not they had been paid by the Trump campaign, a claim the sisters vehemently denied as "fake news" even when

Representative Sheila Jackson Lee cited a Federal Election Commission filing stating they had indeed received \$1,274 from the campaign for “field consulting” (Gold 2018). Thus, Diamond and Silk have been highly successful in converting the quantifiable social capital they have accumulated on Facebook and YouTube into various streams of revenue, as well as appearances on legacy media like Fox News and CNN (Stewart 2019), and a close relationship with the president himself. However, when they perceived Facebook was actively intervening to decrease this social capital, their grievances against the company were framed in terms of governance rather than in purely economic terms.

Taking a closer look at how the sisters framed their accusations at Facebook, their claims are primarily formulated in terms of their rights as citizens of the Facebook community, rather than in terms of a small business whose ability to make profit has been hindered. As discussed at length in the previous chapter, Diamond and Silk leveled claims of censorship and discrimination against Facebook, implying that their problem with the corporation was in its capacity as a regulator, or in other words, as a governing entity. This had an economic dimension to it, but the primary focus of their complaints, as with Republicans’ complaints in general, were aimed at platforms’ content moderation policies and the enforcement of those policies. According to the original Facebook post in which the sisters list their complaints, they alleged that Facebook sent them a notice stating their “content and your brand has been determined unsafe to the community” and that the decision was non-appealable in any way (Diamond and Silk 2018). From Facebook’s side, content moderation is framed as being for the greater public good of the community over which it governs. As Schwarz (2019, p. 131) has noted, Facebook itself contributes to the political framing by borrowing legitimating rhetoric from the political sphere such as alluding to an “appeals” process, adopting a legal code of “Community Standards” and

other quasi-constitutional “governing documents.” On their part, the sisters do not frame their own complaints outside of this paradigm, instead questioning Facebook’s enforcement of these codes, asking, for example, “when exactly did the brand and context become unsafe to the community?” and “didn't FB violate their own policy when FB stopped sending notifications to the Millions of people who liked and followed our brand page?” (Diamond and Silk 2018). Thus, the relationship between both parties is understood in terms of governance rather than in purely economic terms. This episode is also exemplary of how economic concerns and rights of Facebook “citizens” have become inextricably intertwined. The right to monetize the self on digital platforms through leveraging of social capital, understood as quantifiable metrics specific to these platforms, is understood as the right of the platform citizen as long as their action is within the bounds of acceptable behavior, no matter how autocratic or by which opaque mechanisms those bounds are determined, thus creating a new kind of social contract. Acting outside the norms of a “good citizen” results in punishment in the form of reduced social capital.

The emergence of new forms of governance, power, domination, and ways of being as a political subject has also led to new circumstances where actors who are in government, thus potentially possessing the capacity to implement laws and regulations for technology companies and their platforms, are also governed by these very companies. As Schwarz (2019, p. 123) notes, firms, politicians, brands, individuals, and social movements alike create identities on digital platforms and through an isomorphic process begin accumulating likes, connections, friends, retweets, and other forms of social capital. The tensions created by this new form of power technology companies, and their CEOs in particular, hold is manifest in several of the episodes discussed in the previous chapter like Trump’s social media summit at the White House, as well as Zuckerberg’s many appearances before congressional committees. To take a

specific example, Representative Marsha Blackburn, a Republican congresswoman who questioned Zuckerberg about Diamond and Silk's accusations during a hearing, had her own skirmish with Twitter and its governing policies. During her campaign, Twitter barred Blackburn from paying to promote her campaign launch video due to "inflammatory language" (Robillard 2017). The company had decided that a line in the video in which she brags about her track record fighting Planned Parenthood's sale of "baby body parts" violated its advertising policies, though it later reversed its decision (Robillard 2017). In this case, Twitter had intervened to limit Blackburn's ability to convert video views, likes, and retweets not into money (though perhaps through campaign donations) but ultimately into votes, or in other words, political power in the typical sense. This is not to say that a politician's chances of being elected are entirely contingent on their social media presence. However, it is to illustrate how digital platforms become integrated into new dynamics of power, in which good citizenship on such platforms is policed by platform owners in order to maximize profitability for the corporation, and the user's performance of good citizenship comes with the rights to cultivate, monetize, and otherwise leverage valuable social capital in ways that can have serious implications for the "offline" world.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how digital platforms are integral to the formation of new political-economic actors, giving rise to new assemblages of power and dominance in which platform founders exercise outsize control over their users, not solely through economic exploitation, but also through modes of governance that condition user behavior. The need for governance stems from platform owners' need to maximize the profitability of user behavior, as

shown through the various “community standards” and content policies platforms like Facebook implement (Schwarz 2019, p. 131). Governance by platform owners attempts to mold platform users into “good citizens” who comply with these terms, punishing those who do not comply by cutting off their access to social capital mediated by the platform itself.

Thus, digital platforms themselves are actors, carrying out work that helps assemble these new formations. Digital platforms, themselves complex assemblages, do the work of creating, aggregating, and circulating the generalized social capital that is an integral link in the relationship between platform users and platform owners. Likes, shares, views, and retweets are essential for the political entrepreneur. These metrics are constitutive of generalized social capital that is concrete, trackable, and manipulable; as social capital, platform users can convert these metrics into money, access to institutions, and relationships with powerful figures, as seen with the story of political entrepreneurs Diamond and Silk. Therefore, platform users do not solely exist in a relationship of exploitation and extraction with platform owners. As long as they comply with the content policies and behavioral norms of the platform, good platform citizens have access to this social capital and are free to monetize their political speech and selves-as-brands as they see fit. These relations give rise to a new social contract of sorts, in which platform citizens give up their right to privacy in exchange for their rights to platform-specific social capital.

These formations of founder primacy and political entrepreneur are historically new and highly contingent, dependent on complex associations between human and nonhuman actors that must continually be carried out. The end result of these associations are new relations of governance, exploitation, and domination, giving rise to analyses such as Couldry and Mejias (2019) analogy of “data colonialism.” However, in the perspective put forth by this chapter,

relations of a new colonialism, rather than being the explanatory factors, is the end result of these associations, rendered visible by the continuous work put in by platform owners, platform users, and the platforms themselves. Thus, once the work stops being done, the analogy falls apart, revealing that it was always held up in the first place by these traceable associations rather than by invisible, underlying, and perpetual forces.

