Participations: Dialogues on the
Participatory Promise of Contemporary Culture and Politics

PART 5: PLATFORMS

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Tarleton Gillespie:

Debates about online participation must necessarily consider the mediating technical environments in which participation takes place. This may have once meant bulletin boards, Usenet discussions, home pages, chat rooms, and blogs, but overwhelmingly the participation we're now concerned about happens on large-scale social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, Google+, YouTube, Flickr, Tumblr, Blogger, Reddit, Instagram. For a number of important reasons, these are where people go to participate. These platforms simplify the tools for posting, distributing, sharing, commenting; they link users to a massive, often global audience; and they do so at a very appealing price. These platforms are, of course, nearly all for-profit operations, funded by advertising and the value that can be extracted from the data users leave behind, and thus are quite interested in not only supporting their users' participation but sustaining their attention, bringing them back, growing the community, and developing a site that's also appealing to advertisers and content partners.

Many of us here are interested in pinpointing and explaining the influence platforms have over public participation, creativity, and sociality. It turns out to be deceptively easy to merely nod to the role these platforms play, and then let them slip back to the analytical background, as if they are merely there. It is also deceptively easy to gloss their influence as straightforward, either facilitating participation in powerful ways or exploiting it. How do we examine the role of platforms without painting them as either all-powerful or merely instrumental? How do we recognize their attenuated influence over the public participation they host and the complex dynamics of that influence?

Certainly, platforms do shape participation. They have precise (and shifting) technical affordances that constrain and guide practice—both in their own design and in their fit with a myriad of infrastructures, including their back-end data systems, the protocols of the Web, and the dictates of mobile providers. They have rules and norms that bless some practices and are used to restrict others. They have myriad international, sometimes conflicting, legal obligations they must enforce. They have commercial aspirations and pressures that drive decisions about how they're marketed, how they're updated, and how they're positioned against their competitors. But even this can easily sound as if the platform is the immovable object facing the unstoppable force that is user practices. To advance this conversation, we need more nuanced ways to examine platforms beyond simply acknowledging that they shape participation.

(I'm also quite aware that I'm being painfully imprecise here in my choice of terms: I'm carelessly throwing together different kinds of "platforms," and reifying a loaded term, and there are most certainly different kinds of "users," perhaps so many that the term should be banished from this discussion as impossibly broad. Would a different vocabulary and level of granularity help in this regard?)

I want to get better at articulating how platforms and users are inextricably entangled, on multiple levels. So, for example, in early 2014, when Facebook adjusted its EdgeRank algorithm in ways that seemed to privilege "relevant news sites" over the viral pop tidbits from sites like Upworthy, it was using its technical and commercial power to protect its brand and choreograph its users by making a covert intervention into what it thinks should be visible. Platform shapes participation. But this was more than technological

politics (though it was enacted as such), and it was more than bottom-line profiteering. It was one of countless midstream adjustments, responding to the competing and probably intractable problems of what Facebook is, what it thinks it should be, what users expect of it, what will make money, what users turn Facebook into through all their posting and clicking and liking, and what competing communities of Facebook users agree and disagree about. How do we capture the nuance of what happened here? Is it that Facebook algorithmically distorted what users had indicated was worth seeing, or that Facebook corrected a distortion caused by Upworthy's efforts to engineer particularly "likable" headlines? Did Facebook arbitrate between competing claims of what is important, or is the way importance is now represented already structured by the ubiquity of the "like" button? Were users taking advantage of the ubiquitous sharing mechanisms to elevate and certify the kind of content found at Upworthy, or did Upworthy supersede news sites that could not compete in an environment shaped by the mechanisms of sharing? Was Upworthy's traffic not in fact affected, or dropped for other reasons, meaning the accusation itself was more a public expression of concern about the contours of participation and the power of platforms over it? Have the reposting of both serious news sites and viral headline memes displaced some deeper or more genuine form of expressive participation, or have users begun to reject that form of participation? Facebook is choreographing mediated participation, in response to the perceived shift in mediated participation, based on evidence of mediated participation, in light of notions about mediated participation, to encourage different mediated participation, amid critiques about mediated participation. There is no stable or linear cause and effect in this recursive interchange. But it is an interchange worth teasing out.

José van Dijck:

I would like to pick up on Tarleton's core questions: "How do we examine the role of platforms without painting them as all-powerful or merely instrumental? How do we recognize their attenuated influence over the public participation they host and the complex dynamics of that influence?" There is a real problem with examining the intricate entanglement of social media platforms and their users, not only because their interaction is so complex and shapes user participation at multiple levels, as Tarleton suggests. In my book *The Culture of Connectivity* (2013), I have tried to design a model that analyzes social media platforms at these multiple levels, looking at technologies, users, and content as well as governance, ownership relations, and business models. But even with the most refined instruments, it remains very difficult to grasp the essence of a platform's abilities to steer and affect user engagement. The problems with examining platforms are manifold, but I would like to highlight three aspects here: (a) invisible back ends and entangled data streams, (b) unstable and unknowable relations between platforms and their owners, and (c) the vulnerability of users vis-à-vis platforms. Let me explore each of these points in more detail.

Covert interventions in a platform's ability to steer users' exposure to what is "newsworthy" and what is "relevant," as Tarleton unravels in his Facebook/Upworthy example, are powerful framing mechanisms. For the past hundred years, we have been critically examining editorial decisions made by newspaper journalists and television editors in terms of agenda setting and ideological framing. At times, I can get really nostalgic for the disarming visibility of old-school mediation. Many of Facebook's back-end decisions executed by information engineers are not only invisible and unknowable to users, but their effect goes

well beyond the site proper. Facebook's power in selecting information is mounting by the day; its pervasive influence in filtering the world's information and news happens through a subtle process of replacing editorial logic with algorithmic logic—a process keenly described in Tarleton's recent co-edited volume *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality and Society* (Gillespie, Boczkowski, & Foot, 2014). Algorithmic logic only partly reveals itself in interfaces and other front-end technologies, but 90% of the iceberg is hidden under water, invisible to users.

Interventions on the level of ownership rest on a similar hide-and-seek pattern. There were instant (yet quickly fading) outcries from users when Facebook bought up Instagram last year (and more recently WhatsApp) for exorbitant sums. However, few eyebrows were raised when Facebook announced partnerships with Datalogix, Acxion, Epsilon, and Bluekai—four of the most influential data companies in the world. In the dog-eat-dog culture of Silicon Valley, buyouts and takeovers are the hot news of the day, while silent partnerships may turn out to be at least as influential in terms of controlling the gateways to the ecosystem of connective media. Google, Facebook, and Amazon have come to serve as portals to this ecosystem by each forming its own vertical chains. Their real power, though, lies not in fighting one another's turf, but in their joint ability to form a nirvana of interoperability, which is governed by a systematic set of rules and a shared social media logic. We know very little about the connection between data streams handled by social media platforms and those assembled by data companies; the potential for combining behavioral, financial, and personal user data is endless. Almost every service industry is turning into a data industry. Just last week, the largest Dutch bank (ING) launched the idea of selling its customers' financial data to third parties. The implications of linking up huge and varied data sets are hard to understate and yet difficult to imagine. Turning revelation into imagination takes more than one Edward Snowden and a single Dave Eggers.

Tarleton's observations concerning mediated participation trigger poignant questions such as: What can we know about how platforms steer online communication? How much do we understand in terms of their power to massage the messages we send and receive? Are users technically literate enough to understand the invisible commercial and algorithmic mechanisms used to process their data? How vulnerable are users who have become addicted to, if not dependent on, the platforms they have themselves helped become indispensable? I strongly believe in the critical muscle of users' common sense, but the more powerful social platforms become as technological gatekeepers, the more difficult it is to "recognize their attenuated influence over the public participation." It's essential to avoid regarding platform owners as all-powerful or completely benevolent, but it is equally important to see users neither as powerless victims nor as benefiting consumers. The role of users requires as much painstaking research as the role of platform owners. How much can, do, and should they understand about social media dynamics and their connective logic? In a world that is increasingly governed by high-tech systems operated by specialized info-engineers, what level of understanding is attainable for middle-class users who are well educated and willing to engage, but unaware of the powerful mechanisms guiding them?

