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Contesting Captions: Netflix and the Limits of Platform Design

Kelsey Cameron (Regis University)

As more and more video content moves online, digital video captions emerge as an important site of contestation between platforms and disability advocacy groups. Captions – lines of text that translate sonic information into readable form – serve constituencies from Deaf and hard of hearing communities to search engine algorithms unable to process moving images. Thus, as scholars like Janine Butler, Elizabeth Ellcessor, and Sean Zdenek have argued, captions emerge in relation to a complex assemblage of bodies, technologies, and regulatory histories. Online captions raise questions about who digital accessibility is for, and who should determine emerging accessibility norms. Building on this work, I argue for attention to the role individual streaming platforms play in caption design. In deregulated digital contexts, there is no single, agreed-upon captioning standard, and popular streaming platforms like Netflix, YouTube and Hulu construct captioning in significantly different ways. Consequently, the design of a streaming platform not only enables or disables captions; it also dictates their appearance and functionality.

However, platform power is not absolute. Using Netflix as a case study, I show that platforms often make captioning decisions reactively, in response to a particular external campaign or publicized crisis. This paper analyzes two such moments: a 2012 federal court case (National Association of the Deaf et al. v. Netflix) and a 2018 controversy over captions in the Netflix original series *Queer Eye*. The former provoked Netflix to commit to captioning one hundred percent of its video content, and the latter forced change to internal policies about captioning profanity. Both events demonstrate that decisions ostensibly made by a platform implicate a wider array of actors, from courts and advocacy groups to fans and media industry professionals. Consequently, I argue that platform design is best analyzed through the context that shapes it. In studying captions and other designed affordances, this methodological move helps us see that platforms are not all-powerful entities imposing their will on the public. Rather, platform design and policy are the culmination of complex and ongoing processes of negotiation.

Spinning and Surviving the Techlash in Southeast Asia: From Exposing Disinformation Shadow Economies to Resisting State Regulation

Jonathan Corpus Ong (Department of Communication, University of Massachusetts - Amherst)

Southeast Asia is a region notorious for many disinformation innovations with global reach, such as Indonesia's Instagram clickfarm industry and the Philippines' dark PR firms. Different countries enact varying discourses of a techlash—from a strong platform determinism in the Philippines where journalists attribute electoral manipulation to social media trolls to a weak vocabulary of platform regulation in Thailand where activists attribute propaganda to partisan pundits on television. What unites scholars and activists in the region however is resistance against anti-fake-news laws originated in the region and have now become hijacked by diverse state leaders attempting to control social media expression and silence dissenters. This paper offers reflection on the opportunities and risks of multi-stakeholder collaborations among academics, activists, and fact-checkers in the fight against fake news. It identifies how diverse normative frameworks of transparency and securitization compete yet converge in particular moments. As an ethnographer involved in election integrity initiatives in the region, I aim to retell diverse compromises and conflicts in three "para-sites" (Marcus 2000): 1) backchannel communications with platforms tipping them about 'bad actors', 2) third-party fact-checker arrangements and their regional trend toward partisanship, and 3) multi-stakeholder meetings where ethnographers are pressured by platforms, journalists, and politicians to "name names" and compromise identities of project respondents. Inspired by Nick Seaver's anthropology of algorithms approach, I reckon with how ethnography's virtue of patient attentiveness can help uncover hidden motives and navigate new questions arising from fast-moving risky research.

[Bibliography](#)

Code as Mutual Aid: User Agency and Social Media Modding Mehitabel Glenhaber (University of Southern California)

Calls for platform reform often suggest slow-moving, top-down changes to platform infrastructure, focusing on regulating the actions of platform owners. (Gillespie, 2018; AND MORE) However, while we wait for these changes, what are social media users already doing to seize grassroots power over platform governance? Drawing on a case study of users on Tumblr, I argue that some social media users, even users who do not self-identify as activists, have already created sociotechnical systems to resist corporate platform governance, using tools such as information campaigns and social media modding. I further argue that literature from subculture studies, fan studies, and game studies can help provide a more nuanced picture of the role of user agency in platform governance.