Chapter 3

Political Institutions and the Formation of Online Collectivities

Overview

As the first presidential candidate in a generation to openly run as a socialist, Bernie Sanders' 2016 primary campaign brought the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) into the national spotlight. Though the DSA was formed in the 1980s, for much of its existence it has escaped the notice of mainstream politics. Due to Sanders' highly publicized calls for democratic socialism, the organization experienced unprecedented growth in numbers, increasing its membership eightfold from the launch of Sanders' campaign in 2015 to the midterm elections of 2018. Part of the reason for the DSA's growth was its strategy of independently working to support Sanders' campaign, leveraging publicity from the campaign to direct Sanders' supporters to potentially joining the organization. However, the transformations the organization underwent is only partially represented by looking at its spike in membership.

Rather, the DSA is exemplary of how long standing political institutions are being fundamentally altered by digital platforms. Accounts of the DSA's growth attribute it to Sanders' popularity, backlash against Trump's election, and the role of sites like Twitter in making socialist discourse more accessible to a wider audience. While these factors scratch the surface of the DSA's transformation, a deeper look suggests that digital platforms play an integral role in bringing new organizational structures and modes of political action into being. The case of the DSA shows how these new forms are not simply cases of an organization that has simply "discovered" the internet as a means of recruitment (Chadwick 2007, p. 296). Instead, it shows how existing institutions absorb these new forms of action and organization, both in terms of the

human actors seeking to join, and the digital platforms themselves as agents that exert change in their own right. Thus, this chapter seeks to unpack the assemblage of these new organizations, which are subsumed into familiar institutions.

Connective Action and Platform Practices

Scholars have argued that in postindustrial democracies widespread social fragmentation, particularly among younger generations, has led to “individuation as the model social condition,” making it harder for actors to coalesce around typical collective identities through political parties, ideological programs, and other formal organizations (Bennett 2012, p. 22). Pointing to the Occupy Wall Street movement and the *indignados* anti-austerity movement in Spain, Bennett and Segerberg (2012, p. 741) argue large-scale political participation is now carried out through the logic of *connective action*, in which the driving force is individuals’ interpersonal networks, structured and scaled up through digital communication technology. Though people still may join political action in large numbers, “the identity reference is more derived through inclusive and diverse large-scale personal expression,” whereas in traditional *collective* action, it is “through common group or ideological identification” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, p. 744). Political content in the form of easily personalized ideas such as Occupy’s famous “We are the 99%” slogan are shared across individuals’ digital networks, calling people to participate based on their personal identification with such ideas, rather than identification with a particular organization (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, p. 744). Thus, according to this approach digital platforms are facilitating a new logic of connective action conducive to late modern societies “in which formal organizations are losing their grip on

individuals, and group ties are being replaced by large-scale, fluid social networks” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, p. 748).

However, while interpersonal digital networks are increasingly important to structuring and mobilizing political participation, formal organizations have not disappeared and still play a crucial role in politics today. Connective action may bring together loosely organized individuals based on personalized action frames, but digital platforms have also transformed long-standing political institutions. As Bennett and Segerberg (2012, p. 753) argue, networks are not just the precursors or building blocks to collective action; the networks themselves are the new organizational structures of such action. Drawing on Latour (2005), they also note how networking technologies are agents that run alongside human actors, calibrating relationships and storing digital, physical traces to provide memory records and action repertoires that can be passed on (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, p. 753). Thus, the question becomes how these interpersonal digital networks also overlap with, are absorbed by, and feed into lasting political institutions, thus fundamentally transforming familiar parties and organizations? In part by blurring the lines between formal organizations and more seemingly amorphous political action, digital platforms drive rapid institutional adaptation and experimentation, as different types of organizations borrow from each other’s digital network repertoires (Chadwick 2007, p. 285).

In many ways, digital platforms make it possible for grassroots actors to renew old institutions such as political parties from the “outside-in,” as digitally-enabled citizens remake parties “in their own participatory image” (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016, p. 283). Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016, p. 283) say that digital media foster a culture of political experimentation in which people can adopt a “party-as-movement” mentality, rejecting norms of hierarchical discipline and long-term partisan loyalty that has traditionally characterized parties.

Taking Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns as examples, Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016, p. 285) explain that while digital media are useful for campaign elites' "computational management" and "controlled interactivity" from the top-down, they can also be used for fostering openness and grassroots participation in directing the Democratic party and its candidate's policies and goals. Like Bennett and Segerberg (2012), Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016, p. 287) argue that participation in an electoral campaign is a form of individual expression, where the party-as-movement mentality can easily accommodate populist appeals on both the left and right side of the political spectrum. New organizational forms and action are made possible through digital network technologies that set up complex interactions between the online and offline environment, allowing for fast repertoire-switching within a single campaign or from one campaign to the next (Chadwick 2007, p. 284). Chadwick (2007, p. 285) draws on Tilly's concept of repertoires as a "limited set of routines that are learned, shared and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice," arguing that these online repertoires play a role in sustaining collective identity. Rather than neutral tools to be adopted at will, these digital network repertoires actively shape what it means to be a participant in a political organization, in some ways reflecting how "the medium in the message" (McLuhan 1964, quoted in Chadwick 2007, p. 286). Therefore, the forms of digital action individuals adopt inform how collectivities are assembled and sustained, bringing "fringe" organizations like the DSA into closer proximity with mainstream institutions and campaigns and lending it greater visibility through digital interpersonal networks to actors who otherwise might not have been exposed to the organization and its ideals.

