
Community Despite Connection: Resisting the Digital Logics of Optimization and Failure

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Abstract: If a certain brand of aspirational tech-utopian discourse is to be believed, those privileged enough to be plugged into digital information technology are living through a golden age of connection. Platforms claim to facilitate sharing and partaking, bring people together, and bestow upon them new and improved spaces to gather and build communities. While reality differs decidedly from such idealized conceptions, it is nonetheless crucial to ask what kind of guiding vision is being instituted through such representational efforts: namely, the figure of community made operational and optimizable. This project will reject such idealized visions of coherent communities drawn together by technology and instead proposes that 'community' is best understood as a negative and inoperative phenomenon in conversation with Lacanian psychoanalytic feminism and Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*. Though the two understandings of community discussed here are ultimately different, they both emphasize a structuring absence, a void at the heart of social relations, leading to a rejection of the politics of communal essence and wholeness. Together, they articulate a critique of what I see as the main danger of platform capitalism's insistence on its specific vision of community: the foreclosure of a dimension of generative antagonism and of an opening for the unexpected, for 'the political' (le politique). While the dimension of 'the political' can never be fully foreclosed, the efforts of platform capitalism nonetheless alienate us from experiences of community understood as negative presence and thus as an ongoing work-in-progress and common responsibility.

Irina KALINKA

Community Despite Connection: Resisting the Digital Logics of Optimization and Failure

How do digital platforms comprehend community? If a certain brand of aspirational tech-utopian discourse is to be believed, those privileged enough to be plugged into digital information technology are living through a golden age of connection. Digital platforms will (a promise forever yet-to-come) "enable more people to connect in more ways that transform and enhance their lives" ("About Skype"), "create a world where anyone can belong anywhere" ("AirBnB Business"), "give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together" (Facebook), "connect the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful" ("About LinkedIn"), and be a "home to thousands of communities, endless conversation, and authentic human connection" (Reddit). Social media platforms at their supposed best are promoted by those who run and support them as machines for authentic community connection. Corporate copy claims these platforms and applications facilitate sharing and partaking, that they are interactive and interpersonal, and that they bring people and communities together and bestow upon them (through the "generous service" of software and algorithm) new and improved spaces to gather, voice their thoughts and debate, meet strangers and friends, and conduct business. According to this discourse, such digital gathering spaces are efficient, relevant, smart, and, above all, *optimized* – continuously perfecting the work of connection.

The "thought-leaders" who shape this discourse laud ever greater connection between all peoples as a desirable ambition and, possibly, crucial societal function for digital platforms to perform. At his 2017 Harvard commencement address, Mark Zuckerberg called this "his story" and what gives him "a sense of purpose," continuing, "A student in a dorm room, connecting one community at a time, and keeping at it until one day we connect the whole world" ("Speech"). In an open letter about Facebook's global aspirations from that same spring, Zuckerberg reiterates this idea of ever greater wholeness: "Progress now requires humanity coming together not just as cities or nations, but also as a global community." He continues to outline what he sees as the cornerstone for Facebook's future trajectory: "For the past decade, Facebook has focused on connecting friends and families. With that foundation, our next focus will be developing the social infrastructure for community" (Wagner and Swisher). Facebook's shift of focus here is striking: No longer content with small scale, local connections, the platform's future vision will be guided by an ever more ambitious role for itself: instituting new infrastructures and social orders, global in aspiration and reach. The aim is to bring ever more people together and facilitate social relations in virtual space, to be the underlying "something" that makes community possible. In this same vein, Zuckerberg had gone so far as to claim at SXSW in 2008 that animosities in the Middle East do not "come from a deep hatred of anyone" but rather "from the lack of connectedness and lack of communication, lack of empathy and understanding" (cited in Morozov 292). Cue the solution that will overcome this "lack" and make community whole again: Facebook.