Scholars of subculture and fandom have argued since the 1970s that in many mediums, there are ways that consumers participate in corporate-produced media, while resisting that industry's complete control. Subculture members are "unruly creators" who produce media artifacts and cultural capital which cannot be easily co-opted by a capitalist culture industry (Andrejvic, 2009; Hebdidge, 1979). They also engage in "oppositional" readings, reinterpreting and remixing corporate produced texts for their own purposes. (Hall, 1971; Jenkins, 1992; Tushnet and Coppa, 2017) Though we must avoid a utopian view of subcultural production online (Terranova, 2001), the tactics which subcultures employ to resist corporate control of traditional media can also be employed to resist corporate control of social media platforms. Far from passively accepting corporate governance, users take an active role in creating the norms and infrastructures which shape their own, and other users', experience of the site.

To illustrate this point, I focus specifically on subcultural communities on the social media platform Tumblr. Tumblr has historically been a haven for media fans, disability advocates, sex-positivity activists, queer rights advocates, and a variety of artist communities, (Chew, 2018; Cho, 2017; McCracken, 2017; Tiidenberg 2016; Schott and Langan, 2016) and these users are highly aware of how the affordances of the platform can make or break their subculture's ability to thrive. (Fink and Miller, 2014; Haimson, et al., 2019) Though they possess almost no legal power over the site, Tumblr users employ the platform's affordances, or even remix the platform itself, to claim a voice in how Tumblr operates. In this paper, I examine two main tools employed by Tumblr users: information campaigns, and social media modding.

Tumblr users use the platform's own affordances to circulate information which can give members of their communities more informed agency over their own interactions with the platform. The Tumblr developer team frequently employs "dark patterns" which undermine users agency by obfuscating information that users need to protect themselves from exploitation or surveillance (Brignul, 2010). Users resist these attempts at control by creating and circulating tutorials guiding other users through the privacy settings and warning them of new on-by-default features. Even when Tumblr fails to provide the tools for informed participation, users step in, appropriating the platform itself as a tool for information sharing, even against its owners' profit motives.

Some Tumblr users also go further, creating their own code – such as the Xkit or Tumblr Savior browser extensions – which actually modifies the site's UI. Browser Extensions allow users to govern how the platform appears on their own computer or phone. They can add or subtract key features and affordances – Tumblr Savior, for instance, provides the ability to block potentially triggering keywords, a crucial accessibility feature which Tumblr repeatedly ignored user's requests for. Browser extensions can be seen as analogous to video game mods, which video game scholars have argued allow users to participate in governing games they have no legal ownership of (Postigo, 2010; Kow and Nardi, 2010; Taylor, 2006; Kucklich, 2005). If, as Lawrence Lessig tells us, code is law in cyberspace, then browser extensions and other forms of social media modding allow users to democratically participate in the writing of those laws – even without the platform owner's permission (Lessig, 1999).

[WORKS CITED](#)

Forgotten Passwords and Long-Gone Exes: the Life and Death of Renren Lianrui Jia (University of Toronto, Scarborough)

Once-dubbed “the Facebook of China”, Renren was a popular and leading Chinese social media network, especially among college students. Founded in 2005, Renren has seen a steady rise of user population, growing from 83 million in 2009 to over 178 million in the 2012 (China had 573 million internet users by the same year). With investments from Morgan Stanley, Deutsche Bank and Credit Suisse, Renren’s share price soared 40 percent on the day of its initial public offering on the New York Stock Exchange in 2011. However, the company’s development did not trail the hopes and hypes of the stock market—Renren’s market capitalization and user population growth started to slow down quickly after its IPO. The social media network has been struggling with profitability and by 2014, its revenue has slumped half compared to previous year. In order to stay afloat, Renren started to diversify into various financial products, livestreaming, gaming and secondhand car sales—yet with very limited success. Even though Renren made a comeback in 2019 with the launch of Renren mobile app, it is too late to the mobile game dominated by existing “super apps” (such as WeChat and Alipay) on the Chinese mobile internet. Renren, which translates to “everyone” in Chinese, is now a digital ghost town.

This paper reconstructs the historiographies of Renren as a non-Western social media platform. Grounded in political economy theories and platform studies, this paper examines the internal and external factors of Renren’s rise and fall. Relying on Internet Archive’s Wayback machine, Chinese and English language news reports, and historical financial reporting such as Renren’s annual reports, stock filings and media releases, this paper systematically analyzes Renren’s shifting platform strategies, business models, and business culture. Externally, this historiographies of Renren will be situated in the larger transitions of the cultural and political-economic formations of the increasingly monopolized Chinese internet market. Moreover, building on magazine articles, commentaries, digital recollections and blogposts, this paper looks at memory narratives and counter narratives of Renren users and depict how they view the challenges and factors that contributed to the platform’s decline and rebirth.