The DSA is an informative case for examining how digital platforms fundamentally alter long-standing political institutions, as from its inception has had a loosely coordinated network

structure, with National Director Maria Svart saying in a 2015 interview, “we are an activist organization, so what we fundamentally do is educate the public, educate ourselves about history and mobilize people and organize people to work together” (C-SPAN 2015). Throughout its history, as will be explored in more detail below, it has at varying levels sought to operate as the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, involving itself in national electoral politics well before Bernie Sanders’ primary campaigns in 2016 and 2020. The following sections will seek to trace the organization’s transformation to the present day, showing how digital platforms fundamentally transform existing political institutions as these platforms become integrated into new repertoires of action that inform how institutions are assembled, how their collectivity is constituted, and their modes of conducting politics. While the DSA did experience massive growth, the transformations to the organization far exceed its unprecedented increase in dues-paying members. First, this chapter will explore the history of the DSA, emphasizing its involvement with electoral politics to date. Then, its explosive growth throughout the events of the 2016 presidential election will be discussed, illustrating how digital platforms are perceived to have affected how the organization attracts and mobilizes new members. After that, it will analyze how these accounts of social media recruitment overlook the agency of digital platforms themselves in working to bring new political actions and collectivities into being. This new form of politics drastically alters the composition of long-standing political institutions as they seek to absorb this new form of politics.

DSA Historical Background

Founded in 1982 by Michael Harrington, the DSA was meant to function as an institution independent of the Democratic and Republican parties, though Harrington envisioned it mainly

as a progressive force to put pressure on the Democrats. At its founding, the organization had about 6,000 members who came together in a merger of the New American Movement (NAM) and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC). Following a vision of coalition politics, Harrington brought the two groups together in the hopes of uniting trade unionists, feminists, black, Latino, and socialist activists against the prevailing Reaganomics of the time (Schwartz 2017). On foreign policy, Harrington was critical of the “new colonialism” perpetuated by international organizations like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, while domestically he championed a democratically planned economy, rejecting neoliberalism and emphasizing the importance of local government intervention to meet the economic needs of communities (Harrington and Howe 1984). However Harrington and Irving Howe, a co-founder of left-wing magazine *Dissent*, saw the Democratic Party as the DSA’s “main arena of action,” and followed a strategy of “realignment,” which sought to transform the Democratic Party from within (Harrington and Howe 1984). Famously, Harrington’s motto and approach was to be the “left wing of the possible,” or, in other words, to build coalitions between socialists and progressives outside of socialist ranks, such as the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, to push for progressive reforms (Isserman 2018). Though this viewpoint was not without contestation from within the organization itself and across the broader left in general, it led DSA leadership to be involved in electoral politics in hopes of pushing through their preferred policies.

In 1988 the DSA officially endorsed Jesse Jackson’s candidacy for the Democratic nomination for president. Jackson’s platform opposed US intervention in Latin America and set forth a New Deal-style infrastructure program, a single-payer healthcare system, free college education, and reversal of tax cuts for the rich (Everett 2020). Many have argued that Jackson’s

campaign set the precedent for Bernie Sanders in 2016 (Sanders did endorse Jackson in 1988 when he was mayor of Burlington, Vermont) (Kruse 2019). His campaign popularized the term “economic justice” as a critique of both the Democratic and Republican parties, which had increasingly turned towards neoliberalism (Everett 2020). When the DSA first voiced the idea of an endorsement, staff members from the Jackson campaign reportedly asked it to withhold, fearing association with “socialism” would harm Jackson’s electoral chances, though Jackson himself intervened and ended up accepting the endorsement (Nicholas 2015). However, Jackson’s campaign and the DSA endorsement did face criticism from within the DSA and other progressives. As Mike Davis (2018) writes, “the ascendancy of electoralism on the left, far from being an expression of new popular energies or mobilizations, was, on the contrary, a symptom of the decline of the social movements of the 1960s, accompanied by the organic crisis of the trade-union and community-service bureaucracies.” Echoes of this dissatisfaction with socialist participation in Democratic politics were heard in 2015, when Sanders, a lifelong independent, announced his campaign would be for the Democratic ticket, rather than as an independent. Critiquing this move, a DSA member from Brooklyn told the *Wall Street Journal*, “the Democratic Party is where social movements go to die” (Nicholas 2015).

In the 1990s, the DSA actively took part in the global justice movement against globalization and was forced to rethink its strategy of realignment as the Democratic Party under the leadership of President Bill Clinton embraced neoliberal economic policies. The DSA strongly opposed the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement as well as Clinton’s policies that deregulated finance and repealed protections against mergers between commercial and investment banks that had been enshrined in the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933 (Canova 2008). Instead of realignment, the DSA opted for an “inside-outside” approach, which was not geared

exclusively towards working within the Democratic Party nor towards building a political party of its own (Canova 2008). However, the DSA still participated in the electoral realm, endorsing John Kerry in 2004 and Barack Obama in 2008, despite apparent reservations about both candidates (Canova 2008). Canova critically notes that in both elections, DSA leadership held the position that socialists were “duty-bound” to choose the “lesser-evil capitalist party” in an effort to defeat Republicans.

Given the DSA’s past record the electoral politics, its early vocal support of Bernie Sanders’ presidential run was met with criticism from both within the organization and the broader left. Comparing Sanders’ 2015 campaign to Jackson’s 1988 campaign, Everett (2020) notes that Harrington’s approach to using the Rainbow Coalition as a means to consolidate the DSA’s coalition-building efforts within the Democratic Party was a failure. Pointing to how Jackson brought the Rainbow Coalition under his control after the party convention, Everett argued, “For Jackson and aspiring Black politicians, the Rainbow offered a bargaining chip to negotiate with Democratic Party power brokers. Once the party leadership had resolved to cut a deal with Jackson rather than lock him out, the Rainbow’s independence could only be a hindrance to his ambitions.” Thus, the upshot of 1988 was that the Rainbow Left was tolerated only so long as it worked towards electoral ends, or in other words, towards expanding the Democrats’ voting base. From this, Everett (2020) concluded, “The pathway to building the left does not lead through the DSA nor along the path of campaigning for a Sanders’ presidency. Instead we must build a new, revolutionary left in our workplaces, in our schools and campuses, and on the streets.” However, when making the case for Sanders’ campaign, DSA leadership was careful to draw distinctions between the present and the strategies of the past. Editor of *Jacobin* magazine and long-time DSA member Bhaksar Sunkara (2015) argued that Sanders presented

the chance to strengthen the left in the long term. Contrasting Harrington's approach of realignment of the Democrats, Sunkara instead said, "our goal must be to transcend the Democratic Party entirely."