Jessica Clark:

Prepping to write this response offered a micro-study in my own platform usage. En route to a meeting, I skimmed Tarleton's initial provocation via e-mail on my iPhone. Back home, I downloaded PDFs of the

previous two dialogues on creativity and labor, accessed through the IJoC website, and printed them out to read and annotate by hand. I opened up José's next step in the dialogue via Word on my Mac, typed my notes into the document, and then retrieved a stat from *The Wall Street Journal* stating that "millennials are spending as many as 18 hours a day skimming the web, watching TV, texting, playing video games and using social media" (Data point, 2014, para. 1), two or three of which activities they might be engaged in at any one time.

While I'll admit this is just one anecdote—a disappointingly weak form of data, as other participants in these dialogues have noted—to me it suggests at least a few lessons. First, any one of us might be hard pressed to define what constitutes a "platform" in the hodgepodge of open and closed communications technologies I just described. Second, off-line modes of media consumption and interaction still play a significant role, at least in the practices of overeducated Gen Xers like me. Incoming platforms don't neatly displace existing ones. Users often take a cue from improv comedy, saying "yes, and" to whatever new device or social media service enters the scene, keeping the ones that work for them and discarding those that don't when something shinier, cheaper or more convenient comes along. Third, it's no longer reasonable to assume (if it ever was) that any one platform is holding a user's full attention at a given moment. Both content and context matter.

These contingent and messy realities are confounding both academic researchers in search of new leverage points to loosen the hegemonic grip of commercialized platforms, and news/entertainment industry researchers seeking to harness shifts in platform usage to deliver eyeballs and dollars. Users' improvisational approach to emerging platforms is also no joke to those, like me, who operate in the foundation- and government-funded middle of think tanks, research centers, and nonprofit innovation projects, seeking to nail down where and when "civic engagement" takes place.

When it comes to vetting platforms for such moments of democratic engagement, the questions are many and thorny. Users' motives and experiences are not clear-cut. These are neither the fun and creative interactions of fans with a work or brand they love, nor the immiserating toil of Turks tethered to their machines to crunch data for pennies. Instead, these are moments where users' relationships to issues, to local and national disputes, to identities (embodied or symbolic), or to injustices (real or perceived) are informed by which media platforms they have access to, and how nimbly they can use them to learn, respond, and express their own perspectives. Neither work nor play, such mediated civic functions aren't neatly supported—and may in fact be discouraged—by the market. This recalls the question that Adam Fish raises in the dialogue on labor: "Can we support a system (capitalism) and its information infrastructures that result in inequality with a system that attempts to achieve equality (democracy)?" (Andrejevic et al., 2014, p. 1093).

The answer, not simple, of course, is "yes, maybe, sometimes." Adam also notes that "markets and commons are in a historically co-constituting relationship." Historically, corrective policy measures have involved platform subsidy. Privatization of local radio and TV markets spurred policies supporting public and community stations, which in turn have led to organizing campaigns to subsidize digital access for those citizens unable to afford it. Over the past decade, consolidation of newspapers also has led to controversial calls for subsidized nonprofit online news sites, including those with enhanced capacity for

inviting and curating participation. At the same time, politicians and government agencies are being urged to reconsider their own communications platforms, both by making their data more open and spreadable and by building more responsive systems for interacting with constituents.

For government bodies, supporting platforms is less controversial than directly underwriting content or participation. Such interventions have led to the creation of public media services that many (though, granted, often demographically homogeneous) people use, and some even love. This is no perfect fix, however. For partisans, the results of such policies are often unsatisfying—producing content and dialogue that are either too bland, too skewed in one direction or another, or just plain chaotic. For conservatives such as Grover Norquist, who prefer their governments drowned in a bathtub, such programs are an appalling waste of taxpayer dollars. For libertarians and anarchists alike, the prospect of relying on government-subsidized platforms for democratic communication is nonsensical at best and sinister at worst.

So where does that leave us in terms of building better platforms for participation and debate? As Henry writes in the dialogue on creativity:

> For me, the struggle toward a *more* participatory culture is a fight for the widest possible access to the means of cultural production and circulation and to the skills and social infrastructure needed to use them effectively in pursuit of one's own personal and collective interests. (Banet-Weiser et al., 2014, p. 1083)

Policy is only one tool for constructing such platforms. Like academic publishing, it can often move too slowly to be of much use in moments of crisis, civic upheaval, or sudden crests of activism or partisanship. With a few notable exceptions such as Wikipedia, nonprofit structures have also not proven robust enough to support media platforms that attract mass participation.

Collaborative iteration is another tool. Over the past several years, activists, nongovernmental organizations, media makers, and citizens have been honing strategies for hacking media platforms, sometimes literally (hello, Anonymous) and sometimes more figuratively. They have learned to take advantage of the native capacities of multiple platforms to devise interlocking campaigns that generate a groundswell of attention and interaction. Learning to be platform agnostic—or platform omnivorous—is a more valuable skill in this environment of rapid media transformation than picking one rising platform and sticking with it, as the bloggers did a decade ago. Tarleton's Upworthy example is just one small skirmish in this ongoing battle to master the use of commercial platforms for civic ends. Documenting these struggles requires a more precise accounting of who the users are and what they're actually using these platforms to try to accomplish.

Leverage points for civic engagement continually change as new platforms are devised. A particularly fertile area of development for mediated civic engagement right now is finding new ways to meld the physical and the digital. Such strategies respond to both emerging high-tech trends—augmented reality, the Internet of Things, wearable computing, and three-dimensional printing—and a high-touch backlash against the last two decades of digital activism and the dematerialization of physical media into the cloud.

For example, in the public media transformation project I've been working on for the past few years, we were surprised to find that some of the most passionate and creative participation happened face-to-face, leading to further interactions with digital and broadcast. This held true across all 10 local projects, led by producers who utilized different combinations of platforms to engage community members in documentary and storytelling productions. (See AIR's Localore project at http://localore.net, and read more about what we learned: http://bit.ly/pubmedia2014.)

Zizi Papacharissi:

It seems to me that we are talking about an all-too-familiar duality here, that of agency and structure. Tarleton insightfully asks how we describe this duality without assuming that organizations are all-powerful and people utterly choreographed participants. José explains that these environments organize social experiences through a back-end architecture or algorithmic logic that is invisible to users, yet somehow connects all these structures into "a nirvana of interoperability." This makes it all the more challenging for people to hack these prescribed choreographies of sociality into something else. Jessica adds that people choose, adopting some options, adapting others, and often abandoning online options in favor of off-line ones, "in search of new leverage points to loosen the hegemonic grip of commercialized platforms." Individuals seek and claim agency through these new leverage points, until, of course, those points become integrated into commercial architectures.

Bourdieu used the term *habitus* to describe and reconcile the duality between agency and structure. The habitus refers to a set of durable predispositions that define our sphere of interaction, inviting particular varieties of action within certain social settings and discouraging others. These predispositions are historically and socioculturally specific. They provide individuals with a sense of comforting homogeneity, but also evolve to adjust to historical developments. These predispositions form around general principles (structure) but only gain meaning as they are appropriated by actors (agency), even if this appropriation results in both reproducing and remixing structures. A habitus is thus comprised of systems that are both fixed and yet constantly reflexive. Affordances emerge out of the habitus, and then they in turn construct a social media habitus. The organizing logic of algorithms is produced by the prevailing ethos of the social media habitus and further reproduces that habitus. But the resulting structures, algorithmic and non, only gain meaning insofar as they are adopted by communities of practice or by networked individuals. The habitus pertaining to a given field, group, network, or aesthetic is not a fixed set of principles; it is a malleable set of predispositions to act in a given way, and these are further reconsidered and adjusted as new practices emerge.

The problem here, of course, is that the logic of algorithms is dedicated to organizing predispositions for how to focus our attention. So, thus, the paths to attention (and agency, because what we dedicate our attention to is a form of agency) have been edited and curated for us already. And rather than being marked by desire lines or some sort of organically developed and healthy balance of logic and sentiment, these driveways to attention and agency are imposed.