The significance of recalling and recounting Renren’s history is three-fold: firstly, while many scholarly work focuses on the success stories of China’s BAT (Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent), much less attention is paid to smaller, less-successful and less-known Chinese social media platforms. Methodologically, this paper discusses and experiments a combined analytical approach to studying platform history of poorly archived non-western platforms in established archive such as Wayback Machine. Secondly, with Renren’s resemblance to Facebook, retelling its historical transformation also sheds important lights on how similar social media platform constructs and designs evolve differently in varying cultural-social contexts. Mapping the developmental trajectory of Renren also offers valuable insights into the collapse of platform and the rapid downfall of “network effect”. Thirdly, as one of the early real name social networks, Renren has come to bear special cultural values which impact Chinese internet culture and mark web uses of a generation of internet users in China. Despite its failed rebirth, many users still log on to reclaim their digital pasts, reconnect with old friends, and are mesmerized by the sense of community and belonging once cultivated by Renren.

Platform determinism & the case of the TCCN

Daniel Joseph (Manchester Metropolitan University), Katie MacKinnon (University of Toronto)

In October of 2019 Catherine Tait, the CEO of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), stated that the CBC would no longer be working with Netflix to produce shows, telling Content Canada they were growing American companies (Netflix; Amazon), “rather than feeding our own domestic business and industry”. Tait previously accused Netflix of “cultural imperialism,” a phrase hardly heard in Canada outside of Media and Communication Studies departments at Universities, that is typically used to describe a powerful nation imposing its culture on less powerful nations. Today, it mostly refers to the United States using its overwhelmingly dominant position in the capitalist global order to influence culture abroad – acknowledging that the United States’ cultural hegemony is part of the same project as its economic and military imperialism. Catherine Tait’s comments reflect the “official” institutional and structural anxieties around the “platformization of cultural production” and “platform imperialism”.

This discursive and economic framing of the cultural imperialism of monopoly social media platforms has deep roots in Canada’s history of cultural and industrial policy and the birth of computer networks. While the internet as we know it today was “born” inside the US defence research complex, other computer networks were being imagined, configured and proposed in a variety of other locations. In the late 1960s a handful of scientists at the Science Council of Canada and leaders of Canadian businesses spearheaded a similar discussion about changes in industrial and cultural policy. The Trans-Canada Computer Communications Network (TCCN) was proposed by the Council’s committee on Computer Application and Technology to “exercise control over the shape and thrust of the [computer] industry, so that its development may be harmonized with our social priorities.” These social priorities included attending to national unity issues caused by “regional disparity, geographic configuration and industrial domination.” In short, they proposed an alternative to US imperialism, a Canadian internet for Canadians.

This paper presents original archival research conducted at Library and Archives Canada into the TCCN from the early 1970s to show the discursive framing of this moment in the history of communications in Canada. We have three contributions: 1) contextualize the emergence of the Science Council’s Committee on Computer Application and Technology and the final TCCN report; 2) discuss how ideas about technological sovereignty, national unity, data privacy and computer regulation were interwoven throughout the vision of a TCCN; 3) address the question at heart of the workshop’s framing “against platform determinacy”. Here we argue that research on the future of platforms must be grounded in historical and political economic analysis of communications and information processing from different historical epochs of capitalist development. In addition to arguing that the infrastructure of the internet is itself a platform, we focus on the 1970s as a turbulent time as state governance in the west began to diverge from what was up to that point a Keynesian consensus of government intervention at the “commanding heights” of the economy. We show that the next 50 years of development of the computer industry, and the eventual development of vast platform monopolies, owes more to the political economic choices of nation-states in the world system as they backed away from nation-building interventions and embraced free-market (and ultimately, US dominated) industrial strategies. The Canadian example of the CBC’s anxieties over US platform imperialism is just one example of how national policy strategies will increasingly echo debates of the past.

Naming Performativity: Alternative Lineages of Antiracist Brazilian Feminism on Twitter **Alejandra Josiowicz (State University of Rio de Janeiro [UERJ])**

This paper looks at the strategies that women in Brazil are deploying to counter the racist and sexist violence inflicted by Twitter's algorithmic infrastructure.

