

The Platformization of Fandom and its Discontents: Understanding Platform Harms Through the Archive of Our Own

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While platformization is often discussed in relation to commercial platforms and the impact of the profit motive on their design and governance, many of its common problems also plague the design and governance of noncommercial platforms like the fan fiction archive, the Archive of Our Own (AO3). Taking as its departure the 2023 End OTW Racism campaign, which urged the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) to address fandom racism, this article argues that AO3 demonstrates fundamental platform problems unrelated to commerciality. The End OTW Racism campaign arose in response to the long history of ignoring racism in Anglophone media fandom. However, it also demonstrated fundamental issues related to platforms, such as the dangers of the fiction of neutrality; the problem of scale; hostility and harassment; and the ways platforms become infrastructural.

Keywords: platforms, fan fiction, theory, racism, harassment

From May 17 to 31, 2023, fans conducted the End OTW Racism campaign on social media, asking the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW)—“a nonprofit organization run by and for fans to provide access to and preserve the history of fanworks and fan cultures” (“About the OTW,” n.d.)—to follow through on the promises it had made in the wake of George Floyd’s murder in 2020: to address fandom racism, particularly in the OTW’s fan fiction archive, the Archive of Our Own (AO3). The campaign cited examples such as a story “that used anti-Indigenous slurs and was written specifically to lash out at fans of color” and “writers using racial slurs against commenters who pointed out racism in their hockey fic” (End OTW Racism, 2023, para. 2). One of End OTW Racism’s key demands was for “A content policy on abusive (extremely racist and extremely bigoted) content; by abusive, we are talking about fanworks that are intentionally used to spread hate and harassment, not those that accidentally invoke racist or other bigoted stereotypes” (para. 22). Campaigners also sought “Harassment policies that can be regularly updated to address both on-site harassment and off-site coordinated harassment of AO3 users, with updated protocols for the Policy & Abuse Team to ensure consistent and informed resolutions of

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abuse claims" (para. 21).¹ An essential cause of this campaign was abusive content and harassment resulting from Anglophone media fandom's "long history of white-centricity, systemic racism, and anti-Blackness" (Pande, 2024, p. 108). However, it only makes sense to make this complaint to the OTW because of the platformization of fandom.

AO3 is a platform in the sense of Gillespie's (2010) description of platforms as spaces—"designed to facilitate some activity" and specifically "a place from which to speak and be heard"—that proclaims itself to be an "open-armed, egalitarian facilitation of expression, not an elitist gatekeeper with normative and technical restrictions" (pp. 350, 352). AO3 offers a platform for fans to post and share fan fiction, as it is (by policy) open-ended and egalitarian and allows anyone to participate. This organizational structure has made it a key infrastructure for large swaths of fandom, particularly in Anglophone media. However, AO3's lack of restrictions also means that it platforms racist stories and harassment, such that its openness is often anti-egalitarian in practice.

Taking as my departure the End OTW Racism campaign, I argue that the tension between the increasingly central role of platforms and their exclusions fundamentally characterizes contestation not only over AO3's place in fandom but also over platforms in general. While platformization is most frequently discussed in relation to commercial platforms and how the profit motive influences their design and governance, I show that AO3 faces many similar problems—the fiction of neutrality; the problem of scale; hostility and harassment; and its increasingly infrastructural role that shapes participation in fan fiction. I contend that these issues are compounded in the case of AO3 because how it was conceptualized at its founding—as an archive serving marginalized people who were fundamentally progressive—is at odds with how the platform has become an infrastructural social media site that enables racist harassment.

Defining Platformization: Beyond Commercial Platforms

I use platformization in the sense of "the reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around platforms" (Poell, Nieborg, & van Dijck, 2019, p. 6). That is, platforms—as key sites for the circulation of cultural materials—shape the (inter)actions that occur there. I also draw from Nieborg and Poell's (2018) notion of platformization, which focuses on "platforms exercising significant political economic and infrastructural control" (p. 4281). AO3, as the product of a nonprofit organization, is not part of the platform *economy*, but to the extent that the practice of fan fiction has been platformized—reorganized around this platform—it produces the same fundamental challenges as the Facebookification of the Internet: narrowing options and increasing control. The impacts of platforms result from what Massanari (2017) calls "platform politics," meaning "the assemblage of design, policies, and norms that encourage certain kinds of cultures and behaviors to coalesce on platforms while implicitly discouraging others" (p. 336). By considering these aspects, both the general affordances and limitations of platforms and the specific affordances and limitations of individual platforms come into view.

¹ Other demands focused on governance changes at the OTW itself: following through on "Hiring a Diversity Consultant within the next 3–6 months" and "Committing to a policy of transparency on this topic" (End OTW Racism, 2023, paras. 25–26).