This is why leverage points, as Jessica refers to them, are key. They are of critical importance, because they are *liminal:* They are characterized by a lack of social markers and an in-between stage of social heterarchy that renders all actors equal, for the time being. Liminal positions, stages, or conduits are characterized by social and structural ambiguity, or as "the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (Turner, 1967, p. 97). The function of liminality is to abandon structure so as to enter a process that will in fact result in the birthing of structure. But it is the potential for disruption, the new, and agency that compel actors.

So, to follow up on Jessica's point, I would say yes to policy and yes to iterative collaboration as solutions, especially if they are designed to produce more leverage points, more liminal opportunities.

But I will also say that people are playful by nature and always looking for these opportunities and ways to invent them, if not within structures, then through their own lived performances of the self in their everyday lives.

Abigail De Kosnik:

It is somewhat fortuitous that my turn to add to this fascinating discussion of participatory platforms came on this day. Today, NBCUniversal (NBCU) announced that it will be shutting down two of its popular online content properties: DailyCandy and Television Without Pity (TWoP). I never read DailyCandy, but Television Without Pity entered my life in 2006 and has been the screen site that I use most consistently while (or, rather, immediately after) viewing television programs. I have spent far more time reading and "talking" about TV on TWoP than on Twitter. TWoP forums have been integral to my experiences of *Mad Men*, *The Voice*, *The Walking Dead*, and especially *Game of Thrones* (TWoP has a forum dedicated to *Game of Thrones*' "Completely Unspoiled" viewers, or non-book readers, such as myself, and it would have been difficult for me to tease out that fictional world's complex character relationships and power struggles without the collective intelligence of similarly unspoiled viewers).

Re/code's story on the NBCU site closures (Swisher, 2014a) states that TWoP currently has three employees and that the decision to shut it and DailyCandy down is due to the fact that "there was . . . not enough traffic and, therefore, a difficulty monetizing the properties, especially in the wake of increased competition" (para. 5). At the same time, the *Re/code* story wonders, "So what happens to the huge amount of content in the archives of both DailyCandy and TWoP? It will all be saved in the digital ether, but not be available to the public" (para. 9). So the site has attracted a "huge amount of content," and only employs three individuals, and is not generating sufficient profit to keep it open? Would it have generated a profit with two employees, or one? If four unpaid undergraduate interns had agreed to work on TWoP just enough to maintain the site, would NBCU have kept it operational? TWoP, which has built a well-established, recognizable brand in social television over the past eight years or so, and has amassed a vast storehouse of user-generated content, will soon disappear for the purpose of saving NBCU three salaries and some server space. I will not be surprised if two years from now, NBCU or another media conglomerate announces, without a trace of irony, an exciting new initiative to launch a social site that will be something like a "digital water cooler, *the* place to go to discuss television with like-minded viewers."

Tarleton's initial set of comments point out that nearly all "large-scale social media platforms" are "for-profit operations," and to that I add that numerous small- to mid-sized social networks are also owned by corporations, which seek to assemble a number of content properties under their logoed umbrella in an attempt to vie with the larger platforms for shares of the attention economy. Is/was TWoP a "platform"? It is/was to me. As is evident from this thread of discussions, when media studies scholars talk about platforms of participation, we are asking questions about whether industry players or audiences have ownership and control, and to what degree—the types of questions that the Marxist cultural studies tradition always asked about media, which are, as Zizi stated, really questions about structure versus agency. This line of questioning around participatory online platforms seems very different from the rising field of what is called "platform studies" (See Bogost and Montfort's [2009] excellent paper explaining that area.) But maybe the division between media studies' interest in platforms and platform studies is artificial; after all, investigating "the underlying computer systems that support creative work" could very well mean assessing the ramifications of those systems' ownership and management.

What does it mean that NBCU owns TWoP? It means that NBCU will be acting well within its rights when it evicts several dozen communities from a website that has hosted them for nearly a decade. Some of these communities will attempt to migrate and make homes for themselves in new territories, such as Previously.tv. No migration takes place without difficulties, even in the presumably fluid space of the Internet; it will take time for the communities to reconstitute themselves and to find a semblance of rhythm and order in their new environments, where undoubtedly there will be unfamiliar moderators and rules of participation. Already, TWoP posters are warning one another that Previously.tv may crash repeatedly from the influx of traffic that site will soon get, and for which it is likely underprepared. Not only the contributors to TWoP will be affected; the lurkers, those who only read TWoP forums but do not post to them, will also be negatively impacted. Today I discovered that the "Completely Unspoiled" forum in the TWoP *Game of Thrones* subsite has a large following consisting of spoiled (book-reading) fans. One book-reading viewer posted on TWoP today,

> One of my great enjoyments of the entire GoT [*Game of Thrones*] series is reading the reactions, speculations and guesses of the Unsullied [unspoiled viewers] here at TWoP. And I know that thousands of GoT fans feel the same—we even have an entire thread over at westeros.org dedicated to quoting and discussing the Unsullied's postings.

Later, that same fan states that the latest of six such threads on westeros.org has so far received 31,000 views. "Somewhere, we've got to find a safe home for the Unsullied. They matter," writes the fan, meaning that a second website, wholly separate from TWoP, will be thrown into disarray by TWoP's closure. These are the network effects of platforms such as TWoP, which are disrupted when a corporate owner shuts these platforms down due to seemingly arbitrary decision making.

Another ramification of NBCU owning TWoP is this: The large archive of fan-written commentary created by that site—commentary on some of the best years in U.S. television's history—will soon be deleted. At the moment, I am writing a book manuscript about digital archiving, and coincidentally I have found out today about the possible erasure of tens of thousands of posts, by thousands of audience members,

spanning what is widely acknowledged to be the high point of the "quality TV" serial genre as well as a very robust period of reality television in the United States. This would be a potentially devastating loss to the future of audience research.

Fortunately, the nonprofit [Organization for Transformative](#) Works (OTW), which was founded by media fans and is managed by media fans, appears to be archiving TWoP's posts for entry into its Open Doors project. Open Doors rescues "historically important fan sites" that are threatened with deletion or obsolescence by storing those sites' data on OTW's servers. OTW was formed by fans who witnessed the careless deletion of user-made content from platforms such as LiveJournal in the mid-2000s and who rallied to build fan-owned websites run on fan-owned servers. OTW's legion of volunteers are motivated by a deep understanding that corporate entities cannot be trusted, and should not be allowed, to have authority over all of the assets that media audiences produce and publish online. As Francesca Coppa, one of OTW's founders, writes in the "Creativity" dialogues, OTW came about "because fans realized that owning the means of circulating and distributing fanworks—the servers, the interface, the code, the terms of service—would be essential to the long-term health of fan creativity" (Banet-Weiser et al., 2014, p. 1072) especially in a time when "enormous commercial entities . . . own much of this infrastructure" (ibid.). TWoP is not the last corporate-owned platform, replete with audience-produced content, that will have to be archived by OTW's Open Doors, or some other noncorporate entity. What will happen when Tumblr folds? When Google sells off or closes YouTube? When Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook go dark? The fate of all of the text, image, and video ever posted to any of these platforms will not ultimately be decided by the millions upon millions of users who made that content but by the corporations that own the platforms.

Zizi graciously ended her section with a gesture toward my interest in bringing together performance theory and new media theory. I subscribe to Marshall McLuhan's concept of worldwide telecommunications networks as constitutive of a "global theater." In this theater, wrote McLuhan, we are all actors, taking our turns entertaining one another in a "perpetual happening." But our ability to perform, or to keep the records of our own or others' performances, can be severely constrained, or taken from us, by those who control the platforms on which our performances take place. *The Wall Street Journal* reports that one TWoP moderator has banned users from posting any criticism of NBCU on TWoP following the announcement of the site's closure: "There will be ZERO TOLERANCE of badmouthing or denigrating our parent companies. It was a business decision" (Orel, 2014, para. 8), the moderator states. When a company owns a platform, it can forbid its users from performing protest even at that platform's demise.