Brazil is the country with most Twitter users in Latin America, and the fourth in the world, with 15.7 million users as of July 2020. Brazilian Twitter users are predominantly affluent young adults, and more male (62.9%) than female (37.1%).ⁱ A systematic look at Twitter's trending topics and most retweeted hashtags in Brazil shows that they are dominated by digital influencers and automated profiles with high visibility and popularity built by supporters of the far-right Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro. Recent research has shown that social media in Brazil is a breeding-ground for racist discourses on Black women and that online hate speech amplifies the reverberation of such racist and sexist discourses.ⁱⁱ In August 2020, Black feminist activist and author Djamilla Ribeiro presented a legal accusation against Twitter in the Federal Public Ministry, denouncing the platform for giving prominence to and cashing on hate speech, exploiting racism and sexism for profit through advertisement.ⁱⁱⁱ Ribeiro, in her formal suit, demanded that the company establishes rules, offers reparation for victims and organizes digital literacy campaigns to educate the public against racist and sexist online discourses. Ribeiro has also organized a campaign asking brands to refrain from advertising on social media until the platforms take action to prevent racism, sexism and hate speech.

Even though they rarely appear in Twitter's trending topics and are systematically made invisible by Twitter's algorithmic infrastructure, during the last decade, a group of intellectual women have gained popularity through Twitter and other social media, advancing antiracist, anti-police violence and LGBTQ+ agendas. That has been the case of Marielle Franco, Black feminist activist, politician and outspoken critic of police brutality and extrajudicial killings, assassinated on March 14, 2018. Franco was particularly active on Twitter and the news of her assassination generated a true uproar on the platform. Inspired by Franco, many women, some of them her close collaborators, friends and relatives, have risen to prominence and acquired visibility in social media. In the coming municipal elections to be held on November 15, 2020, there is a record number of women and Black candidates, who have deployed different strategies to denounce, document and protect themselves from hate speech in the cyberspace.

My aim is to study these strategies of organized resistance, with the hypothesis that these intellectual women, such as Marielle Franco and Djamila Ribeiro, have been able to mobilize, through hashtags and other tools, a wider public on Twitter, both white and Black, women and men, from different social backgrounds. We will conduct interviews not only with the candidates' campaign leaders, women intellectuals, and digital influencers, but also with different online publics and counterpublics to look at the impact of these women on Twitter. We will extract and analyze tweets referencing them, looking at the most popular hashtags, users, and topics they mobilize. We hope to shed light to the specific strategies that women put to work to oppose algorithmic violence, resist the dominant Twitter use in Brazil, and advance their agendas, such as the fight against police brutality, racism, gender violence, education and legislative reform.

[Footnotes](#)

Keep it Oakland: Putting the Local to Work in the Global Retail Economy Tamara Kneese (University of San Francisco)

In this paper, I re-think platformization through geographically situated retail labor and material culture, building on my co-authored work with Michael Palm on listing labor in the digital vintage economy. What we define as “listing labor” entails animating online inventory with an aura of authenticity (Kneese and Palm, 2020), which also means regularly producing engaging content and keeping potential customers invested. Through ethnographic, historically-oriented investigations of the selling of vintage clothing, vinyl records, and homemade or craft goods on Etsy, Ebay, Depop, and Discogs—and the use of platforms like Instagram to both sell and promote vintage items and branded storefronts— we locate global platform capitalism within changing labor practices organized by race, gender, age, class, and geography. Increasingly, many kinds of work and workers interact with digital platforms and apps, and it is hard to differentiate distinct “platform” labor from other forms of retail and service labor. We approach platform studies through the intersection of local economies, larger subcultures, and existing “traditional” labor practices.

This paper examines the labor involved with the upkeep of social media accounts for Oakland-based brick-and-mortar boutiques and their digital storefronts, particularly as businesses move their wares online during shelter in place amid the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Instagram is a site for showcasing items and, increasingly, a sales platform thanks to direct messages and intermediary payment systems like PayPal, Square, and Shopify. Focusing on small shops based in Oakland, California, particularly those which are part of Oakland’s Indie Alliance — a coalition of independent small business owners— this paper explores the role of shop workers in producing the authentic aesthetics of themselves and store accounts as an extension of the shop floor and— now— a replacement for the brick-and-mortar shop altogether. What influencer strategies and logistical methods are small retail businesses employing to maintain a connection to their sometimes internationally based customers? How do small-scale shop owners and clerks make platforms, which were not designed with their needs in mind, work for them? What new skills are necessary for people selling material goods in a time when online sales are their own option? How does sellers’ performance of the local interface with a global digital marketplace and platform infrastructures? In what ways do existing hierarchies and structural inequalities related to gentrification, rising commercial rents, immigration status, race, class, and gender affect shop personnels’ experiences of platforms and apps meant to facilitate business transactions?