Because of the broad social impacts of big commercial platforms, it is unsurprising that much analysis focuses on platforms like (the platform formerly known as) Twitter (Burgess & Baym, 2020; Jackson, Bailey, & Welles, 2020; Lawson, 2018; Trice & Potts, 2018), Facebook (Bucher, 2021; Fuchs, 2012; Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018), YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2009; Gillespie, 2010; Soriano & Gaw, 2022), and Instagram (Cotter, 2019; Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). The literature on platform harms therefore tends to focus on things like the collection and selling of data (Arvidsson, 2016; Bivens, 2017; Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013), the distortions of algorithmic recommendations (Bucher, 2017; Cotter, 2019; Kumar, 2019), and the drive to attract and sell attention (Arvidsson & Bonini, 2015; Fisher, 2012; Fuchs, 2012). However, it would be a mistake to identify these issues as inherent to all platforms, rather than commercial platforms. These user-platform relations do not apply with AO3 because it is advertising-free, donation-supported, and provides no algorithm.

AO3 is perhaps better illuminated by research on Wikipedia (Fierer-Blaess & Fuchs, 2014; Ford & Wajcman, 2017; Geiger, 2014), as the two share the characteristics of being both platforms and noncommercial. Fierer-Blaess and Fuchs (2014) contend that Wikipedia demonstrates how “a communist Internet” can be “cooperative, self-managed, and surveillance-free,” a space in which “humans could engage more directly with each other” (pp. 89–90). To some extent, noncommercial platforms can be just that. However, this utopian vision misses that simply removing capitalism eliminates only one (albeit a significant) source of platform trouble. The absence of corporate control does not necessarily produce the “participatory self-management” Fierer-Blaess and Fuchs (2014) tout, nor is it practical at scale (p. 89). While anyone who donates \$10 or more may vote for the OTW Board of Directors—and that is more inclusive than governance by balance sheet on a commercial platform—there is still a great deal of mediation between the average user and the control of the site. In addition, as others have noted, noncommercial platforms reproduce the same social exclusions, such as gender inequality (Ford & Wajcman, 2017), as any other institution. We must therefore be wary of reducing either platforms or their problems to commercialism, which is why studying things like AO3 is important.

Some research has examined platforms specifically in fandom. While this area is still understudied, occasioning a 2024 special issue of the journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* to expand work in the field, there is a growing awareness that “fan activity of various kinds is built upon and through specific spaces, technologies, and the cultural norms that develop there. In this case, then, platforms are both foundations and even actors” (Alberto, Sapuridis, & Willard, 2024, para 1.2). There is tension in fandom platforms between centralization and separate communities. On one hand, for example, “Discord operates as an ur-platform for fan communities, connecting and networking fans from across other social media sites while retaining them within its harbors” (Kocik, Berge, Butera, Oon, & Senters, 2024, para. 1.1). On the other hand, Discord’s many different servers allow separate fan communities (Wagenaar, 2024), and another platform, BobaBoard, is exclusively open to those who share its values of free expression (Ocone, 2024). Scholars have shown that platforms’ policy and moderation are essential in shaping how fans use them (Kocik et al., 2024; Ocone, 2024). In particular, there is a drive for safe spaces for sexual expression among fans (Ocone, 2024; Wagenaar, 2024). Despite Discord’s commercial nature, these same tensions over policy and sexual expression drive conflict about AO3.

As Bogost and Montfort (2009) noted, "a full platform study will also consider how the platform came about in its particular shape, and how that particular shape later influenced how and what later things were brought about" (n.p.). Accordingly, AO3's history is particularly important for understanding it as both a noncommercial platform and one with contestation over inclusion. The OTW and AO3 were founded after several events revealed that online fan fiction communities were at risk from outsiders who sought to privatize fan fiction or censor controversial content to appease advertisers, all for corporate profit (De Kosnik, 2016; Morrissey, 2013; Scott, 2019). Specifically, as De Kosnik (2016) describes, in incidents such as "Strikethrough 2007," companies that owned platforms housing fan fiction deleted "hundreds of journals containing fan fiction and other fan works because they contained what was deemed offensive sexual content" and removed "thousands of stories that site moderators decided were too sexually explicit" (p. 132). These incidents gave rise to a desire for a space by and for fans, which would serve the fan community and not be at the whim of corporate overlords or advertisers. As De Kosnik (2016) notes, there was "awareness of the need for fans to own and manage their own Internet infrastructure, and to actively preserve their communities' works without interference from for-profit corporations unfamiliar with fans' community and cultural priorities" (p. 133). AO3 was therefore specifically organized to center the fan community's needs in its design and governance (De Kosnik, 2016; Fiesler, Morrison, & Bruckman, 2016)—at least as its founders understood them. Pande (2024) critiques how "in this narrative, the primary existential challenge faced by media fandom spaces has been the threat of censorship and policing of fandom pleasure" in a way that elides the ways fandom racism is also a threat (p. 112). Since its inception, AO3 has often been framed as feminist and queer because most of its creators and users are women, and a significant proportion of its content features same-sex romance (De Kosnik, 2016; Fiesler et al., 2016). Thus, it is an underdog, both in relation to the for-profit economy and because of the population it seeks to serve.