Christopher Kelty:

So far the comments here pull in what seem to me to be opposite directions. On the one hand, toward the need for a more general theory of platforms and, on the other, toward a sense that platforms are replicating things we already understand and often don't think are just. I think this is always one of the problems we face in trying to make sense of the effects of new and changing technologies on otherwise long-standing human practices and institutions. So Tarleton and José both clearly point in the direction of a need to understand the novel aspects of platforms—new configurations of human and machine, and especially the role of automation (or better, automaticity) in how algorithms work on these configurations.

Zizi, by contrast would push us toward applying what we already know—about structuration and the habitus, for instance—to this new situation, and as such implicitly argues that the novelty of such things is not any more significant than, say, new forms of social capital. Jessica and Abigail are both pushing (with the help of nice empirical examples) toward building (or rebuilding) *better* platforms for users, starting from the user's perspective (which is a kind of agnostic stance on whether we need to understand platforms better or just try harder to build platforms that value what users want as opposed to other entities like corporations, nongovernmental organizations, or governments).

I'm not sure where I fall—definitely on the side of building from empirical work, not from theory, but otherwise ambivalent about the "novelty" of new technologies. Abigail's example, for instance, strikes me as almost inevitable given what we already know about participation, the organization and control of resources, and the structure of the media industries stretching back decades—so it may not tell us anything new about new platforms, but merely confirm what we know about old ones (i.e., the media corporation and its particular assemblage of lawyers, content, and money).

On the other hand, I often feel that the only way to get any purchase on such examples, and their novelty, is to get a lot *more* empirical—to figure out what we mean by platform, what layers it has, who controls what (including the distribution of human control and automaticity), and how it is related to the existing social imaginaries of collectivity and individual freedom. In Abigail's example, I think the two entities—TWoP/NBCU and OTW—can be easily and unambiguously distinguished if one is precise about aspects of the different platforms—especially, as Abigail notes (and Francesca as well in the "creativity" thread), the control over resources governed by IP law, the way access to goal/agenda setting is structured, in the way that exit (voluntary/involuntary) is structured, in the effectiveness of voice, or in the creation of flexible, reconfigurable metrics and measures of participation, labor or ownership. OTW is going to make a lot of this more explicit and more just than NBCU ever will—but NBCU will bring other things of value, and that distribution of values is important to understand in precise, empirical fashion.

But the idea that platforms offer a twist on what we already know—and that we don't yet understand how they work—is certainly an appealing, if not seductive, one. I, too, want to understand the details of how these platforms are constructed, who gets access to what data, what an algorithm does (and what humans do to algorithms to make them do what they want), and what effect this will have on the capacities and constraints of the billions of people now using them. And while I think that there is almost certainly a level of conspiracy-inducing secret manipulation occurring behind the scenes, I think most of what goes on is so mundane and so technically boring that very few people actually want to study it. The engineers who work on platforms are, however, the source of much of the precision we would need to make sense of what is happening—and often our allies in doing so. So part of what I think we might need in our struggle to understand platforms (and creativity and labor) in the contemporary moment is a better way of aligning our questions and concerns with those who build, maintain, or observe platforms as technical objects. Sometimes this will reveal political differences (between us and those who cravenly want to make millions of dollars and don't care about who gets hurt), but more often it will reveal the frustrations and blockages at work in the collective construction of these platforms by engineers and users. From this perspective, I think we do need a new theory of platforms—though not one that will (only) satisfy scholars in the humanities and social sciences (I think we actually have a bunch of

candidates already), but one that will have an impact on the actual platforming of our world. It will come as no surprise when I say that I think certain aspects of free software and peer production function as theories of this sort—providing a kind of counterplatforming that is diagnostic at least, if not transformative—and that I see that at work in entities like OTW.

Alison Powell:

We seem to be slowly moving toward a kind of conclusion, so I'd like to try and pull together some themes that I've read in the posts above. One thing I've noticed is that we are all trying to work with multiple levels while also struggling with the fact that one of the key features of today's platforms is that many features of their functions are not easily seen. Another issue seems to be the relative difference in agency between production(s) and consumption(s) within digitally mediated participation. I'd like to weave together these two threads by considering how we might develop an empirically grounded research approach that emphasizes the link between visibility of production and the politics of platforms.

As Christopher points out, strong analysis of these kinds of platforms depends on working to understand how engineering decisions are made, and how they might be made otherwise. As he and I have both investigated in our work on free software, peer production, and technical cultures, engineering practices are embedded in cultures that have their own values and often their own politics. So as much as the political economy of platforms should include the "invisible back ends and entangled data streams" that José mentions, it should also take into account the various ways that technological production can make visible politics. In my own work on technical activism and free and open knowledge production cultures, I've identified a number of moments where this happens. These moments are not necessarily always about making things that work better than the default platforms, but sometimes only about making it clear how they work. I think they are part of what Jessica suggests as a move toward "platform omnivorous" practice.

For example, I just recently learned about [MailPile](), an open-source e-mail application that aims to identify the failings of cloud-based e-mail platforms like Google by providing an alternative that works better. The political goal of the developers might be understood as a liberal, individual separation of private and public, but if nothing else, the project puts forth an alternative form of habitus—MailPile runs on one's own computer and doesn't work when the computer is not turned on, thus raising questions about the practices that one enacts when services "just happen" out in the amorphous and surely ungrounded cloud. Bringing the service back to the home computer encourages thinking about what kinds of work cloud-based services and platforms otherwise do behind the scenes—much as identifying code as free software provokes thinking about where, under other systems of production, the labor of producing, reviewing, and debugging code takes place.

Another thing I have noticed across the thread is the variety of elements that compose our shared understanding of production. These include (at least): the affordances of tools, norms of participants, the commercial aspirations of owners, the actions of fans, and the work practices of engineers. This variety of ways of making sense (that produce these varieties of habitus) undermines the notion that the algorithmic capacities of platforms are dangerous because invisible. Instead of only thinking about the invisibility of

algorithms and their immutable power, it is worth considering efforts to make things visible. Nicholas Diakopoulos (2013) writes in *Algorithmic Accountability Reporting* that journalists should spend time learning how to do reverse engineering on algorithms. I think that media scholars should, too: as Christian Sandvig demonstrates in a recent blog post called "Show and Tell: Algorithimic Culture" (https://blogs.law.harvard.edu/niftyc), reverse engineering and playing around with the often illogical results of algorithmic sorting can at the least make for hilarious teaching (Why does Google autocomplete for "puppy dog" but block "bitch dog"?), and at the most create a kind of critical interrogation of some algorithm engineering decisions.

So, yes, I agree that habitus is important, and I agree, too, that the large-scale political economics of merger and acquisition, interoperability and entire economic models based on "accidental data" are important. I also disagree, though, about whether these are as immutably powerful as we would like to theorize them into being. Each of us makes our complicated balance with the ways that our media system is structured, employing aspects of it to make our voice heard, resisting others, or working out how to hack, restructure, or reimagine it. As scholars we should attend empirically to these actions, and bring their consequences back to our theory—if we can.

Tarleton Gillespie:

I'm grateful for Chris and Allison's efforts to sort out what we've been talking about so far. Let me take up a question Chris posed: Are we dealing with something novel enough to warrant a new "theory of platforms" or something perennial enough that existing theories are sufficient for explaining it? Talking about the "new" has been an exhausting little rabbit hole for those of us who study "new media." I promise not to slip down it again. But Chris' question is an important one: Which offers more analytical value, bringing classic insights to platforms, to look past their novelty at how they grapple with long-standing tensions; or constructing new theories around platforms as an object of analysis, so as to apprehend them not as analogous to old forms, but on their own terms? I will suggest (of course?) that we split the difference. Every mediating technocultural apparatus has specific configurations that add their own twists to enduring cultural practices. Both the specific and the enduring are important here—as is the recognition that this also holds true for other media systems.