In this paper, I specifically focus on the Oakland Indie Alliance’s Covid recovery and repair funds, which employ social media and crowdfunding platforms or payment apps to provide assistance to local businesses, particularly those which are BIPOC and/or immigrant-owned.

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“Moes Getting Hoes Where They Needz 2 Goes:” Homobiles’ Queer Values Disrupt Surveillance Capitalism

Harris Kornstein (NYU)

In 2010, queer/trans punk musician Lynnee Breedlove founded Homobiles, a San Francisco car service run by and for LGBTQ people with the tagline “moes getting hoes where they needz to goes.” Though Homobiles did not position itself as a technology company or gig-oriented platform, it emerged in the same time and geography as companies like Uber and was directly acknowledged by other ride-sharing companies as inspiration. As a DIY service, Homobiles was novel: though community organizations around the world had previously implemented “safe ride” programs, Homobiles offered a more robust operation carrying passengers to and from drag shows, doctor’s visits, hook-ups, airports, and elsewhere. At its peak, Homobiles offered near-24/7 services and featured up to twenty drivers at a time, all working as volunteers for suggested donations and with no one turned away. While the service regularly shuttled passengers for about five years, it ultimately succumbed to its competitors Uber and Lyft cornering the market—though it still operates as a non-profit, and provides rides primarily to low-income riders for medical appointments. However, as this paper argues, unlike its venture-capital funded peers, Homobiles operated through logics of care rather than surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019), given its roots in legacies of mutual aid, punk, and queer separatism (Hobart and Kneese 2020; Spade 2020; Brown, Deer, and Nyong’o 2013; Enszer 2016).

This paper explores Homobiles as a case study that is not only a queer- and trans-created platform—and not only a service geared specifically to queer and trans people—but one that highlights unique strategies for queering popular technologies and their collection, storage, and use of data. Drawing on ethnographic interviews with riders and drivers, as well as queer theories of ignorance and intimacy (Ahmed 2019; Gieseking 2018; Halberstam 2011; Muñoz 1996) and media theories of refusal and design justice (Keeling 2014; Barnett et al. 2016; Costanza-Chock 2018), this research focuses on the social and technical strategies that Homobiles engaged to do business differently (as well as some of the challenges it shared with other platform services). In particular, it analyzes Homobiles’ small-scale and ephemeral approach to data collection and use, using low-tech tools like paper and text messaging (and opting to keep limited records); it also highlights Homobiles’ relational approach to ensuring trust and safety by drawing on existing community ties and operating just outside of legal constraints. Ultimately, the paper offers a concrete counter-example of a contemporaneous gig economy platform that not only refused the typical financial and technological models of Silicon Valley tech companies, but offers an alternative roadmap through queer affect and social justice values, to ensure a mission in which “everyone gets home safe.”

Coding Out Justice: Digital Platforms' Enclosure of Public Transit in Cities**Torin Monahan (Department of Communication, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)**

This paper explores the interconnections between ride-hailing platforms and public transit systems in large US cities. Drawing upon qualitative interviews with expert key informants representing city government agencies, industry, community groups, and others, we find that ride-hailing platforms have catalyzed a *downward spiral* in many public transportation systems: as more people use ride-hailing instead of transit, transit systems receive less revenue and must reduce services to compensate, which makes transit seem even less desirable to would-be riders, leading more people to explore other transit options. Preexisting transit deficiencies, shifting customer expectations, and stigmatization of transit systems and riders each contribute to ride-hailing platforms' successful encroachment upon public transit. Ride-hailing and transit partnerships, such as a Boston-based pilot project to provide paratransit services for people with disabilities, point to possibilities for complementary city mediations of platforms, but they remain constrained by their industry-focused market models. The current downward spiral is particularly concerning because it negatively impacts the most vulnerable and disempowered in society.