Therefore, in 2015 the DSA saw its involvement in national electoral politics in different terms than in the past. Rather than viewing the Sanders' campaign as an opportunity to pressure the Democratic Party to move to the left on various issues, people within the DSA argued it could be an invaluable opportunity to grow the DSA itself and build a strong leftist movement outside the Democratic Party (Guastella 2015). Noting how Sanders was the "first serious left-wing candidate in a generation" to embrace the explicitly "socialist" label, Guastella argued that supporting him "would be a chance for leftists to flex our electoral muscles and for millions to see that there is an alternative to the policies of neoliberal capitalism" (Guastella 2015). The DSA's major mistake of 1988, Guastella wrote, was not using the Jackson campaign to build its own organization, so that there would be institutional growth that could then outlast the race itself. Thus, Sanders represented an opportunity to get it right, a chance to "organize those freshman radicals towards an immediate goal and build connections and skills to mobilize sympathizers in the future" (Guastella 2015). To sum it up the DSA "[needed] Bernie, not as a savior but as a tool for future organizing" (Guastella 2015).

Thus, in accounts looking ahead to the 2016 election, the desired growth of the DSA is understood as being premised on a strategic shift on the part of its members, with people like Guastella and Sunkara outlining different tactics for the DSA than those deployed in 1988. DSA members hoped they could leverage the Sanders campaign to independently grow a stronger left and direct a wider audience to the DSA as an alternative to the Democratic and Republican parties. However, viewing the growth of the organization as resulting from a conscious strategic

shift denies the agency of digital platforms themselves in structuring an entirely new organizational form, and with it, new forms of constitutive action. While this is not to argue that the DSA's growth was technologically determined, it is to recognize and analyze how the interpersonal networks structured through digital platforms are not only than building blocks to a larger collectivity; they are themselves new organizational structures that have, in part, been absorbed by long-standing institutions like the DSA (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, p. 753). As the next section will explore, understandings of how the DSA grew with the events of the 2016 election and its fallout commonly deny the agency of digital platforms, overlooking this new networked structure, and its implications for the formal organizations into which it is partially absorbed.

DSA's Growth: 2016-2018

Over the course of the 2016 election through the 2018 midterm elections, the DSA saw its membership increase at rates not seen for half a century, with the number of dues-paying members rising from 6,500 in the fall of 2014 to 8,500 by election day in November 2016 (Schwartz 2017). In the nine months following Trump's election, its membership reached over 13,000 (Schwartz 2017). Finally, a third wave of growth followed the midterm elections in 2018, when DSA-member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez won New York's 14th Congressional District, beating out long-time incumbent Joe Crowley. Ocasio-Cortez, who had been an organizer with the Sanders' campaign in 2016, brought renewed national media attention to the DSA, whose membership increased by another 4,000 in the week following her victory (Siu 2018). To date, there are over 60,000 dues-paying members nationally, over an eight-fold increase since before the 2016 election, with the majority of new members being between 18 to 35 years old

(Sernatinger 2019). Though this number seems quite small when viewed in a national context, DSA member and *Jacobin* staff writer Meagan Day (2019) observes, “While these new socialist recruits represent a small number of the people whose political outlooks were transformed by Sanders’ candidacy, they represent an enormous percentage of the organized socialist left.” Thus, the DSA experienced unprecedented growth, bringing in a new generation of membership. As Day (2019) notes, the explosive growth of the DSA in the wake of the 2016 election was not a foregone conclusion. Rather, it was contingent on many actors, including DSA members who strategized, planned, and organized action around recruitment through the Sanders’ campaign, and, importantly the agency of digital platforms in bringing together and structuring a new form of collectivity.

In accounts of the DSA’s growth, however, social media platforms are generally conceived of as passive tools for DSA members to instrumentalize for their own ends. As Barnes (2020, p. 33) argues, the affordances of digital platforms were crucial for the organization’s expansion, as it was conducive to its philosophy of “meeting the people where they are at” in order to make socialism accessible to everyone. Similarly, the DSA’s National Director Maria Svart acknowledged Twitter’s importance as a source of membership, saying it allowed a wider audience to have encounters with socialist discourse, not just from accounts formally affiliated with the DSA (Barnes 2020, p. 34). Through the platform, people could easily see socialist critiques of current events, especially as the 2016 election was unfolding. Andrew Porter, a DSA member of the Columbus, Ohio chapter observes:

“Right now, if you sign onto Twitter it’s pretty easy to get an idea of... why Democrats were failing and why they weren’t able to offer a real alternative, that was kind of everywhere to see. And luckily we had people promoting DSA as an alternative in conjunction with that...Whereas when I got involved, we had a website. It was not very good. But we had one, and you didn’t really hear or see the same sort of analysis that you’re able to see really easily now. You kind of

had to go digging for it. So fewer people were exposed to it, or had to grapple with these ideas” (Porter 2020).

In tandem with the strategy of using Sanders’ campaign to grow the organization, the DSA could also tap into Bernie Sanders’ popularity on his own social media accounts in order to gain exposure (Stigler 2020). Out of all the 2016 candidates, Sanders had the highest rate of engagement with his followers across Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, according to a study by social media analytics platform Captiv8 (Chaykowski 2016). Though his total number of followers across the three platforms, 5.7 million, trailed behind Donald Trump at 14.1 million, and Hillary Clinton at 9.3 million, Sanders led in engagement, measured as likes per follower (Chaykowski 2016). The study also found that candidates who appeal most to millennial generation voters will have the highest digital response, illustrated by Sanders’ capture of the 17-29 year old vote (Chaykowski 2016), which is also reflective of the influx of younger DSA members. These accounts recognize the importance of social media platforms in recruiting new members through exposing more people to socialist discourse. However, these perspectives view social media as a passive tool to be instrumentalized in the greater scheme of the DSA’s electoral strategies, overlooking how, as actors in their own right, digital platforms fundamentally reconfigure the collectivity and make possible new, constitutive digital network repertoires.