First, then, we might highlight some of those configurations that are specific to platforms, common to platforms, and significant for the implications of platforms. A number are already visible in this discussion:

- Platforms don't just deliver content; most retain that content over time and are designed to continue making it available. This feature, and promise, of archival longevity was not the case for broadcasting or publishing, where availability was limited and content preservation was largely outsourced to libraries and archives. This helps explain the despair Gail expressed about the sudden closure of the Television Without Pity discussion boards, a despair that simply would not have pertained if a television network shut its doors. It also highlights why the financial value that can be extracted from a whole archive (from streaming subscriptions to data analysis) is emerging as so prominent.

- The fact that the Organization for Transformative Works expressed interest in preserving the TWoP discussions highlights a second important configuration: Because these platforms make participation both public and persistent, they can potentially be scraped and salvaged by other interested parties (though this ability is constrained in specific ways by laws about computer trespass and copyright infringement). Similarly, platforms can be hacked, hijacked, flooded, and blocked. Except for rare examples of signal jamming, such challenges from without were basically unavailable around broadcasting and publishing.

- A third is that these platforms host amateur content. This is rarely exclusive; amateur content now lives alongside an array of forms of professional content. The point is not that it is solely amateur, it is that it is still nominally and largely amateur, which has a number of implications. The sense of ownership (not in the strictly legal sense, but in the affective sense) is different, which constrains to a degree what a platform can do with it. It also means that many of the traditional ways in which providers of content governed that content—contracts, professional norms, salaried labor—are unavailable. This changes how participation on platforms can be organized, highlighted, curated, and demoted. And it marks how users will react when an entire platform of "their" participation and the "their" community folds.

- And finally, because it came up and because I like thinking about it, algorithms are an important part of the specific configuration of social media platforms. Not, I suspect, because they are hidden from view, though they are. After all, the "algorithm" by which newspaper editors calculated what was most newsworthy was also largely obscured from readers as well. But the algorithms that help sort and deliver content on social media platforms matter because their judgments are so deeply programmed, and therefore are so deeply *programmatic*. The calculations being made here are distinctly pattern based, but—because the sheer amount of participation and participants is so great and the data upon which these calculations are based so vast—these patterns are difficult for us to observe or even perceive, even for the platform operators trying to tweak them toward public benefit and/or financial gain.

Still, all these configurations matter because they orient the platform toward perennial concerns around cultural and political participation: Who speaks? Who hears? How does the means by which participation happens also shape that participation? Who is in positions of power over participation, and what kind of influence can they have? How is access patrolled and constrained, and for whom? How is the flow of participation subtly steered, in how it is organized, sorted, highlighted, sold, and preserved? How does the economic logic of the platform shape the way its operators conceive of participation and intervene in it? How (if at all) can those in positions of power be called to account for this influence? It is these perennial concerns that suggest that we should draw upon social theories that have already helped us understand the tension between participation and power in public discourse, the effects of economic

imperatives on the structure and aim of cultural intermediaries, the impact of the materiality of public expression. This is not simply a question about structure and agency: As José put it, how do platforms "steer" communication? This steering has to include the structuring of social interaction, certainly, but also the selection of what is important and the explanations made for that, the provision of tools that suggest certain forms of engagement over others, and the reward systems that certify some participants and some tactics over others.

But I find that when I start to think about the subtle ways in which platforms might steer cultural and political participation, like Allison, I sometimes wonder if it is too easy to overstate this influence, with platforms as puppet masters, channeling participation into sterile little rivulets of their own design. I wonder if a more appropriate image is of platforms as reeds trying to stand up in a howling wind tunnel of public discourse. Yes, Facebook tweaks its algorithm and suspends users for breaking the rules, but it also hosts the regular participation of over a billion people, who use the platform for countless different activities. This rush of participation never stops, and is shaped much more by its own needs and tactics. Facebook's attempts to structure it are pitiable compared to its relentless force. Whatever structure a platform attempts to introduce may cause its own little eddies and detours, but they are minor compared to the massive perturbations endemic to public discourse: shifting sentiments, political flare-ups, communal and national rhythms, and the recursive loops of how forms of participation emerge and propagate, then are superseded. This is not to say that platforms are of no consequence. But what would it look like, empirically, to examine the work of platform operators in terms of simply holding on, as they are tossed about and battered by the gusts of public discourse? What does the flow of culture look like when it's coursing over these platforms like wind over the curve of a wing?

Thinking of platforms and participation in this way feels counter to my own intellectual tendency, which typically emphasizes how commercial stakeholders and technologies shape cultural production. But holding both extremes in my head at once, the puppet master and the wind tunnel, might provide a richer framework for approaching empirical investigations into how platforms are designed and how they come to matter.

José van Dijck:

The puppet master and the wind tunnel—sounds like the title of the latest Murakami novel. I could not agree more, though, with Tarleton's previous observations: The "perturbations of public discourse" are both unpredictably evolving *and* deliberately manipulated flows gushing through the arteries of Internet platforms. The phenomenon of the viral is a case in point: Why do some events go viral and others don't? It's an age-old question (Why are some books are more successful than others? What accounts for popular news items?) Indeed, wind tunnel dynamics have changed, and there are a bunch of new puppet masters, and, yes, the world of digital technologies and global economies has become a lot more complex. But the core question is: How can we best interrogate the ecosystem of connective media and understand multifaceted phenomena such as virals and trends?

Forgive me, perhaps I'm just a recovering literary scholar whose predisposition is to ask rhetorical questions . . .

Zizi Papacharissi:

I second Tarleton's suggestion that we split the difference in terms of inventing new terms to describe contemporary politics versus remediating theory that has been with us for some time. There is some need for continuity, because, as a field, when it comes to the politics of content production in general, many questions remain open and resurface as new platforms are introduced. At the same time, we need some new language, too, because many of these developments challenge theories of the past, and they also challenge how we think about theory in general. Specifically, they invite us to think about theory in nonlinear terms. There is the tendency to think about theory that has predictive power (at least in some areas of our field); for these questions it is best to think about theory that has descriptive power (so as to understand nonlinearities and co-occurring processes, but also evolve beyond the networks paradigm).

There are aspects to these processes summarized by Tarleton that are key—for instance, the ability of these systems to retain content, the fact that they invite amateur forms of production/produsage, publicity and persistency, and the paradox, of course, that algorithms are designed to make content visible, yet their very nature renders them invisible. And then there are tendencies, like virality, that José brings up, that need to be better explicated. I would recommend a *keywords* à la Raymond Williams approach, actually. I suggest we identify key terms and explicate them further. This allows us to preserve continuity, because it would require us to trace a term/process back to how it originally surfaced, and also address its meaning and repercussions in the present context. Such a culturally sensitive lexicon of terms would have value for both scholars and publics engaging with these technologies. And it would help us understand this evolving ecology of platforms better.

Nick Couldry:

This dialogue has done a great job of articulating the *depth* of the analytic challenge with which platforms confront us: Platforms are action and meaning interfaces that operate through a complicated latticework of back stages and front stages, based on cultural and technical work of many varieties. Many different types of things go on through platforms—processes that, as Tarleton and José explained in their opening posts, "entangle" us, involve us in "power," in multiple ways. A depth analysis of how power is performed through platforms is difficult (Whose power? What sort of power? Power over whom or what?), which is why Henry and I were happy to have this thread be the last in the *Participations* series.

And yet reaching some agreement over what a good depth analysis of how power and genuine participation work *through* digital platforms would look like is more than an intellectual puzzle. It matters a lot for how we come to think, as Jessica noted, about where—*between* where—civic engagement will be facilitated in the future, and how (Jessica, Zizi) new actors can gain leverage over platforms for civic, social, or political ends.

If platforms (and the sustaining of platforms: platform*ing*?) are highly complex objects of analysis, so, too, must be attempts to work against, or work differently with, the power of platforms: I really like Chris' term *counterplatforming*. And given counterplatforming's necessary complexity, it must be wrong, as Alison notes, to dismiss too quickly the visibility strategies that social actors are developing through

platforms, but working from outside platform institutions—before, that is, we have even worked out fully what acts of counterplatforming might look like. Gail's post drew us to one important area where conflict is emerging around platforms.