Keywords: public transportation, ride-hailing, Uber, paratransit, social justice, marginalization

“Pose”: Examining moments of ‘digital’ dark sousveillance on TikTok
Chelsea Peterson-Salahuddin (Northwestern University)

Over the past year, the Chinese-owned social networking platform TikTok has gained traction with young U.S. users, leading to much discussion and scrutiny over the way the platform operates. Many young creators who use the video-sharing platform have claimed that its underlying algorithm surveilles and suppresses the reach of content by Black, brown, fat, queer and disabled creators (Botella, 2019; McCluskey, 2020). However, despite these algorithmic biases, marginalized creators have continued to find new and ingenious ways to not only create but successfully share anti-racist, anti-misogynistic, LGBTQIA+, and body positive content on the platform. Using this tension between marginalized content creators and the platform algorithm on TikTok as its point of departure, this essay examines the ways marginalized creators employ TikTok’s various medium and technological affordances in innovative ways to “talk back” (hooks, 1989) to their marginalization in society both off and online. Specifically, I examine the enactment of two of the platform’s most popular “challenges” by women and queer creators of color, the “JoJo Pose” challenge and the “Vogue” challenge, to explicate how video, sound, and images are put together to critique historical locations of racist and sexist behavior, while simultaneously aiming to thwart suppression and surveillance by the platform algorithm.

These challenges operated in two distinct ways in their mission to call out instances of racism, sexism, and ableism in society. In the ‘JoJo’ Pose challenge, Black and brown creators used the song ‘Pose’ by Apollo Fresh, to pose like racist individuals in their school or town who had openly promoted racist rhetoric, when the song said “pose” they would contrast pictures of themselves with a picture of the racist person(s) in question enacting the same pose. The challenge was similarly used by women on the platform to call out men who had sexually assaulted them. In the ‘Vogue Challenge,’ created by Salma Noor, young Black and brown TikTokers photoshopped themselves onto the cover of Vogue, in order to highlight the historical absence of Black and brown bodies on the high-fashion magazine’s cover. Despite their different approaches to spreading counter-hegemonic messages, this essay theorizes both of these practices as a form of digital “dark sousveillance”. Borrowing from Mann’s definition of “sousveillance” as inversions of power dynamics enacted under states of surveillance, Brown (2015) defines “dark sousveillance” as the tactics historically and contemporarily employed by Black people to evade systems of racialized surveillance. Extending Brown’s theorization into the realm of digital media, I argue that through these “challenges” creators render their bodies both hyper-visible and invisible through strategic moments of moments of visual corporeal presence and absence, all while under surveillance from the platform and a constant threat of being suppressed by the algorithm.

This essay draws on the existing scholarship on the relationship between race, technology, and surveillance (e.g. Brown, 2015; Benjamin, 2018; Brock, 2020; Noble, 2018) in order to better understand not only how marginalized creators use social media to counteract various forms of everyday racism and oppression, but also the ways in which these creators use these practices to explicitly call attention to the underlying whiteness of these “neutral” technology spaces.

Work Cited

The Space of Negotiations: Analyzing Platform Power in the Cultural Industries**Thomas Poell (University of Toronto), David Nieborg (University of Amsterdam), Brooke Erin Duffy (Temple University), José van Dijck (Utrecht University)**

Around the globe, digital platforms like YouTube, TikTok/Douyin, Instagram, Twitch, WeChat, and Spotify have taken an increasingly central role in the production, distribution, marketing, and monetization of culture (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Although it is abundantly clear that platforms have become powerful institutions in the cultural industries, there is much less insight in how platforms exactly exert power. Spurred by years of skyrocketing market capitalizations, there has been a tendency among pundits, journalists, and scholars to depict platform companies as firmly in charge of their own destiny, if not omnipotent. Continuing our inquiry into platform power, this paper moves away from such a one-sided, monolithic understanding of platform power by theorizing power as relational and inherently contingent (Van Dijck et al., 2019). While the relationships between platforms and cultural producers are highly unequal and precarious, they exist in a state of mutual dependence and therefore leave room for constant negotiations and strategic decision-making on both sides.

The paper aims to provide a systematic examination of the key variables that affect how platform power emerges and evolves. Focusing on the cultural industries, we argue that establishing and maintaining institutional relationships between platforms and cultural producers constitutes a complex balancing act. Operating as multisided markets, platforms in the cultural sector not only aim to acquire end-users, they continuously try to bring more cultural producers, advertisers, and other so-called “complementors” on board. To attract and retain complementors, and to simultaneously ensure that the transactions among them run smoothly, platform companies continuously adapt pricing structures, revenue models, developer agreements, moderation practices, algorithmic filtering mechanisms, and so on. Throughout, platforms try to strike a balance between openness and control, or what information scholars have dubbed “resourcing” and “securing” platform boundaries (Ghazawneh & Henfridsson, 2013). In response, cultural producers have to constantly weigh whether platforms allow them to create and capture value. These decisions are often taken under highly precarious circumstances, in which cultural producers are strongly pressured to find new audiences and sources of revenue.