Putting platform studies and AO3 into conversation helps show that platform problems arise from governance, design, and usage norms, not simply the profit motive. Nieborg and Poell (2018) emphasize that increasing dependence on platforms, alongside platform governance and content moderation decisions, have significant impacts, and such impacts are central to the contestation over AO3. Fundamentally, fans are stuck with the values of the platform. This includes those hard coded in, such as which kinds of metadata are mandatory and which are merely optional. Anyone posting a new story must label whether it contains any of the specific "Archive Warnings": "Graphic Depictions of Violence," "Major Character Death," "Rape/Non-Con" (nonconsensual sex), or "Underage" sexuality; alternately, they may mark "No Archive Warnings Apply" or "Choose Not to Use Archive Warnings." Notably, while graphic violence or sexual violence are considered obligatory to warn for, the violence of racism is not given the same degree of concern—it is not considered to rise to the level of "issues in a story that are likely to provoke enough of a reaction that some might seek to avoid them" (Lothian & Stanfill, 2021, para. 4.2). This value judgment, made by the platform's builders, is reflected in its design. Users must also grapple with the values of the people involved, from the OTW Board of Directors down to individual volunteers who do content moderation and decide whether and how to address specific complaints. Fans may or may not agree with how the platform operates, but are nevertheless to some extent dependent on it to participate in fan fiction, and this is compounded as network effects (platforms that many people use are more valuable than those that few people use) and switching costs (the difficulties of migrating to a different platform) make avoiding AO3 more difficult. Thus, AO3 demonstrates how platformization *itself*, rather than merely platformization in the service of capital,

introduces harm. Issues particularly arise around the fiction of neutrality, the problem of scale, hostility and harassment, and infrastructuralization.

The Fiction of Neutrality: Of Conduits and Content Moderation

The first key site of platform trouble is content moderation. At a fundamental level, platforms and their users suffer from the fiction of neutrality. Platforms assert that their function is “merely the neutral provision of content, a vehicle for art rather than its producer or patron, where liability should fall to the users themselves” for any harm done in posting or experienced in consuming what gets posted (Gillespie, 2010, p. 358). AO3, like other platforms, posits such neutrality, stating that “Our goal is maximum inclusiveness” and that “The Archive does not prescreen for content” (TOS Home, n.d., Sec. 1, Sec. I.E.3). Because AO3 is maximally inclusive and does not screen, the Terms of Service go on to warn that “You understand that using the Archive may expose you to material that is offensive, triggering, erroneous, sexually explicit, indecent, blasphemous, objectionable, grammatically incorrect, or badly spelled” (Sec. I.E.3). This places responsibility for any risk on the user: “The OTW is not liable to you for any Content to which you are exposed on or because of the Archive” (Sec. I.E.5). In particular, the TOS prohibit only a few specific uses of the platform: “spam and commercial promotion,” “threatening the technical integrity of the Service,” infringement of copyright or trademark, plagiarism, “unauthorized disclosure of a fan’s personal information” (commonly called doxing), harassment, and content that is either illegal or not fanworks, such as:

child pornography (images of real children); warez [pirated software], cracks, hacks or other executable files and their associated utilities; trade secrets, restricted technologies, or classified information; or if it consists entirely of actual instruction manuals, technical data, recipes, or other non-fanwork content. (TOS Home, n.d., Sec. IV.B-H)

Beyond these specific exclusions, anything goes.

There are reasons for “maximum inclusiveness,” as mentioned above. One reason for founding the OTW and AO3 was that other platforms had removed fan content, especially sexual content. Because previous platforms policed fan works based on beliefs about appropriateness, AO3 explicitly refuses to do so. This is a negative freedom argument—seeking freedom from being acted upon. While this may be a reasonable response to previous attempts to restrict content, it has consequences. As Jackson et al. (2020) point out, “decisions on whether and how to curate content are not neutral” (p. 191). Allowing anything that is legal and does not use the platform outside its intended purpose might seem neutral, but by having no specific policy restricting racist content, the balance is tipped toward racism. Choosing *not* to remove something is choosing to allow it.