This means, as Tarleton emphasizes in his new post, that we need to strike a deal between repeating old formulations of power analysis and experimenting with completely new ones, but I suspect the deal may be more of a combination deal than "splitting the difference." What we hold over from past (predigital era) formulations and what we now bring fresh to the table are not the same types of thing, analytically. What's new with platforms is at the very least their topological form: the minimal number of interconnected levels we simply *must* think about when thinking about platforms. Platforms just *are* more complex objects than we have been used to analyzing in media and communications studies before, or so it seems to me! But, at the same time, there is no reason not to hold on to some key tools and formulations from past social and communications theory.

Which is why Zizi was right, I feel, to introduce early on the continuing usefulness of the structure/agency couplet for thinking about platforms. So how exactly would we parse structuration in this context? The poetic turn of the last few posts has reflected perhaps the difficulty of achieving any satisfactory formulation, but we should beware of metaphors exaggerating for us the difficulties here.

Puppet master and wind tunnel: We *know* we can't understand them in relation to each other. The combination is necessarily paradoxical because puppets can't ever play in the vast engulfing winds that ravage the steppe (that's my bit of poetry (?!) out of the way). However, if we think about holders of platform power not as puppeteers trying (in vain) to control individual actions on platforms, but rather as environmental designers seeking to channel at least normal-strength winds in various directions most of the time and across many types of terrain, then the paradox is blunted. True, no environmental designer can ever plan for how his or her landscapes will be trashed when exceptional winds blow through. But that does not mean we have understood nothing of importance when we understand how they manage to control the more normal winds the shape their terrain most of the time.

Perhaps the aggregative metaphor (winds) loses sight of the richness of all the smaller-scale acts of meaning making that go on in platform landscapes. But we need some metaphors to get at the complexity here. I suggest we borrow William Sewell's metaphor about the social as both built environment and semiotic process. That double metaphor helps us to stick at the task—with the help of theory, but not abstract theory—of improving our ways of *describing* (as Zizi just put it) how structuration works in and around platforms, how the norms that platforms regularly embed in action get replicated, why (and how much) this matters for action elsewhere, and what sorts of things count as resources for those who want to counter or contest those norms.

That sort of practically oriented "'theory'" is sorely needed if, as Gail insists, we are to respond more surely to the challenge of making sense of how we *can't yet* make sense of many of the things platforms now do to us. I use the obviously inadequate term *us* to point to how a necessarily disparate set of actors and actions get bundled together on platforms, while also insisting that *sometimes* common normative issues do emerge across those disparities.

So two questions, one more immediate, the other a meta question about what sort of conversation we are having here:

1. How, specifically, do we think about *justice* and *ethics* in relation to complex objects like platforms? (That is the force of the TWoP case, but similar issues emerge from legal theorist Julie Cohen's (2012) book *Configuring the Networked Self*.)

2. How, generally, can more time be enabled for interlocutors—as (or more) diverse than the participants to this thread—to think *together*: that is, to develop together diagrams, metaphors, terms that advance these very difficult questions? What new sorts of forums/resources are needed to support the development of better meta-languages for living with platforms?

Abigail De Kosnik:

A few days ago, as this thread was in progress, Tarleton sent all the participants a link to a *Re/code* story (Swisher, 2014b) reporting that NBCU has registered "fan complaints" about the archives of TWoP and DailyCandy going dark after the sites' shutdown and has decided to keep those archives available for public access.

The *Re/code* story quotes only a couple of tweets from individuals protesting the threatened disappearance of TWoP's legion of content, which was generated by both users and paid "recappers" (people who wrote humorous, "snark"-filled, summaries or recaps of every episode of select television programs). But elsewhere on the Internet, former TWoP recappers mourned the looming loss of the archives as the loss of a major component of Internet history, and of a significant piece of their own professional histories. The two witty fashionistas who founded Go Fug Yourself, a popular blog that mocks celebrities' outfits, and who are the main fashion writers for *New York* magazine's culture section *Vulture*, [got their start as TWoP recappers](). [Linda Holmes](), who writes and edits NPR's entertainment and pop culture blog Monkey See, also launched her career at TWoP. An article on *Smart Bitches Trashy Books* (SBTB; Sarah, 2014) compiles writers' posts discussing the influence of TWoP on online cultural discourse, including a tweet that states, "If there's such a thing as an Internet institution, TWoP is it. I doubt places like BuzzFeed would exist without it." (See also Anders, 2014.)

If these posts and others like them swayed NBCU's decision to keep TWoP's archive of content public, then that week's worth of online blogging and tweeting may in itself be an example of what Chris calls counterplatforming. I interpret counterplatforming to consist of moves made *against* platforms, or moves made to influence the directions in which platforms develop (or the afterlife of a platform once its development ceases). It's interesting to think that each of the writers cited above—the so-called Fug Girls, Holmes, SBTB's Sarah and all of the writers that she quotes, and *io9*'s Charlie Jane Anders—have established their own online platforms, some of them actual platforms, like Go Fug Yourself, and some of them metaphorical platforms, such as an individual's Twitter stream. For me, this set of examples raises the possibility that a platform, a site from which counterplatforming can be performed, is defined by its followership—that is, by its success in attracting a regular readership, which today can be effectuated

through microblogging. From one perspective, then, the seemingly minor case of NBCU announcing the shuttering of TWoP's archives and then reversing that call offers a lot of hope: When platforms' corporate owners act in ways that go against the common interest—for example, by underestimating the platform's own cultural and historical importance by deleting its data or masking its archives—then a network of users can engage in counterplatforming, and can sometimes bring about the outcome for the platform that they sought.

But, of course, most individuals' platforms are subsites or streams hosted on enormous, and swelling, corporatized platforms. These megaplatforms—the platforms that sustain hundreds or thousands or millions of other(s') platforms—hold far more power than microplatforms (such as a blog or a site like TWoP) ever will. Microplatforms allow people to make a difference in the workings of other microplatforms, but can they affect the way that megaplatforms, including Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, WordPress, and Instagram, operate?

And, as I alluded to above, it is one thing when a microplatform teeters on the verge of disappearance or deletion. But what about when the first megaplatform goes down? We have already witnessed scenarios in which governments ban their citizens' and residents' participation in megaplatforms (see Arsu, 2014; Loveland, 2009; Macri, 2014; Tate, 2011). Imagine governments or corporations or military organizations erasing, or manipulating, or altering the terms of service of megaplatforms for the specific purpose of limiting a wide understanding of history as it has played out on the Internet. In other words, through influencing megaplatforms, organizations and institutions can easily control the public's access to the digital past, to the protests that were mounted on these platforms, to the counterplatforming that transpired on and through these platforms. The power of the megaplatforms is rising as more people put more of their content on them and use them to build their individual platforms. Megaplatforms already have the power to determine the conditions under which the majority of online public discourse and debate takes place, and to decide whether cultural memory is saved or wiped. As Tarleton and others have suggested, the megaplatforms do not always grasp or use the full extent of their power in these arenas. Our task as scholars of new media is to continually assess, surface, and critique how platforms do exercise the power they have.