What Zuckerberg is highlighting in these various examples is not the reality of how these platforms work, but the vision that (purportedly) animates him and his company to do better. Building community and meaningful connections are idealized again and again in this discourse as a way to combine profitability and "doing good." Such utopian speculation about the ability of electronic media to forge connections among people can already be found at the very beginnings of media studies as a discipline. As Marshall McLuhan argues in his 1964 book *Understanding Media - The Extensions of Man* about the "speed-up" of the "electronic age:" "Our specialist and fragmented civilization of center-margin structure is suddenly experiencing an instantaneous reassembling of all its mechanized bits into an organic whole. This is the new world of the global village" (101). Today, as Zuckerberg and the corporate public-relations language of the "About Us" sections of Facebook and a host of other platforms assert, it is these social media platforms that are making the "new world of the global village" possible by ostensibly creating ever more effective infrastructures of connection. Against what they characterize as a chaotic onslaught of information online, these corporations claim to provide the user with a certain curatorial architecture to efficiently sort speech and content, framing the service rendered by their technologies (which also allows for monetization through data extraction) as a helpful force of coherence, relevancy, ranking, or efficient distribution that supposedly enables ever more necessary and valuable connections (in contrast to those deemed confusing, senseless, or worthless) between various users or users and content.

The communitarian language that "platform capitalism" (Srnicsek) drapes itself in is, of course, a fiction, albeit a dangerous one. I read such corporate public relations language as symptomatic. This relentless over-emphasis on community – the assertion that sociality will be anywhere and

everywhere accessible, smooth, and harmonious – masks the ever greater alienation *from* community that these platforms facilitate. While reality differs decidedly from such idealized conceptions, and the impetus for these platforms is more often than not structured by economic imperatives above all else, it is nonetheless crucial to ask: What kind of guiding vision of community are such representational efforts serving to uphold? How is the figure of community mobilized and, as I will argue, mischaracterized to idealize the work of the platform? This project will reject such idealized visions of coherent communities drawn together by technology, and instead, propose a different understanding of community in conversation with Lacanian psychoanalytic feminism and theories of “the political” and “being-in-common” from Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community*.

I will argue that “community” is best understood as a negative phenomenon. In the same way that Joan Copjec writes in “The Sexual Compact” about “sex” through the lens of psychoanalytic theory: “[community] cannot be located in any positive phenomenon, word or object, but is manifest in negative phenomena exclusively,” like “lapses,” “interruptions,” or “discontinuity” for instance (32). For Copjec, we do not *share* sex; sex is the void that we have in common and that “holds open the space of human action” (42), while also precluding communal unity. In this way, sex is “the enemy of relation conceived as unbroken link” (43) and throws into question “political theories of community”(31).¹ In his book *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy similarly rejects the possibility of communal unity and asserts that “[b]eing in common has nothing to do with communion” (xxxviii) and is neither “transcendence,” nor “substance” (xxxix). For him, community takes place in “unworking” and, “no longer having to do either with production or with completion, [it] encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension” (31). In other words, while also being characterized by negative phenomena, community in Nancy is more closely connected to practices that embrace inoperativity.

Though these understandings of community are ultimately different, they both emphasize a structuring absence, a void at the heart of social relations, leading to a rejection of the politics of communal essence and wholeness. Together, they articulate a critique of what I see as the main danger of platform capitalism’s insistence on its specific vision of community: the foreclosure of a dimension of generative antagonism and of an opening for the unexpected, “the political” (*le politique*) in distinction to “Politics” (*la politique*).² As Nancy writes together with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: “What the question of the political does to psychoanalysis is also what psychoanalysis, displaced, overflowing, does to the question of the political: it leads, perhaps, to a subversion of that question in the very matrix of its possibility. [...] How to envision *something else*?” (“The Unconscious” 192). While visions of *something else* can never be fully foreclosed, the efforts of platform capitalism nonetheless alienate us from experiences of community understood as negative presence and thus as an ongoing work-in-progress and common responsibility.

The approach I put forward here resists the allure of striving for total connection. The impossibility of such a form of closure is foundational to any experience of the common. Standing against the aspiration – embodied by digital platforms – to manage, to solve, to produce community once and for all, what is ultimately at stake in this counter-vision is caring for “the political.” It demonstrates care for our collective ability to continue asking, thinking, or writing what it means to be in common, to share the world with others, *anew and differently*. To interrogate such guiding visions above and beyond the actual workings of the platform is to close-read the imaginaries that animate the digital constellation in the present.