Despite the fiction of neutrality, the reality is that platforms inevitably have rules, and their enforcement is a site of friction. Perfect enforcement is impossible; “there is always something on a social media platform that violates the rules” (Gillespie, 2018, p. 75). This is compounded by the fact that moderation involves so many people: “a platform might instantiate a reasonable rule with good intentions and thoughtful criteria, but that rule might be interpreted very differently” by the policy writers, the

reviewers, and/or the user reporting a violation (Gillespie, 2018, p. 137). To ensure a satisfactory outcome for all of those people is therefore an enormous task. At AO3, "Complaints may be submitted to our Policy & Abuse team" (TOS Home, n.d., Sec IV.A), which is composed of fans who volunteer to serve the organization. The team then interprets the content alongside the rules and may ask the user to voluntarily remove it or remove it themselves.

One demand of the End OTW Racism campaign is for a policy banning "extremely racist" content. However, this is easier said than done. Who will decide what is racist enough to warrant action? As Lothian and Stanfill (2021) point out, "in our current conjuncture where few white people are deeply educated about race and racialization," the only fans with enough knowledge to adjudicate these questions will be fans of color, such that "any effort to ban all harmful content would likely demand a vast investment of labor from the very fans who are likely to be most harmed by that content" (para. 5.6). This demand thus implicates not just creating a content policy but enforcing it. The End OTW Racism campaign frames this as a simple request, but it is quite complex, and when the complexities cause delays in writing, approving, and implementing the policy, and when differences arise in interpretations of the policy by people posting, reporting, and enforcing, discontent with the platform will continue, if not intensify.

Similarly, the End OTW Racism campaign demanded a harassment policy that addressed both the on- and off-site harassment of users. As noted above, harassment is one type of content that is currently unequivocally banned on AO3: "Harassment is not allowed," and it is defined as "any behavior that produces a generally hostile environment for its target" (TOS Home, n.d., Sec. IV.G). The TOS further distinguish between threats (prohibited) and annoyance (allowed), content that goes directly to a target (like comments on their works) and that which does not, and action that continues "after being told to stop, harasses the subject, or requests that others harass the subject," which "may be considered part of a general pattern of harassment" (Sec. IV.G). It is notable that incitement to harassment is included, as this is rare for platforms. However, the current policy relies on activities happening on AO3 itself. It is not clear how AO3 would know that the same user is harassing *or* being harassed on another platform, particularly in an overwhelmingly pseudonymous community.

Ultimately, such issues are why platform policy and enforcement are contested. As Gillespie (2018) describes, "this is an exhausting and unwinnable game to play for those who moderate these platforms, as every rule immediately appears restrictive to some and lax to others" (p. 73). At times, users directly show their dissatisfaction, such as by individually reporting content, coordinating the reporting of content, complaining about policies, or "groups of users turning to activism to express their outrage, about one decision or an entire policy" (Gillespie, 2018, p. 169). End OTW Racism was precisely activism to express outrage about policy. Such activism is necessary largely because platforms, because they are run by people, are systemically biased. That is, neutrality is not just a fiction, but non-neutrality tends to trend in certain directions more than others. As Tufekci (2018) describes Twitter, platforms want:

to remain "neutral" but, as is often the case, rights of one group—the group who wanted to silence women or minorities—clashed with rights of women or minorities (especially outspoken ones) to freely use the site to speak and assemble. A stance of "neutrality" meant, in reality, choosing the former over the latter. (p. 178)

Fundamentally, platforms reconstitute the prejudices of their societies (Brock, 2011; Jackson et al., 2020; Massanari, 2017). By operating under the fiction of neutrality rather than actively resisting prejudices through content moderation, AO3 platforms them—it provides a place for people who wish to exclude others to do so.

Design Matters: Scale and Speed

The second source of platform harm is fundamental technological design. That is, without being technologically determinist and saying that design causes certain behaviors, it is nevertheless the case that platformized, centralized forms of cultural practice are big and move fast, and these features have consequences. Commercial platforms often provoke concerns about how platform design cultivates consumers, not citizens (Bennett, 2012; Hokka, 2021) or how algorithmic recommendations can be radicalizing (Gaudette, Scrivens, Davies, & Frank, 2021; Marwick & Lewis, 2017), but the fundamentals of big and fast subtend both problems. Design matters. Bogost and Montfort (2009), in their essay articulating platform studies as a field, called attention to “how particular aspects of a platform’s design influenced the work done on that platform” (n.p.). As many scholars have pointed out, technologies have both affordances (the things they allow or facilitate) and limits that mean the platform is difficult or even impossible to use in unexpected ways (Bivens, 2017; Gillespie, 2018; Stanfill, 2015). Indeed, Stein and Busse (2009) note how the form of fan fiction in particular is shaped by the interfaces of the websites on which it appears. The uses of platforms are shaped by the beliefs and values embedded in the technology itself. The impacts of design become clear from the fact that the aforementioned top-level content warnings on AO3 are not simply a policy (which could be broken and then potentially reported and enforced): They are required by design. The submit button does not work without making a choice in that section—nor without an age rating, fandom, title, language setting, or content in the submission text box.