Christopher Kelty:

There is a lot going on here, but I'll take the counterplatform bait since it was obviously a trap I set for myself. I think the notion might be understood in three ways: (1) as a label for the kinds of resistance that take the platform as object (disruption, flooding, appropriation, jamming, as Tarleton suggests above) rather than a neutral medium for discourse or ideas expressed there; (2) as a practice of creating other platforms—both, as Abigail suggests, internal to megaplatforms and external to them; and (3) being against platforms as such. I probably used the term because it invokes Michael Warner's idea of counterpublics—publics which are not simply oppositional within a mainstream frame (i.e., a public that opposes X or Y) but that in some way refuse the standard dynamics of the power of the public—perhaps even contest the idea of the public as a legitimate form of democratic power. I think we are today ambivalent about whether platforms are themselves publics or whether they are simply the material and communicational media for publics to form and address each other. I, for one, think that you cannot have

an authentic, independent public unless it can also dispute and potentially change these communicational and material aspects of its own existence—and the TWoP/OTW case is for me an example of what happens when you can't. The fact that NCBU "relented" doesn't change this; we serve at the pleasure of the sovereign. On this note, however, I would caution against thinking of platforms as primarily or largely "amateur," as Tarleton suggests—indeed, there was a time (say, 2005–2010) when appealing to citizens, amateurs, or "You" (à la *TIME* magazine) was de rigueur, but I think that time is passed. Platforms are as professional as it gets these days—they are just a lot more porous in terms of who can enter them. Was *Lost* a professional or an amateur TV show? Clearly, professional in most senses of the word, but involving a vastly larger number of participants than previously possible. Channels, promotion of content, preferred members, badges—all attempts to restratify the platform. What has happened, interestingly, is perhaps something like an amateurification of professionals, along with the increasing precariousness of the freelance lifestyle of anyone in the major content industries. In this respect, TWoP is also a great example of how one has to run the gauntlet of an "amateur community" to become a professional (e.g., Linda Holmes perhaps). It's not quite fair to think of TWoP as primarily amateur—in the same way that calling the volunteers who maintain the Linux kernel "amateur" is pretty absurd. There are fans and then there are *fans*, right?

Of the two first forms of counterplatform above, I think the first is the easiest to identify and track, to do research on, and to figure in terms of justice or ethics, because it involves the expression of resistance or the designation of clear sides (the evil empire of NCBU and the TWoP resistance fighters, etc.). The second is where OTW fits—but it is harder to figure that as pure resistance, because OTW could end up looking just like NCBU qua platform. I very much doubt that it would, but it is subject to a world of constraints, demands, finance, and technology over which it can exercise quite limited control. It is a counterplatform not in the oppositional, but in the alternative, sense. However, we only have platforms like Twitter and Facebook because there is a phenomenally complex and amazing ecosystem of tools, technologies, corporations, and pipes that we more or less make use of equally and fairly (notwithstanding issues of net neutrality or monopoly pricing). The third is perhaps the most interesting and hard to imagine. On the one hand, it might invoke dropping out, leaving the grid, refusing the world of data extraction and surveillance, and so on. But it could also invoke certain kinds of radical engineering imaginaries—true peer-to-peer, radical decentralization, bitcoin blockchainification of everything. Which is to say a utopian crypto-liberal world *without* platforms. I'm not sure either of those are viable alternatives, but they do nonetheless ask us to think about the contingency and necessity of having platforms at all. And I think if you had asked an Internet enthusiast (like me) 15 years ago whether we would have platforms of the sort we have today, you would have gotten derisive laughter. The fact that we have these platforms today is and should be really surprising given what we thought the Internet was going to do.

Henry Jenkins:

Across all the conversations, we keep coming back to the question "participating in what?" The platform companies no doubt would love us to say that we are participating in their platforms; they talk about the Reddit community or the YouTube community. Yet I suspect in most cases, the participants do not understand themselves in these terms at all. The participants in the Archive of Our Own understand

themselves as part of fandom (understood in broad, general terms) or, more narrowly, as part of *Sleepy Hollow* or some other specific fandom.

These groups have a history, traditions, ethical norms, shared values and identities, and collective goals and projects, and they often migrate between platforms searching for the best ways to achieve these agendas. My research has watched fan communities move across a range of communication technologies—from mimeograph to photocopy to digital—and platforms (as Abigail is tracing in her current work on the history of fan archives).

Sometimes platform users are simply a group of high school friends trying to reconnect with each other, sometimes they constitute a political interest group. Any given platform is crisscrossed with multiple kinds of affiliations and shared identities/projects. We certainly need to understand how the affordances and constraints of a particular platform shape what kinds of interactions occur there, and I am not going to imply that participants always know why they have chosen a particular platform, in what ways the platform shapes their engagements with one another, and in what ways the platforms benefit from their participation. Although some groups are highly conscious of some of these factors, the platform owners are anything but fully transparent about some of these issues, and this creates important roles for critical theory in identifying implicit constraints on participation. I really value this discussion for the ways it sharpens our understanding of the technological infrastructures within which participation and communication take place.

In the work I am doing right now, based on interviews my research team has done with more than 200 young activists, we are pushing back against phrases such as "Twitter revolutions," "Facebook activists," or even "digital activists," because in almost every case, we are seeing these groups, organizations, networks, causes, campaigns, what-have-you, being conducted across multiple platforms, through practices of transmedia mobilization. Indeed, we plan to entitle our book *By Any Media Necessary* to describe these movements across platforms, which may be the collective equivalent of the "Yes, and . . ." practices that Jessica discussed in a more individualized way early in this exchange. In focusing on Facebook activism, in contrast with the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Malcolm Gladwell (2010) confuses a platform with a movement. It would be fairer to compare the use of Facebook to the use of the telephone as one tool among many a movement uses to connect with various far-flung participants.

We might think about these groups as imagined communities in Benedict Anderson's (1983) sense, but his imagined communities come out of the one-directional communication that occurs between center to periphery among the readers of *The* [London] *Times* across the British Empire, say. But in an era of social media, we might also think of these as *imagining* communities, since they are shaping these collective identities through the activities facilitated by these platforms, and they do have at least the potential for contact with members who may never meet face to face, shifting some of the terms which Anderson imagines. Facebook and *The Times* might both be thought of as platforms through which imagined communities are constituted, but they allow for different sets of interactions between participants and thus allow for different ways of imagining the nature of the community being constituted.

So the question I want to ask here is: How do we understand the intersection between these imagined/imagining communities and the technological platforms they deploy? How do we bring the social/cultural/political lives of users back into this conversation about the technologies that clearly have an impact upon how they interface with each other? I know this gets us back to the structure/agency conversation we have been having, but it seemed that this discussion was mostly occurring at the level of the individual, and, to me, this question has different contours when we acknowledge the collective dimensions, when we pay attention to the social networks at play within any form of *networked* communication.

Tarleton Gillespie:

These are important observations, ones we sort of know in practice but so easily reify in our scholarship. Users certainly don't participate online through just one platform alone, and the intersection of multiple platforms and the shifts from one to another are more telling than narrowing the focus to activity on just one. Megaplatforms work differently than microplatforms, as Gail noted, and counterplatforms (in Chris' second sense) emerge within and beyond the megaplatforms. These platforms are hardly just home to amateurs, as they might continue to proclaim, but rather play host to a wide spectrum of activities that we might describe as amateur in ways, professional in ways, and hybrid in ways; and all are entangled in the contemporary flows of professionalization (the ways professional media providers draw in amateurs as all manner of precarious freelancers as well as the "amateurification of professionals" Chris commented on). I still think that, because they host amateur content and continue to be "amateur facing" in their orientation, self-promotion is important, if only because the traditional mechanisms for organizing and regulating professional content (contracts, salaries, professional organizations, partnerships) are less central here, forcing the platforms to look for other ways to regulate content they don't select or pay for.

One way to begin to think about the way these "imagining communities" (killer phrase!) intersect with the platforms that sometimes play host to them is to pay attention to their shifts into and out of people's understanding of their own participatory practices. I agree with Henry's point that the "YouTube community" is something YouTube is very eager to produce, but I worry about going so far as to say that participants do not understand themselves in these terms at all. There are moments when fan communities and political commentators and niche subcultures who happen to blog or tweet or share videos *do* see themselves as part of a YouTube community, and other moments when that is certainly not very salient to what they're doing, and what they say they're doing. Reddit users shift between moments when they are deeply involved in a community understood in terms of its focus on something meaningful to them—figuring out who set the bombs at the Boston marathon, for example—and sometimes they are keenly aware of being part of Reddit. This may be when they find commonality with what Reddit represents or offers, or when Reddit is under attack by the press, or when Reddit makes a change to the voting algorithm they dislike. In other words, sometimes it *is* a Twitter revolution, not just because Twitter says so, but because understanding or performing it that way is meaningful to the community of people involved, at that moment. In other moments, Twitter and social media are understood as instrumental but not essential to it.