How Do Data Markets Envision Community?

The repeated emphasis on connection and community by corporate public-relations materials should not be too easily dismissed as an innocent cliché or trope. Benjamin H. Bratton argues that, as “organizations, [platforms] can take on a powerful institutional role, solidifying economies and cultures in their image over time” (41). The platform’s “initial program may be born of economics, but their execution can push sideways through other modes of value” (42). The guiding visions underpinning

¹ Copjec makes this connection between psychoanalysis and community on the very first page of her article, arguing that psychoanalytic feminism is “capable of throwing into question some of the basic assumptions underlying philosophical theories of the subject and political theories of community” (“Sexual” 31).

² How these terms function in Nancy’s argument will be explained later in my article. For a general overview, one can refer to Chantall Mouffe’s distinction between “Politics” and “the political” here. She writes: “I have proposed to distinguish between ‘the political’ and ‘politics’; ‘the political’ refers to this dimension of antagonism which can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations, a dimension that can never be eradicated; ‘politics’ refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflicting because they are affected by the dimension of ‘the political.’”

such digital spaces are by no means limited to online interactions, but indicative of the larger imperatives that platform capitalism sets in motion and that give rise to corresponding social and political constellations as well. As Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy write in their article "Seeing like a market," the current trends in digital architectures built around data extraction can be read as a continuation of a "control revolution" with a much longer genealogy aimed at the "systematic application of rules and measures that make the world legible so it can be acted upon" (10). Rules and measures – for instance, algorithms, programming languages, or protocol (Galloway) – are also the very conditions of possibility for digital community formation, the defining characteristics of the underlying architectures to which every user has to adhere – at least to a point – if they want to participate. Digital connection comes at a price: it requires legibility, operational compliance, tracking and data extraction. What is arguably new about today's "control revolution" in contrast to older attempts is the sheer scale and speed of information gathering. According to Fourcade and Healy, both are now "continuous" and potentially "indefinite" (11), enabling platforms to contend that their data is capable of "encapsulating the *totality* of [the user's] *relations* as expressed through digital traces, ordered and made tractable through scoring and ranking methods" (18, emphasis mine). How users connect with others online is not only traced, but rendered legible via pre-established, quantifiable, and streamlined categories, which help facilitate the smooth commodification of their interactions. How do data markets envision community? First, at any given point in time, online social relations are conceived and structured to be *totally* knowable and mappable through their digital traces. Further, these markets see no contradiction between an economy of connection that reduces gestures of community to data points and the idealized call that animates many "About Us" sections to bring the world closer together. Both go hand in hand to support a particular digital logic of *community made operational*.

To be in common with others, to share and partake, is thus often cast exclusively as a kind of productive work, for example of building, enhancing, or empowering user groups. As Rob Horning argues, social media platforms address their users as "a bunch of isolated nodes connected by its graces and its software, all competing for one another's attention and approval, urged perpetually to up the stakes of their sharing by Facebook's algorithms." This kind of connection is what the platform understands community to be. As such, the language that guides platform development often facilitates and amplifies possibilities for coherence and unity between users and on behalf of users – to connect faster, better, and as continuously as possible. Ever more "improved" possibilities for community formation are said to be bestowed from above by "its graces and its software." At the same time, the underlying economic model of data extraction makes the homogenization of formats imperative: rendering everyone's digital traces quantifiable, and thus trackable and comparable. Activity and communication need to become measurable and categorizable as optimally as possible. Community is here reduced, as philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy similarly writes, to a "project of fusion, or in some general way a productive or operative project" (*Inoperative* 15).