Drawing from examples across the cultural industries, the paper demonstrates that the decision space of cultural producers as platform complementors is shaped by three variables. First, platform evolution, the stage of a platform’s development and its rate of adoption by end-users— or lack thereof if a platform “fails to launch”—directly impacts the bargaining power of complementors. Early in a platform’s development, platform companies tend to provide cultural producers with more favorable economic conditions. Second, industry segment, historically, some parts of the cultural industries—games and social media entertainment—have been “platform- dependent,” whereas other segments—news and music—have histories far predating platforms. The latter, consequently, tend to have more options to operate independently from platforms. This second variable impacts a third variable: stage of production. Depending on whether we focus on production, distribution, marketing, or monetization, cultural producers have more or less options to operate independently from platforms in an economically sustainable fashion. Providing access to large and diverse pools of end-users, platforms have become especially indispensable in the distribution process. Conversely, the supposed dominant role of platforms during cultural production, marketing, and monetization, we will argue, is anything but straightforward and leaves cultural producers with other options.

Algorithmized but not Atomized? How Emerging Technologies Can Engender New Forms of Worker Solidarity

Rida Qadri (MIT)

In the world of digital platforms, literature either predicts an isolated, atomized, disempowered digital worker or expects workers to have only temporary, online, ephemeral networks of mutual aid. Yet, Jakarta's mobility-platform drivers have formed robust communities of spatial solidarity, revolving around language of kinship and stamping their presence across the urban landscape with 'basecamps' (semi-permanent shelters created by drivers themselves). These communities also come with custom merchandise, quirky names, emblems, elections, even their own emergency response service. By centering this unique form of labor solidarity, this paper argues 1) the spatially-rooted mode of organization deployed by drivers resists the organizing economic logic of the ride-hail app and 2) this form of digital labor organization was not happenstance but borne out of an interaction between affordances of technology and the pre-existing institutions of the mobility market within which the platform embedded.

With the first argument, I recover power for the digital worker by showcasing the possibilities of 'everyday resistance' which are not necessarily reliant on 'logging out' or 'boycotts' but are exercised while participating in the digital economy. By creating spatially-rooted, physical sites of solidarity the drivers anchor themselves in space which pushes against the spatial-dynamism ride hailing assumes of its drivers. Further, the basecamps become a physical manifestation of the solidarity and networking between drivers that mobility platforms would like to render invisible. Finally, the basecamps' focus on socializing, hanging out and relaxation quarantines against the optimizing impetus of technology. The drivers of Jakarta then show us exactly that how digital workers can create systems of joy, collaboration, identity and avoid the abstractions and sterility and isolation that can come with digital work.

Through the second argument I showcase how outcomes of platform mediation are refracted and co-constituted by local particularities. Current research on disruption misses some of this nuance because it emanates primarily from western countries, primarily the US. Local structures have always influenced how technology is used and made sense of and technology is always implicated in the social constructs within which it is used. This project, by focusing on a case not well-studied in platform literature, narrates a story of the resilience of informal institutions, possibilities of technology and surprising hybridity that emerges as the digital is domesticated and implicated in local social relations.

The politics and economics of global AI: Chinese facial recognition in Zimbabwe

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In May 2020, the Guangzhou-based firm *CloudWalk Technology* was among a list of sanctioned entities by the U.S. Department of Commerce. This maker of facial recognition software was cited as complicit in the Chinese state's "human rights violations and abuses ... campaign of repression, mass arbitrary detention, forced labor and high-technology surveillance against ... [Uighur and other] Muslim minority groups" [1]. Prior to this, in March 2018, *CloudWalk* had signed a 'strategic partnership' with the Zimbabwean government to deliver facial recognition technology for security and law enforcement. Described by both the Zimbabwean government and *CloudWalk* as a general catalyst for "modernization" in fields such as "infrastructure, technology and biology" [2], there has been some speculation that the true strategic goal is to train the *CloudWalk* AI on a substantial Black population via free access to government data to build competitive advantage on a global scale, given the current unreliability of AI matching dark skinned faces [3, 4, 5, 6]. This paper takes the case of *CloudWalk* in Zimbabwe as a problem space in which to investigate the complexities and contradictions of AI training and race in the broader frame of geopolitics and global techno-capitalism.