In some ways, digital social networks have been recognized for their crucial role in recruitment and expansion of the organization, beginning to hint at these new forms of action and structures of collectivity, although human agency and conscious decision making are still centered. Recounting their personal journey from initially deciding to join the DSA to an elected member on its National Political Committee, Erika Paschold (2020) of Lincoln, Nebraska says they officially signed up to be a dues-paying member the day after the 2016 election after seeing a friend from California post about the DSA on Twitter. They remember, “I found out about it

[on Twitter] and I just kind of joined on a whim because, again, I was just feeling really frustrated, like I needed to do something completely different politically.” After they had joined, the DSA national office had set up a Facebook group for the surge of new members, “which was wild because it was just a bunch of people who had no frame of reference and no relationship with each other and they were all just posting...” (Paschold 2020). In the group, Paschold commented on a post asking where members were from, finding another individual who said he was also from Lincoln. From there, he and Paschold connected, planning a meeting at the end of the month. This meeting was the first of what would become the Lincoln DSA chapter, though at the time it was “just a group of people trying to get something started” (Paschold 2020). Thus, as this account reveals, digital platforms play an integral role in not only introducing people to the DSA and its ideas, but they also work alongside human actors to structure the organization and guide action through the networks they support and the repertoires of action into which they are integrated.

Digital Network Repertoires: Debates and New Possibilities

DSA members’ perceptions of social media is not entirely positive, with many individuals critiquing its negative impacts on the organization. These debates among members again frame digital platforms as tools that need to be used in the “best” way possible (if they are to be used at all) in order to further DSA strategy or socialist goals in general. However, what these debates actually reveal is a contestation over digital network repertoires, which in turn inform how the collectivity is assembled. As Chadwick (2007, p. 286) has argued, the ways in which platforms are integrated into different modes of action fundamentally shapes what it means to be a participant in a political organization.

Critiques of social media usage of the left recognize the contradictions inherent in digital platforms as privately-owned public spaces, noting the negative consequences for socialist movements. In a 2018 piece in *Jacobin* entitled “Log Off,” Benjamin Fong argues that socialists should give up social media, saying addiction to screens would be problematic enough even without the capital accumulation of technology corporations. However, he writes, the phenomenon of addiction is “a direct manifestation of the alienation we experience under capitalism,” so that digital platforms pose an imminent threat to the left by attracting people “who are natural fodder for socialist politics and then absorbs them in the unthinking narcissism of pseudo-political statement procurement, where they enter the negative feedback loop that distances them from the reality of everyday human engagement” (Fong 2018). On the other hand, Day rebuts his argument in her response, “Unfortunately, We Can’t Log Off,” saying that to do so would be to “relinquish the social media sphere to our class enemies” (Day 2018). Offering solutions to the problems Fong outlined, she suggests severing the “self” and the “avatar” by viewing Twitter profiles not as an extension of oneself, but as a propaganda tool for “persuasion and promotion” (Day 2018). She says socialists should also focus more on institutional social media accounts, which further the “collective propaganda effort” (Day 2018). Despite their disagreements, both Fong and Day recognize the need for socialists to resist the process of atomization they argue is inherent in social media’s design, with Day proposing different modes of action and engagement with digital platforms to overcome to harmful effects of their design.

On a more practical level, members have also debated the usefulness of social media platforms for recruitment and communication between members. In general, Svart has discussed the advantages and disadvantages of Twitter for attracting membership, saying while it has

helped increase the number of dues-paying members, it also has caused the demographics of new members to skew younger, not being representative of the working class as a whole (Barnes 2020, p. 36). For further growth and the ability to diversify beyond white, college educated individuals, Paschold (2020) says the DSA needs to move away from social media tactics and focus more on attracting members through housing and environmental campaigns. At the national level, there has been a debate about how to funnel resources into online recruitment versus in-person approaches (Paschold 2020). Among DSA members, individuals have reported anxiety about posting the “right kind of message” online, in some cases causing them to not participate in conversations (Barnes 2020, p. 39). While humor online has been recognized as a means for bonding the socialist community and normalizing its critiques, Barnes (2020, p. 39) has found that the typical demographics of people posting socialist humor tend to be young, male, and well-educated. As this demographic develops its own codes and inside jokes, affective bonds within the group are enhanced while outsiders are increasingly alienated. Recognizing the danger of online socialist culture, Svart has said, “...if we’re trying to build a mass movement, we can’t have a club-- we just need to speak the language that the people speak” (Barnes 2020, p. 39). Furthermore, social media has also been criticized as an inappropriate venue for in-depth political discussion, a characterization seemingly at odds with digital platforms’ perceived ability to expose a wider audience to socialist discourse. Twitter as a medium, Porter (2020) says, can push conversations towards people “just being snarky” with each other, while Stigler (2020) says, “I do see sometimes, chapters or perhaps people pretending to be chapters, and their accounts fighting people in the mentions of things, or you know quote tweeting things to dunk on them...” As these contradictory and complementary understandings of social media show, the DSA as an institution is attempting to fit these new modes of political organization and action into its existing institutional framework as members debate which modes of action to absorb and which to reject.

As the case of the DSA illustrates, existing political institutions must deal with the task of absorbing digital interpersonal networks into their long standing organization, which also entails either integrating or rejecting new digital network repertoires that are constitutive of these networks. Importantly, absorbing these networks and their constitutive practices involves not only the human actors within the networks, but the technological agents that animate the networks as well. The DSA's recruitment of unprecedented numbers through Twitter, and its subsequent use of platforms like Facebook to organize the influx of newcomers demonstrates how digital interpersonal networks, rather than being building blocks to an enlarged formal institution, become integrated into that institution, fundamentally changing its organizational form (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, p. 753). As Chadwick (2007, p. 296) has noted, these new forms are categorically not cases of "a traditional membership-based interest group that has simply "discovered" the Internet." New forms of political action that are constitutive of these networks arise from human actors integrating digital platforms into their personal expression. These forms of expression are specific to the platform, as seen when Stigler (2020) speaks of DSA members "quote tweeting to dunk on" political opposition, or in the trend of DSA members putting red rose emojis, long a symbol associated with international socialist movements, into their Twitter profiles (Speedy 2017). These digital network repertoires inform what it means to be a member of an organization (Chadwick 2007, p. 286), as DSA members develop particular practices, codes of language, and modes of constructing collective identity that are mediated by digital platforms.