A Counter-Figure of Community

What is obscured when community comes to be seen and managed as a knowable, measurable, and coherent project, striving toward ever greater wholeness? How might one resist such a vision? In his book *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy gestures to the possibility of a "politics of the political," a politics that consciously engages the "the *moment*, the *point*, or the *event* of being-in-common" (x1). This is a politics of "*le politique*," what Christopher Fynsk calls in the Foreword to the book, "the site where what it means to be in common *is open to definition*" (x, emphasis mine).³ Such a politics aims to engage terms – like community, common, communication – not as imperatives, but instead through acts of conscious unworking (i.e. in-operativity). Its aim is to question and unhinge, to the limit, the very thing it wants to preserve – lest praise of the common will "betray its object by having identified it too well" (Nancy, "In Praise" 278). Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* can itself be read as an example of such practices of unworking. Through his writing, Nancy both deconstructs prevalent understandings of community by denying that this concept has any positive content at all, and yet emphasizes the ongoing need to "think community" (22)⁴ over and over. Therefore, the politics of the political resists the allure of closure by emphasizing the impossibility of closure as foundational. It

³ Fynsk: *La politique* (Politics), in contrast to *le politique* (the political), is "the play of forces and interests engaged in a conflict over the representation and governance of social existence" (x).

⁴ Nancy: "[I]t can no longer be a matter of figuring or modeling a communitarian essence in order to present it to ourselves and to celebrate it, but [...] it is a matter rather of thinking community, that is, of thinking its insistent and possibly still *unheard demand*" (*Inoperative* 22).

asks: "What might a politics be that does not stem from the will to realize an essence" (x1)? I would add: what might a politics look like that has the ability to sustain acts of care for the experience of being in a common world with others?

The political – in contrast to the logic of faster/better/optimized – is a kind of failure. It is the foundational and productive failure to sustain a coherent, universally accepted conception of what it means to share a world, and the inability to agree, once and for all, on the terms, practices, or spaces proper to this sharing. Such a site constitutes a *void*, an unruly excess, or a fluid opening that can never be fully incorporated into established definitions of the common.

In her article "Sexual Difference and Ontology," Alenka Zupančič also introduces the term "void" as part of her psychoanalytic reading of the sexual relation underlying the social: "It is a void that registers in the real. It is a nothing, or negativity, with consequences. [...] It is a nothing that walks around and makes trouble" (9). This "nothing," this "nonexistence," is nevertheless generative: it troubles established understandings of the common and the subject through its radical indeterminacy. The void is a possible opening for re-definition or re-imagining: exactly what visions of wholeness and community as "unbroken link" – like those of a fully digitally connected global community – try to deny or efface. This foundational incompleteness can be the gateway towards something else. In other words, towards trouble.

In "Sexuality within the limits of reason alone," Zupančič writes on this point that "the political" is "sexually driven, 'motivated,'" but "not driven by that in the sexual which is, but rather by that which is not" (14). This generative, structuring absence underlies, provokes, and propels the political as an opening for re-definition or re-imagining. No wonder, then, that Lacan himself once claimed: "capitalism, that was its starting point: getting rid of sex" (cited in Copjec, "The Sexual" 40). The political – in the psychoanalytic understanding sexually driven – creates unpredictable conditions, which capitalism cannot abide. Further, the void that characterizes the political is at the same time the place of community. The "unification at stake [in the sexual relation], the tying of all drives to one single purpose, never really works," (8) Zupančič argues, and yet, "there is nothing necessarily a-social in partial drives: [...they] function as the glue of society, as the very *stuff of the communion*" (10, emphasis mine). In other words, the fundamental impossibility of unification, of harmoniously agreeing about what it means to share a world, is the very stuff of community. It makes relation, sharing, and being-in-common possible to begin with. Yet it also troubles the fictive whole that platform capitalism attempts to create. In *Read My Desire*, Joan Copjec criticizes the positivist understanding of social relations underlying efforts at total classification, efforts that are evocative of the claims made about big data's ability to map the totality of the social through digital traces:

[T]he whole of society will never reveal itself in an analytical moment; no diagram will ever be able to display it fully, once and for all. At the same time this acknowledgement does *not* compel us to imagine a society that never quite forms [...]. To say that there is no metalanguage is to say, rather, that society *never stops realizing* itself, that it *continues* to be formed over time. (8f)

The analytical data models of platform capitalism will never be able to fully capture "the generative principle of a society," which "is never storable as such, the way the contents of that society are" (10). This foundational incompleteness cannot be encompassed by any map of society. It is a fugitive surplus. And yet, this principle is precisely what propels society to "never stop realizing itself" and to "continue to form over time." Community, understood in this way, is a never-completed process of becoming.