First, we situate this venture as a continuation of the long history of scientific and technological **experimentation** on Africans and Afro-descended populations around the world. From medical apartheid in Africa, the United States, and elsewhere, from the slavery era through colonial rule to the present (including proposals to test COVID-19 vaccines in Sub-Saharan Africa) [7, 8, 9, 10], we perceive this as another instance in which Blackness is enrolled as a test lab for absorbing potentially deadly risk. Specifically, we locate this experimentation at the intersection of extractive colonizing surveillance capitalism and the externalization of a 'new cold war' between two techno-regimes represented by U.S. and Chinese corporations [11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16]. The extraction of data is no longer a byproduct of knowledge production, it is a goal in and of itself and training datasets are continually folded into algorithms forged on experimentation 'in the wild'. Trial phases, pilot projects and explorative deployments of platforms are "engines" not "cameras" [17].

Second, *CloudWalk's* deployment in Zimbabwe is a site of **infrastructuring**. Enrolled into China's controversial *Belt and Road Initiative*, the project itself is framed as infrastructural development by the two signatories, not only to improve the state's law enforcement operations, but also as a platform for future applications (payment systems are cited) [2, 3, 4, 5]. Facing the technical challenge of operating a system with high demands on computation in an environment where power outages are common and ICT infrastructure is unreliable, *CloudWalk* purportedly provides a self-reliant solution with 'batteries included' (or a 'turnkey' infrastructure) [2]. We examine how this unfolds in practice, complicating predominant conceptions about the contingencies and temporalities of infrastructure, particularly where the bits, hardware, and associated materialities are transnational [18, 19, 20].

Third, we draw on the **interface** as a methodological device. Algorithms research has long worked under the imperative to 'open the black box' in order to reveal the suspected secrets of algorithmic power, despite the difficulty of access to research sites [21, 22, 23, 24]. We are content to leave this black box closed, as it were, and concentrate on its various interfaces – to the electric grid, to the legal system, to globalized markets, to bodies on the street – in an effort to draw out its implications. Whereas media studies and research on human-computer interaction focus on usability, affordance, and design for human action *with/on/at* the machine [25, 26, 27], the immediate interface of the surveillance/facial recognition camera has no need for direct interaction with a user *per se*; arguably, it is actively working to selectively limit interaction and agency [28]. Yet, separating the observer from the observed is not an easy process [29], just as turnkey infrastructures do not exist in a vacuum and AI cannot be shipped elsewhere in a box: entanglements remain. [References](#)

Seeing like a state – what is the platform? Evidence from on-demand platforms in urban India during the COVID19 pandemic lockdown

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The COVID-19 lockdowns have created a petri dish of experiments in the public distribution of food and experiences of hunger for India. All scales of government racing to find ways of feeding their constituents. Delivery and intra-city logistics platforms have played multiple roles in these experiments. In this flux of broken public infrastructure and private efficiencies, what happens to the labouring bodies of platform service providers?

This paper reflects on the ways in which corporate digital on-demand platforms have acted during the nation-wide lockdown caused by the COVID19 pandemic in India. The lockdown created previously unheard-of opportunities for platforms and marketplaces that do logistics, delivery, movement of goods within food, groceries, medicines - which make the bulk of the hyperlocal segment – to become 'essential services'. During the lockdown they represented the small sliver of organised industry in Indian cities that was allowed to operate during this time while most informal enterprises offering the same services were shut down or severely curtailed.

This article lays out a typology of engagement between private platforms and public authorities in Indian cities in a way to build out a larger definition of 'platform economy' that accounts for the ways in which developmental states like India's use the socio-material technology of on-demand platforms to augment state capacity. Platforms offered (a) parts of platform infrastructure for government use, (2) offers main service products for government use and purpose and lastly (3) created new service products for government use. In building out the implications of these different typologies this article notes how different levels of government in India actively partner with platforms for infrastructural and programmatic gaps that legitimate the logic of corporate platforms potentially creating a future which bars regulatory challenge from the state.

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Code as Mutual Aid: User Agency and Social Media Modding

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Platform determinism & the case of the TCCN

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Naming Performativity: Alternative Lineages of Antiracist Brazilian Feminism on Twitter

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ⁱ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-brazil>

ⁱⁱ <http://bit.ly/PPSLuizTrindadePBBrazil>.

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Keep it Oakland: Putting the Local to Work in the Global Retail Economy

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Analyzing Platform Power in the Cultural Industries

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Algorithmized but not Atomized? How Emerging Technologies Can Engender New Forms of Worker Solidarity

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The politics and economics of global AI: Chinese facial recognition in Zimbabwe

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Platform Partnerships Across the Private and Public: Ecosystems in Evolution

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