Debates among members about how the organization should use social media present platforms as tools to be instrumentalized and tamed for strategic purposes, but they are also indicative of a deeper debate about what it means to be a DSA member. The dynamics of

platforms as privately-owned public spaces is new political terrain that institutions must navigate, posing unique contradictions to the DSA as an organization that is at its core opposed to capitalism, as demonstrated by the Fong (2018) and Day (2018) articles in *Jacobin*. However, recognizing the agency of platforms in constituting this new organization form also reveals the lack of complete control human participants in the organization have when it comes to defining and assembling the collectivity.

Conclusion

Leading up to the 2016 primaries, DSA members consciously adopted the strategy to build their organization through the Sanders' campaign, actively seeking to avoid perceived failures of their involvement in Jesse Jackson's 1988 campaign. These tactics seem characteristic of the institutional versatility of the DSA, as throughout its history it has functioned as the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, an activist organization, an educational network for socialists, and even, according to Porter (2020) as social clubs when chapter membership was too low to organize political action. Its unprecedented growth in membership from 2016 to 2018 was due in part to its close work on the Sanders' campaign and attention from Ocasio-Cortez's congressional victory, but changes in the organization were also due to the agency of digital platforms as actors working in tandem with human actors.

Through the work of digital platforms, the transformation of the DSA was not only in terms of its number of dues-paying members. Digital platforms like Facebook and Twitter gave rise to an entirely new organizational structure through what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) call connective action, in which political action becomes a form of personal expression online, through individuals showing support for certain ideas, values, policies, campaigns, etc. These

actions are then algorithmically shared to that individual's connections and mutual connections, building a network of those who also relate to the same ideas and values (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, p. 753). These online political actions, or what Chadwick (2007, p. 286) calls digital network repertoires, are thus constitutive of this new networked structure, informing what it means to be a participant in that collectivity. This new form of collectivity and the novel modes of assembling it are not specific to the DSA, but the DSA is representative of a long standing institution that has needed to absorb them into its existing structures. Debates among DSA members about how best to utilize social media overlook the agency of digital platforms in shaping the organization itself. While these debates are ostensibly focused on how best to instrumentalize digital platforms, they also represent the organization's efforts to decide how to absorb the new collectivity, which practices of constituting it to accept, and which to discard.

Conclusion

How Digital Platforms Reconfigure Politics

Digital Platforms as Actor-Networks

This thesis has sought to address the need for a further theorization on how digital platforms are actively reconfiguring political actors and their constitutive political actions. Existing approaches to studying the impact of digital platforms show how humans often take the credit for the work of objects, as seen in accounts of platforms as a recruitment tools for political organizations that usually operate on the margins of the national political stage such as the DSA (Barnes 2020) or accounts that treat social media as a means by which far-right actors inject their white nationalist discourse into mainstream media (Heikkila 2017). As seen in the example of Diamond and Silk, digital platforms are also seen as tools through which individuals can monetize their political speech, rise to fame through clicks and likes, and gain access to traditionally powerful political institutions (Legum 2018; Stuart 2016). In the wake of the Cambridge Analytica and “fake news” scandals of the 2016 election, debates about how government should regulate social media companies has revealed a contradiction between digital platforms’ status as privately-owned public spaces (Puetz 2015, p. 403). This gap needs to be explored more thoroughly as it is productive of new relations between actors that cannot be viewed solely through the lens of user exploitation and extraction of personal data for corporate profit.

Thus, adopting the view of ANT where all actors as seen as complex and contingent assemblages opens up a new avenue of analysis that can show how all of these phenomena, rather than occurring discretely from each other, are interconnected in traceable ways, as digital

platforms actively reconfigure what appears as the “political.” By adopting the ontology of ANT, which sees the world as made up of traceable chains of association between different actors, it becomes possible to overcome the shortcomings of the approaches highlighted above (Latour 1996, p. 369). Through viewing humans and technology as actors that are composed of complex networks rather than as unified entities, the analysis can then open these networks up to examine actors’ constitutive parts, showing how new associations are constructed. Empirically tracing how new associations are constructed illustrates how the political is assembled, rather than assuming the “political” as a taken-for-granted, already existing sphere.

As Latour (2005, p. 69) notes, tracing the associations between humans and nonhuman actors reveals how asymmetries of power are established. Rather than ascribing dynamics of power and domination to social ties or norms, they are the result of a series of agencies, chain reactions, and contingent interactions that must continually be performed. Thus, ANT can help explain how digital platforms give rise to new relations of power whose formations are distinctly novel. Furthermore, “following the actors,” as Latour (1990 p. 123) recommends, requires setting aside definitions and norms that are external to the actors’ own accounts of their reality. Instead of imposing classifications and categorizations on the analysis, the researcher must see how the actors make sense of these shifting chains of associations as they seek to render their own understanding dominant in relation to other actors’ contradictory accounts. Thus, power, norms, and distinctive groupings are a result of the work carried out to maintain associations between actors, rather than the explanations for action.

Key Conclusions

As this thesis has demonstrated, digital platforms are complex assemblages composed of many connected and contingent parts. Algorithms, interface, corporate executives, stock structure, business models, content moderation policies, and a litany of other actors come together in a complex chain of association to compose what appears as a singular entity, such as the Facebook platform. Opening up this entity shows how these constitutive parts make digital platforms act in certain ways, while platforms themselves, when integrated into the assemblages of other actor-networks, in turn make these actors behave in ways that alter a given state of affairs. Importantly, these chains of associations are sets of relations between the various links, where work must constantly be done in order to uphold the connections (van Dijck 2013, p. 26).