Design is a *decision* made by the designer(s)—while there are material constraints imposed by hardware, expense, etc., a much wider variety of possibilities exist than are actualized, and it is important to attend to “how social, economic, cultural, and other factors led platform designers to put together systems in particular ways” (Bogost & Montfort, 2009, n.p.). As Lothian (2016) writes, “AO3’s list of warnings, from which any user posting to the archive must select, stand as a trace of many rounds of fierce and deeply felt debate” among fans (p. 746), and while being feminist and queer-friendly were explicit values for AO3’s designers, antiracism’s total absence in the design shows that it was not. These choices are made in a context, but have consequences far beyond their origin. The constraints imposed by design illustrate how, as legal scholar Franks (2019) notes, “the tech industry’s use of the word ‘platform’ is impressively obfuscating. It echoes Second Amendment fundamentalists’ insistence that firearms are mere tools, innocent implements that cause no harm by themselves” (p. 183). Platforms, like guns, are far easier to use in some ways than others; platform design contains beliefs about what is essential and what is superfluous.

The second way that design causes platform trouble is through the problem of scale. As of July 2024, AO3 had more than 13 million fan works by more than 7 million users, spanning more than 60,000 fandoms (Home, n.d.). Its users come from all seven continents (Rouse & Stanfill, 2023). This is an enormous and complex apparatus with many failure points. The scale of the platform and the openness of

joining—there is a queue to get access to manage the rate of growth, but anyone can get in line—make AO3 susceptible to harmful use, irrespective of its policies and how they are enforced. This is because “moderation and editorial review cannot scale up sufficiently to cover the overwhelming quantity of data on social media platforms” (Jackson et al., 2020, p. 191). As Gillespie (2018) noted, moderation “must happen at a data scale. Such massive platforms must treat users as data points, subpopulations, and statistics” (p. 141). While AO3 is orders of magnitude smaller than social media giants like Facebook or Twitter, it also has correspondingly fewer resources and zero-paid staff. Additional growth scales up the potential for harm and the difficulty of mitigation. In such ways, one key source of platform harm is technological: which values are (and are not) built in and platforms’ sheer scale. While commercial platforms desire endless growth and scale to sell data and ads and generate profit, the ways growth and scale manifest on AO3 demonstrate that these are platform problems, not *commercial* platform problems.

Networked Harassment in Collapsed Contexts: Platforms Meet Misbehavior

That moderation is imperfect and platformization makes social activity bigger and faster might be fine, if not for how platforms are used. The choices users make within design constraints and how they interpret and abide by policies are the third most significant factors in platform harms. The first source of such harm is context collapse, or when multiple distinct audiences intermingle on social media (Marwick & boyd, 2011). In platformized fandom, on both AO3 and social media, different groups of fans, with different tastes, values, and identities—such as fans who interpret source texts differently or fans of rival franchises (Star Trek v. Star Wars, Marvel v. DC)—who would previously have inhabited separate (e)mailing lists, message boards, etc., are all together in one place. In particular, when there are already polarized groups, platforms, including AO3, can bring them into contact (and conflict). While in theory AO3’s search functions let people see only what they want—particularly as users can both include and exclude search terms—in practice, it is relatively easy to stumble across something and even easier to deliberately go looking for people one disagrees with. Moreover, as seen from harassment campaigns like Gamergate (Gray, Buyukozturk, & Hill, 2017; Massanari, 2017; Trice & Potts, 2018) and the campaign against *Ghostbusters* (Reitman & Feig, 2016) actress Leslie Jones (Blodgett & Salter, 2018; Jones, 2018; Lawson, 2018), platformized fandom makes it easy to find likeminded others and coordinate harassment of things fans do not like, particularly the racialized harassment decried by the End OTW Racism manifesto. When harassment happens, platforms make it faster and bigger than ever.