The platforms (mega, micro, and counter) have something to do with this shifting sense of relevance, wanting to insert themselves into the meaningful practices of groups in some moments and making decisions that piss their users off in other moments. In other moments, they would prefer to disappear beneath the practices of use, so that it's not tweeting, it's just dishing on tonight's episode or keeping track of the election. So along with asking how the affordances of social media platforms choreograph use, how their commercial orientations support some practices and make others precarious, how the fire hose of public discourse strains against and sometimes overwhelms platforms trying to direct it, and how users move across and between platforms in their pursuit of compelling social participation, we should also examine the ways in which the platforms shift (and are shifted) in and out of prominence in how people understand and perform what they're doing.

Nick Couldry:

Tarleton ends with exactly the interpretative paradox that, as I noted in my post, William Sewell (2005) regards as inherent to describing the social in its double aspect. For sure, and urgently, we need richer understandings of the varieties of how people are *making meaning* on, through, and in spite of, platforms, while never forgetting the *built* aspect of this emerging environment and how it can come back to bite us in ways with which we have not yet learned fully how to deal, let alone normatively regulate.
If so, Henry's nicely unresolved phrase "imagining communities" may be as good a way as any, right now, of capturing our uncertain entanglement with the complex objects we call platforms.

Jessica Clark:

Fresh on the heels of attending Tribeca Film Festival's Interactive Day—where presenters floated such concepts as the physical world as a platform and the body as a joystick—I'm tempted to complicate our definitions further.

But life is short, and this thread is growing long. So instead, I'll end by briefly tackling the questions that Nick raises: First, how, specifically, do we think about *justice* and *ethics* in relation to complex objects like platforms? And, second, how can more time be enabled for interlocutors to think *together*: that is, to develop together diagrams, metaphors, terms . . . that advance these very difficult questions?

Justice is fairly hard to come by in our hypercommercialized media environment, except in the case of clear physical or financial harm. But ethics might be a slightly easier sell when it comes to improving the capacity of platforms to support participation. Primary areas where ethics come to bear in this arena include universal access, digital/mobile literacy, privacy, content ownership and portability, and mechanisms for responding to hate speech or violent threats. Policy is a blunt instrument for pressuring companies to put users' interests first—collaborations between informed consumers, stakeholder groups, and willing platform owners may be a more feasible tool. Just as platforms constantly shift, campaigns to compel their developers and owners to enact ethical policies are forced to shift in response. It's instructive to take a look at the now-mothballed site for *The Cluetrain Manifesto* (cluetrain.com) to follow the trajectory of one such campaign. The long-running public debate around net neutrality also offers a rich array of arguments, tactics, and collaborations to examine. One ethical question scholars might ask

themselves is whether they can in good conscience stand on the sidelines of such debates or are compelled to enter the fray.

This brings us to Nick's other question—how best to think together about these difficult issues. There are a few challenges here. The first challenge is that, in a profession made up of disciplines, there's often no clear reward for examining complex objects such as platforms, which require multidisciplinary approaches to untangle. A cadre of scholars has to make the case, raise research funds, and mount a sustained attack on the conventions of a field to make space for new topics and approaches. The second challenge is that the platforms used to establish and maintain an academic reputation are themselves lacking in robust tools for participation. This dialogue is unusually open and speedy compared to the traditional process of publishing a peer-reviewed article. Still, it's a strong contrast to the rapid-fire, hyperlinked, visually vibrant public debate raging 24/7 online.

To understand the contours and limitations of participatory platforms, perhaps researchers should regularly be using the capacities of such platforms to support and extend their own work. Collaborative editing platforms such as Google Docs or Draft could facilitate the creation of keywords, as Zizi suggests. Social bookmarking platforms such as Delicious, Pinterest, or Slideshare could be used to share relevant references and examples. Web conferencing platforms such as Google+ or TeamViewer could be used to hold virtual seminars, and so on. Rather than standing to one side of these platforms and observing them, by actively engaging them, we can both shift professional practice and experience firsthand the benefits and pitfalls of relying on third parties to host the conversations we care most about.

■■■

Biographical Notes

Jessica Clark is an internationally recognized independent researcher and journalist, focused on the transformation of public interest media in a participatory era. The founder and director of media strategy firm Dot Connector Studio, she works with makers and funders to produce high-impact transmedia projects. Previously, she directed the Future of Public Media project at American University's Center for Media and Social Impact, and served as a Media Policy Fellow at The New America Foundation. She is coauthor of *Beyond the Echo Chamber: Reshaping Politics Through Networked Progressive Media* (New Press, 2010) and a number of influential white papers. See http://jessicaclark.com.

Nick Couldry is a sociologist of media and culture. He is professor of media, communications, and social theory at the London School of Economics and was previously professor of media and communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is the author or editor of 11 books, including *Ethics of Media* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), *Media, Society, World* (Polity, 2012), and *Why Voice Matters* (SAGE, 2010).

Abigail De Kosnik is an assistant professor at the University of California, Berkeley, with a joint appointment in the Berkeley Center for New Media and in the Department of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies. Her book on digital archives is forthcoming from MIT Press in 2015. She has published articles on media fandom, popular digital culture, and performance studies in *Cinema Journal*, the *International Journal of Communication*, *Modern Drama*, *Transformative Works and Cultures,* and others. She is the co-editor, with Sam Ford and C. Lee Harrington, of the essay collection *The Survival of Soap Opera: Transformations for a New Media Era* (University Press of Mississippi, 2011).

Tarleton Gillespie is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at Cornell University and is currently a visitor with Microsoft Research New England. He is the author of *Wired Shut: Copyright and the Shape of Digital Culture* (MIT Press, 2007) and the co-editor (with Pablo Boczkowski and Kirsten Foot) of *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society* (MIT Press, 2014). He is also cofounder (with Hector Postigo) of the National Science Foundation–sponsored scholarly collective Culture Digitally. He is currently finishing a book on the implications of the content policies of online platforms for Yale University Press.

Henry Jenkins is currently the Provost's Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Art and Education at the University of Southern California and formerly the founder and codirector of the comparative media studies master's program at MIT. His recent works include *Spreadable Media: Creating Meaning and Value in a Networked Culture* (with Sam Ford and Joshua Green) and *Reading in a Participatory Culture: Remixing Moby-Dick for the Literature Classroom* (with Katie Clinton, Wynn Kelley, Jenna McWilliams, Ricardo Pitts-Wiley, and Erin Reilly). He is currently completing work on *By Any Media Necessary: Mapping Youth and Participatory Politics* (with Sangita Shresthova, Liana Gamber-Thompson, Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, and Arely Zimmerman).

Christopher Kelty works at the University of California, Los Angeles, is the author of *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software* (Duke University Press, 2008), co-edits the scholarly magazine

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Zizi Papacharissi is professor and head of the Communication Department at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her work focuses on the social and political consequences of online media. Her book *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age* (Polity, 2010) discusses how online media redefine our understanding of public and private in late-modern democracies. She has edited a volume on online social networks, titled *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites* (Routledge, 2010). She has authored three books and more than 40 journal articles, book chapters, or reviews. She is editor of the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* and serves on the editorial board for 10 journals, including the *Journal of Communication, Human Communication Research*, and *New Media and Society*.

Alison Powell is assistant professor in media and communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research analyzes the expansion of open-source cultures and modes of production, the design and politics of the development of new information communication and communication technologies (ICTs), and the processes of Internet policy formation. She is a member of the Seventh Framework Programme–funded European Network of Excellence on Internet Science. Her recent publications focus on the development of open-source licenses within entrepreneurial cultures and the ways that value decisions are negotiated within the design of new ICTs.

José van Dijck is a professor of comparative media studies at the University of Amsterdam. Her work covers a wide range of topics in media theory, media technologies, social media, television, and culture, and she is the author of six books, three co-edited volumes, and some 100 journal articles and book chapters. Van Dijck served as chair of the Department of Media Studies (2002–2006) and was the dean of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam (2008–2012). Her visiting appointments include the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the University of Technology in Sydney. See http://home.medewerker.uva.nl/j.f.t.m.vandijck.

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