In this way, digital platforms and the parts that constitute them have made sociality technical (van Dijck 2013, p. 12), where what appears as the “social” is the effect of a dominant techno-economic materiality (Couldry and van Dijck 2015, p. 3). As explored in the first chapter, technology executives have played a key role in constructing digital platforms as infrastructure to channel the social, where human relations that occur in the “offline” world are presented as naturally shifting to the digital realm. For example, Facebook’s mission to give people the power to build a global community and Twitter’s initiative to encourage healthier conversations and debates exemplify how executives conceptualize their work as serving the public interest through encouraging or safeguarding desirable, naturally-occurring human relations through the use of artificial intelligence to either recommend Groups for users or track metrics to determine conversation “health.” However, what these examples reveal is that relationships between users on digital platforms are inherently engineered and platform-specific; “friending” someone on Facebook or “following” them on Twitter, joining a Group or tweeting/ retweeting at another

account are types of connections between users that are generated by the platform itself. These concepts did not exist before social media companies invented them, demonstrating how platforms redefine the social through “new infrastructures of association” rather than serving as a gathering place for some already existing sense of connectedness or collectivity (Couldry and van Dijck 2015, p. 3). Thus, actions that are conceptualized as social, such as engaging in discussions or being part of a community are rendered formal, manageable, and manipulable by technology, for the purpose of the corporation’s profit (van Dijck 2013, p. 12).

As chapter one noted, controversies about “free speech” on social media reveals a gap between old conceptions of terms like “free speech” and public space and the new materiality of which they are composed. As ANT would propose, “speech” and the “speaker” are not singular, bounded categories, but rather are complex assemblages, actor-networks whose constitutive parts must be taken apart from each other and examined. “Speech” itself is not a floating concept; it is a specific material formation that can be traced. In other words, simply put, the medium of the speech matters. Critical commentary on Republicans’ allegations that social media companies violate users’ rights to free expression by censoring conservative viewpoints has argued that there is a distinction between freedom of speech and freedom of reach; while people have the right to say what they want on social media, they do not have the right to have the visibility of the message boosted by those platforms’ algorithms (Diresta 2018). However, reach is already built into the material composition of speech online. “Reach” is not a separate category from speech, but it is a link in the chain of action of which “speech” on digital platforms is composed. Thus, when actors refer to “freedom of speech” online, what they are referring to is a particular rendering of a new materiality. A similar process is at work when actors such as executives of technology companies draw analogies between their platforms and town squares, which are

public, government-owned spaces where the government cannot restrict citizens' First Amendment rights to free speech (Leetaru 2017). Rather, they are assigning this label to an entirely new techno-economic formation, attempting to bring some of the connotations of the old use of the term to its new usage. Thus, categories such as speaker, speech, and public spaces are in the process of being reconfigured through the integration of digital platforms into their composition. Such controversies as debates about free speech on social media represent efforts by different actors seeking to render their understandings of these terms, as they pertain to new chains of action being brought into being, stable in relation to others' competing understanding. This constitutes a new politics, where new actors are coming into being, and new relations of power and dominance between them are being assembled.

Building on this, chapter two has illustrated how digital platforms have given rise to new forms of power and authority, with technology companies and their executives wielding a great deal of control over platforms' millions, even billions, of users. As explained by Weihe (2017), platform founders occupy an unprecedented position of power within their corporations. Her conceptualization of "founder primacy" refers to how founders are "afforded significant control that overrides institutional investors, public shareholders, and even the company's own board of directors" (Weihe 2017, p. 176-177). Such power arises from a multi-tiered stock structure, in which certain categories of stock are given greater voting rights compared to the others, concentrating voting power in a small group of corporate insiders. Multi-tiered stock structures are themselves a historically novel phenomenon contrasted with past models of shareholder democracy in which shareholders are given one vote per share they own (Hayden and Bodie 2010, p. 2087), and are particularly common among technology companies. Exemplary of this new formation of "founder primacy" is Mark Zuckerberg, who is Facebook's founder, CEO,

board chair, and controller of the majority of voting power among shareholders, owning 58 percent of the company's class B stock, which gets 10 votes per share as compared to class A stock's one vote per share (Durkee 2019). Effectively, the only way to reduce Zuckerberg's power in the company is for him to willingly give it up. However, as this thesis has argued, founder primacy extends beyond unchecked control over the company's corporate structure. Founder primacy is also indicative of the autocratic power Zuckerberg exercises over Facebook's billions of users. This power is assembled not only from the multi-tiered stock structure and his joint position as CEO and board chair; an essential link in the chain of associations of which this power is constructed is the platform itself.

Technology corporations' reliance on selling user data for profit has led to their need to govern behavior on their platforms in order to maximize the profitability of this behavior, producing new relations of power and domination that are understood by both platform users and platform owners outside of purely economic terms (Schwarz 2019, p. 127). As platforms configure the social into bundles of data points for companies to sell, they also produce what Schwarz (2019, p. 126) has called "generalized social capital" for their users. Social capital in the traditional sense refers to the relationships, group membership, and network position that an individual can convert into economic resources, vital information, or political power (Schwarz 2019, p. 123). Digital platforms render this social capital concrete, knowable, trackable, and manipulable through the activities such as liking, sharing, viewing, retweeting, and so on (Schwarz 2019, p. 126). As long as users conform to the behavioral norms of the platform and adhere to its content policies and community standards, they have access to this generalized social capital. Violation of these standards and policies can result in being cut off from generalized social capital in the form of being suspended, banned, or otherwise restricted on the

platform. Through the promise of being able to accumulate social capital, platform owners are able to govern their communities by relying on platform users to comply with whatever terms and conditions the company sets forth, no matter how opaquely these terms are decided and implemented.