While there is often resistance to considering groups like Gamergate as fans (Jones, 2018; Proctor & Kies, 2018), fan fiction fans also sometimes harass people (Guerrero-Pico, Establés, & Ventura, 2018; Pande, 2024). Indeed, the reason AO3’s TOS *have* a harassment policy is because some fans harass. As Pande (2024) notes, “fandom communitarian norms can also reflect and reinforce systemic cultural biases including racism and anti-Blackness” (p. 112), as evidenced by both her research on the harassment antiracist fans face and the End OTW Racism campaign. Additionally, Pande (2016) calls attention to “the ways in which the specific platforms that fandom has utilized has influenced discussions around racial dynamics” (p. 210). Thus, fandom, because it is made of people, is structured by the same systems of power as any other group of people (despite beliefs about fandom as feminist and progressive), and this is compounded not only by commercial platforms but also by AO3. As Pande (2024) shows, there is an “idea that fans who do talk about race/ism in fandom spaces are doing it, a priori, in bad faith and should either be ignored and dismissed, or

in some cases, be made targets for (deserved) harassment themselves" (p. 117). On AO3, as Rouse, Condis, & Stanfill (2024) discuss, stories or comments that address and/or critique racism can and do face backlash, even coordinated mass negative commenting. This is facilitated by platform design in discoverability—people can find those with different views—and enabling collective action. Behaving badly is certainly not *caused* by platforms, but it *is* amplified, and this is a fundamental challenge that platformization presents.

Of Institutions and Infrastructure

Trouble with content moderation, design, and user behavior is formidable enough on its own, but it is compounded by the fourth source of platform harm: AO3's infrastructural position within fan fiction culture. Infrastructures underlie and enable other kinds of action, often invisibly unless they break down (Brock, 2011; Plantin et al., 2018). As Rowberry (2022) noted, "infrastructure is designed to be used by all with little oversight on *how* it is used until problem cases emerge" (p. 52; emphasis in original). Infrastructures serve public values, are widely available, and are structured to be sustainable over time (Plantin et al., 2018). For these reasons, it is hard to opt out of them (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Plantin et al., 2018). They are also hard to change (Bucher, 2017). These features all characterize AO3's role in fandom. As De Kosnik (2016) notes, by 2016, AO3 was "building a strong reputation as *the* universal archive for fan fiction" (p. 93; emphasis in original). This universality, meaning AO3's widely available, sustained, and almost compulsory character, has only continued since then—indeed, it has perhaps accelerated as platforms like Tumblr crack down on forms of sexual expression that AO3 continues to allow. Walls-Thumma's (2024) work on Tolkien fandom clearly demonstrates that "dozens (if not hundreds) of small archives, each backed by a community of fans, have largely disappeared, quietly and without fanfare, with activity shifting largely to AO3 and a handful of social media sites" (para. 1.4). This centralization has significant impacts. On one hand, OTW has become a widely beloved fandom institution, routinely exceeding its fundraising goals every year. On the other hand, there has not been a reckoning with the power inherent in the *institutional* aspect of that. The OTW and AO3 may have been founded to decrease fandom's vulnerability to corporate power, in relation to which they were underdogs, but they have since become power centers in their own right. As the End OTW Racism (2023) manifesto notes, "AO3 has grown to be a central pillar of fandom, likely far outstripping its founders' original vision. It is more than just an archive now; it is a central hub of the modern fannish experience" (para. 27). In this way, AO3 goes beyond reshaping fan fiction practice around itself as a platform (platformization) to take up an infrastructural position that is almost inescapable and must be taken seriously to understand both why other platform problems are so problematic and why there is such discontent.

To begin with discontent, much of the frustration with AO3 arises because infrastructuralization gives it a great deal of heft. Fans see the OTW as powerful (because, compared with any given fan, it is). Fans see the OTW as having substantial resources, as their fundraisers often exceed the amount required to keep the servers running by tens of thousands of dollars—an amount that likely seems large to an individual, even if it isn't significant on the organization's scale. Fans do not see action being taken and conclude that the OTW does not think racism is important. The harm done by racism at scale is urgent, so it feels urgent to redress it. This combination of a moral imperative to take action against racism, the OTW's apparent indifference, and the OTW's apparent power then seem to justify things like mass messaging the organization and its board of directors—often with hostility—as fans turn size and speed back on the platform

itself. However, fans seem not to recognize that, for a platform, AO3 is small-scale, nor that it is run on a small budget entirely by volunteers. An infrastructure with limited resources may seem contradictory when compared with platforms like Facebook, whose massive resources have allowed it to extend its tentacles into so many facets of contemporary life. However, the concept of infrastructure being both essential and severely underfunded is all too familiar from physical public goods. Nevertheless, the assumption that something so big and important from the perspective of the individual must be able to resolve such challenges contributes to discontent with AO3's actual limited capabilities.