Digital platforms have also become a part of the formation of a new actor that is governed by this novel founder primacy. This new actor is governed, yet also makes demands of the governing platform owners based on a “social contract” between them, bound through the user data/ generalized social capital the platform generates. As chapter two argues, political entrepreneurs are actors who are able to monetize or otherwise profit from the political speech on digital platforms, exemplified by the example of Diamond and Silk. However, it is not just their speech that is commodifiable; it is their platformed *self* that becomes a commodity. As scholars of social media marketing have noted, there is a relationship between practices of self branding and the expansion of neoliberal governance in which subjects are empowered to “conceive of themselves as entrepreneurial subjects, responsible for the success or failure of their own conduct, ultimately maintaining the ‘formal game of inequalities’ on which the neoliberal order is based” (Bandinelli and Arvidsson 2012, p. 68). This is especially true of self-branding on digital platforms, where everyone purportedly has an equal opportunity to reach viral fame, as platforms are open to conceivably any individual to make a profile and post content. Thus, the threat of losing access to generalized social capital is detrimental to actors who actively seek to self-brand on digital platforms. Their ability to cultivate and leverage this social capital, which can have tremendous consequences in the “offline” world, is tied to their ability to fulfill the role of a “good” citizen, behaving in accordance with the norms of the platform and adhering to its

content policies. When platform citizens feel as though their rights have been violated by the governing corporation, debates about “freedom of speech” on social media ensue.

Finally, the third chapter of this thesis discusses how digital platforms become integrated into the formation of new kinds of political collectivities, transforming long standing political institutions that absorb these new collectivities. As Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have argued, platforms like Twitter and Facebook give rise to new organizational structures, in which political action becomes a form of personal expression online as individuals show support for certain ideas, values, policies, and campaigns. These personal expressions are then shared to that individual’s connections, mutual connections, and then possibly beyond their own personal circle, to build a network of people who also relate to those same ideas and values (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, p. 753). These digital network repertoires (Chadwick 2007, p. 286) constitute the new organizational structure, informing what it means to be a member of that collectivity. Through the case study of the DSA, chapter three demonstrated how existing political institutions are impacted by these actions, though humans often take credit for the work of technology through characterizing digital platforms as passive tools for organization members to strategically deploy. Debates among DSA members about how best to utilize social media overlook the agency of digital platforms in shaping the organization itself. While these debates are ostensibly focused on how best to instrumentalize digital platforms, they also represent the organization’s efforts to decide how to absorb the new collectivity, which practices of constituting it to accept, and which to discard. Therefore, this chapter also opens up new questions to research as the longer-term effects of digital platforms being integrated into the formation of political institutions unfold. For example, what happens to the autonomy of an organization as its repertoires of action become increasingly oriented toward digital platforms,

which, as this thesis has thoroughly examined, are far from neutral infrastructures? As Couldry (2015, p. 608) writes, “‘the myth of us’ on digital platforms encourages us to believe that our gatherings on social media platforms are a natural form of expressive collectivity, even though it is exactly that belief that is at the basis of such platforms’ creation of economic value.” Thus, as organizations absorb these digitally-constituted collectivities, they also are absorbing the digital platform as an actor-network in all of its complex, constitutive parts.

Broader Applications

While the focus of this thesis has been highly specific to the United States and the events of the 2016 presidential election to the present, its theoretical approach and broader conclusions about the nature of human and technological actors could provide new ways for analyzing similar patterns in other countries and contexts. Scholars such as Moffitt and Tormey (2013, p. 387) have sought to understand the contemporary rise of populism across the globe as a “political style,” arguing that in today’s highly mediatized landscape, performative features of politics are increasingly important. Indeed, the formation of new far-right actors is not a phenomenon particular to the United States. Studies such as Krzyzanowski and Ledin’s (2016, p. 572) examine the rise of “uncivil society” on the web in different European countries, noting the relationship between far-right digital platforms and “offline” activists and members of parliaments. Similarly, Wodak and Krzyzanowski (2017, p. 474) have argued that mediatization and self-mediatization have been major factors behind the rise of far-right populists from Trump to Viktor Orban, though each must be studied as distinct and context-dependent cases. Thus, these approaches could be augmented by the approach presented in this thesis, which would

allow for detailed, empirical accounts of how digital platforms and human actors interact in order to lead to new political formations.

Furthermore, the technological work of reconfiguring the social is not limited to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which this thesis was primarily concerned with. While these platforms introduce new relations of exploitation and governance through the creation of personal data for companies and generalized social capital for users, other types of platforms create different relations of dominance. Cockayne (2016, p. 74) has studied how the discourse of “sharing” perpetuated by firms such as Uber, Lyft, and Airbnb is mutually constitutive of new economic practices in which labor is devalued and precarious work is normalized, reproduced, and romanticized by these firms. More generally, Fisher (2010, p. 235) has conceptualized the “digital discourse” as a hegemonic body of knowledge that “explains the structure and dynamics of contemporary society as arising from the structure and dynamics of network technology.” These discursive approaches could be augmented with insights from ANT, which would explain in material terms how these new structures and dynamics are assembled. Importantly, while these firms are founded in the United States, they conduct business transnationally, suggesting that the way their platforms transform lives for users in the United States also has implications for users in other locations.

The Ongoing Battle over Sociality

This thesis has illustrated how digital platforms have (re)configured a completely new politics based on a techno-economic formation that has changed the very basis of the “social.” As with mass media that were dominant before, Couldry (2015, p. 619) writes, “it is not that social media corporations literally provide a social centre, but that our everyday social

interactions are becoming increasingly oriented to the spaces and pathways from which that those corporations own, sustain and profit.” As demonstrated above, new actors come into being as digital platforms and their constitutive parts are integrated into new chains of action, and new relations of power and dominance are then assembled through these chains of action that connect both human and nonhuman actors. However, these are sets of relations that must be constantly performed. Thus, the process of reconfiguring the social is a highly contingent and ongoing process. As technology continues to develop, and continuous data collection and large-scale data processing increasingly dictates the management of various area of life (Couldry and Mejias 2019, p. 341), it is crucial to continue to ask how digital platforms work to reconfigure the very basis of life as we know it. As van Dijck (2013, p. 20) writes, the “new norms for sociality and values of connectivity are not the outcome but the very stake in the battle to conquer the vast new territory of connective media and cultivate its fertile grounds.” Thus, it is important to not let the “social,” as whatever new configurations of it are rendered stable by actors, become a taken-for-granted category, as it is a site of continuous action that is governed by fluid assemblages of humans and technology.

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