Moreover, the fact that OTW is now a central fandom institution shapes how fans respond to its failure to serve their needs. On one level, the OTW runs on fan donations, creating a not-unreasonable sense of ownership and the feeling that being financial backers should provide a right to give input into the platform. This is compounded by the emotional ownership that comes from the platform being "by fans, for fans" rather than corporately owned—the "our own" in the name is, in many ways, a real felt relation. However, institutionalization and infrastructuralization also have other effects. Because AO3 is seen as powerful, fans who object to how it is governed respond with the same tactics they use to confront others with institutional power, such as television showrunners. Therefore, we get a hashtag campaign like #EndOTWRacism, which builds on previous campaigns, such as #LexaDeservedBetter, during which fans coordinated mass tweeting in protest of the killing of a queer woman character (Bourdaa, 2018; Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018; Navar-Gill & Stanfill, 2018). In particular, during the End OTW Racism campaign, fans responded en masse to posts from the official OTW Twitter and Tumblr accounts, as well as the OTW announcements page, regardless of topic, with comments that reiterated the campaign's demands. This tactic treats these accounts as if they are run by professional PR flaks and not volunteers who are themselves fans.

At the heart of this discontent is the fact that—much as Burgess and Baym (2020) chart how Twitter went from a platform to broadcast mundane personal information like what you had for lunch to conversational, public, and networked—AO3 was imagined as serving one purpose and is designed and governed for that purpose, even as is now quite another type of thing. AO3 was intended as an archive "where authors can deposit their fics and readers of fics can retrieve them" (De Kosnik, 2016, p. 38). The role of an archive is different from that of a platform: Archives are "dedicated to the persistent publication and long-term preservation of their contents" (De Kosnik, 2016, p. 77). Fandom archives in particular function to "embody and convey the cultural memory of specific fandoms, as well as the cultural memory of the larger enterprise of media fandom" (De Kosnik, 2016, p. 29). Because of these preservation and memory purposes, archives "do not delete, hide, or edit content" (De Kosnik, 2016, p. 18). AO3 was never meant to be a platform. It is designed for search and retrieval, memory preservation, and inclusion—of content, not of people. This is a crucial distinction. While the interface has always had social features like comments, interaction between fans was never prioritized in design or governance. More broadly, the OTW certainly did not set out to build an infrastructure, but AO3 occupies an infrastructural position now, with attendant problems and responsibilities; the failure of the OTW to take this into account impedes solving the pressing problem of racism on the site.

The infrastructural position of AO3 thus comes into relief when it fails—and to those to whom it fails. It is a public good, supported by the community through donations, intended to be open to all and reliable

over the long term. It is also quite difficult to opt out of using a “central pillar of fandom” (End OTW Racism, 2023, para. 27). It is for these reasons that the frequent retort by defenders of AO3’s current governance that those who are dissatisfied should just make their own platform falls flat; while it is true that the project is open source and could easily be duplicated in a technical sense, a platform is more than code. The original intent of AO3 is thus fundamentally mismatched with its current reality, much as many other platforms that only had aspirations of profit have turned into essential tools for activism and democracy and essential vectors of hate and misinformation, which becomes apparent when tensions arise around the new purposes.

AO3’s Perfect Storm: Platform Problems Meet Utopian Intentions

At the same time, the OTW is particularly badly positioned to deal with discontent over racism because of its history and continued self-identification as both progressive and marginal. More than 15 years after AO3’s founding as an alternative to commercial platforms that constrained fans, the OTW and AO3 are still, in some ways, underdogs. This is particularly the case compared with mainstream media that consistently mock fan fiction, media corporations who could at any moment attack fan practices under copyright law, and even nation-states—the archive was famously banned in China over a story that represented a Chinese celebrity as a transgender sex worker (Feng, 2020). There is also ongoing contestation over what content should be allowed on AO3, as fans who oppose particular categories of fan fiction and fan art, such as works that include rape or particular preferences for relationships between characters, such as works that feature underage sex or incest, have campaigned against this content being allowed (TWC Editor, 2022). These fans, called “antis,” have harassed and doxed the authors of such stories (Pande, 2024; TWC Editor, 2022). They have also attacked the OTW itself, as when an anti gained access to OTW volunteers’ e-mail addresses and began “sending our volunteers threatening e-mails with illegal child sexual abuse material” (Jess, 2022, para 2). This echo of the Strikethrough incident discussed above, in which it was assumed that depiction of taboo or illegal sexuality was endorsement (and possibly criminal), has reinforced the sense that AO3—and particularly its feminist and queer history of valuing all legal forms of sexual expression, even when some find it distasteful—is under siege.

However, campaigns like End OTW Racism call attention to the fundamental limits AO3 always had. If the archive was designed to serve fans, the question is: Which fans? There was “a broader mission towards making everyone feel welcome in using the archive” (Fiesler et al., 2016, p. 2579), but as we have already seen, in practice it is not actually everyone. The founding intent was feminist and queer, and there were explicit decisions about queer inclusion “in part as an attempt to influence norms. They wanted to show that homosexuality was okay,” despite the fact that this was “in deliberate opposition to some of their users’ wishes,” showing that the designers were willing to consciously assert values (Fiesler et al., 2016, p. 2583). However, antiracism was not a value built into the archive, with or without community support. When we think about inclusion, this is a fundamental absence.

There is a baseline tension in AO3’s self-concept. As Gillespie (2018) describes, “a platform committed to free speech” will moderate quite differently from “a platform conceived as the protector of community, its moderators attuned to all the forces that can tear such community apart” (p. 17). Fundamentally, these conflicts often rest on different beliefs about what moderation is for—what it should protect. As Franks (2019) describes in the context of free speech, on one hand there is “the civil liberties

approach,” which “emphasizes individual rights and the need to protect them from [. . .] interference,” which maps onto the free speech model of moderation; by contrast, “the civil rights approach emphasizes group rights and the need to ensure their equal protection,” corresponding to the community-focused model of moderation (p. 12). Thinking about the problem this way explains why fights over AO3 often focus on individual freedom to read and write as one wishes rather than any collective responsibility to others to be thoughtful about the content one posts. Because restrictions on content were a major driver of creating AO3 in the first place, it tilted toward free speech. Because it was conceptualized as an archive, it is tilted away from the community. However, despite these intentions, AO3 is now a space where interaction happens, and racist uses of the platform may be free speech, but they are caustic to a community that includes fans of color.

In the end, there is a tension between the inclusion of content in a free-speech-focused archive and the inclusion of people in a community. In this way, moderation minimalism echoes what Franks (2019) calls First Amendment fundamentalism, which “warns that even the most modest regulation of any speech rights will lead to mass censorship and that the devastating effects of abusive speech must be tolerated to protect freedom of speech for all” (p. 13). This is a foundationally different approach than focusing on equal protection of groups, and protection of fans of color as a constituency is exactly what End OTW Racism demanded. Therefore, AO3 shows the same problem as other platforms that take such a First Amendment fundamentalist position (like 4Chan and Twitter under the Elon Musk regime): Platforming racists makes for a racist platform.

Notably, the costs of inaction around racism are unevenly distributed, borne not by fandom at large but by fans of color specifically. In a discussion of hate speech, critical race theorist Mari Matsuda (1993) calls this “a psychic tax imposed on those least able to pay” (p. 18). Charles Lawrence III (1993) similarly noted that in framing hate speech through free speech:

we ask Blacks and other subordinate groups to bear a burden for the good of society—to pay the price for the societal benefit of creating more room for speech. And we assign this burden to them without seeking their advice or consent. This amounts to white domination, pure and simple. (p. 80)

While AO3 content rarely constitutes hate speech—though not never, as Rouse et al. (2024) found alt-right memes and racist screeds in comments—the principle holds. That is, if the OTW protects and defends the devaluation of people of color because they want to permit posting anything on AO3 that is within the law, then implicitly, these fans’ suffering is a cost the organization is willing to pay. If it asserts that it does want to solve the racism problem but does not even hire the promised diversity consultant for three years, it also treats the suffering in the meantime as an acceptable cost.² Fundamentally, “communities need care: they had to address the challenges of harm and offense, and develop forms of governance that protected their community and embodied democratic procedures that matched their values and the values of their users”

² In the wake of the End OTW Racism campaign, the OTW published an update on its plans to address hate speech, demonstrating this long timeline (“An Update from the OTW Board and Chairs,” 2023).

(Gillespie, 2018, p. 16). To the extent that AO3 orients toward resisting censorship, it also cannot protect the community. Those who govern it must decide.

Conclusion

The mismatch between user and platform beliefs about platforms' power is ultimately the root of discontent with AO3. Platformization, institutionalization, and infrastructuralization all matter because of the increasing concentration of power in an area of social practice. While racism on AO3 is caused by people being racist, the need for, and the specific organization of, the End OTW Racism campaign reflects the fandom-OTW power relation. Neither the OTW nor fans protesting AO3's platform design and governance understand their mutual power dynamic. The OTW sees itself as having far less power than it does, and fans see it as having far more because fans approach AO3 as a platform and the OTW governs and designs it like an archive. This is, in fact, a fundamental tension of many contemporary platforms: what they were originally for, and even the goals their management has now, are often fundamentally at odds with how people use them. The profit motive looms large in the priorities of most platforms, which has led previous scholarship to focus rather narrowly on its impacts, but it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for platform trouble. Instead, it is the fiction of neutrality, the problem of scale, hostility and harassment, and infrastructuralization that open up these gulfs around platforms—a fact that becomes visible when studying the few noncommercial platforms, such as AO3.

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