This void of the political is also the place where community continuously comes into being for Nancy, the place of the never-completed experience of being-in-common. For him, the political (in contrast to Politics) similarly does not have a telos. Against a view of community as an goal-oriented project, something to be produced, or the yearning for complete unity and connection, he proposes the incomplete activity of sharing as community's definitive dynamic. He writes about the foundational importance of such incompleteness:

[T]here is no entity or hypostasis of community because this sharing, this passage cannot be completed. Incompletion is its 'principle,' taking the term 'incompletion' in an active sense, however, as designating not insufficiency or lack, but the activity of sharing, the dynamic, if you will, of an uninterrupted passage through singular ruptures. That is to say, once again, a workless and inoperative activity. It is not a matter of making, producing, or instituting a community; [...] it is a matter of incompleting its sharing. Sharing is always incomplete, or it is beyond completion and incompletion. For a complete sharing implies the disappearance of what is shared. (*Inoperative* 35)

What is shared is not a "something" that can be divided into discrete portions, named and quantified, but a negativity: the experience of incompleteness itself. His conception of sharing here has little in common with the routine acts of self-disclosure or content generation encouraged by various social media platforms, where the act of sharing is often an individualized gesture that is supposed to participate in particular economies of competition for "likes," "reacts," "virality," or "branding," even as it is promoted as an act of connecting with others.

In stark contrast, the activity of sharing for Nancy is neither smooth, quantifiable, nor exhaustive, and while it creates an "uninterrupted passage" it does so by passing through "singular ruptures." His description allows fusion and rupture to exist within the same movement, thus making full completion, coherence, or unity impossible. It individuates *and* bonds. Such sharing creates "a bond that forms ties without attachments, or even less fusion" (*Inoperative* xl). If the other and I were already completely fused, there would be no need to share anything between us. Indeed, there could be no in-between at all. The bond formed between singular ruptures is one that preserves the singular⁵ and its capacity to change and be changed. Singular presences are neither wholly defined by the bond, nor the bond by them. Incompletion here, the foundational impossibility of achieving total coherence and fusion, is not simply a given, but the ongoing activity that *is* community. Community is communal, because it is incomplete, because this incompleteness is the precondition for acts of sharing that allow for the experience of being-in-common. The political is never finished. This failure is simultaneously its promise: it allows for new horizons of possibility to emerge.

Rooted in the radical plasticity of the social, the challenge to definitions of what it means to be in common that defines the political, is at the same time an opening for the new – it is a moment of possibility (including the possibility of its going unheard or unheeded, or being smoothed out of existence by hegemonic forces). Such a moment is not a blank start, nor a harmonious one. From the viewpoint of psychoanalysis, Župančič writes on this point: "the symbolic field, or the field of the Other, is never neutral [...], but conflictual, asymmetrical, 'not all,' ridden by a fundamental antagonism" ("Sexual Difference" 5). Copjec agrees, writing more specifically about theories of non-foundational politics and democracy: "The space inhabited by indeterminate subjects will never be harmonious; a democracy is not a utopia. [...] Yet it is just this conflict that preserves democracy" (*Read* 161). Antagonism ensures that community never stops realizing itself. Moments of the political are conflictual, but at the time allow for the continuous practice of weaving something else out of and into the loosened threads of previous conceptions, myths, and imaginaries. In this way, antagonism is not necessarily destructive, but rather a *mêlée*. As Nancy writes in "In Praise of the *Mêlée*: For Sarajevo, March 1993," a *mêlée* is a practice "of confrontation, transformation, deviation, development, recomposition, combination, cobbling together" (283), each taking place in ongoing moments of care for the never completed experience of the common. Such work also requires cutting apart, or else deliberately leaving or discovering openings for contestation and continuation. "Political," Nancy argues in *The Inoperative Community*, "would mean a community ordering itself to the unworking of its communication, or destined to this unworking: a community consciously undergoing the experience of its sharing" (40). In other words, it would mean a community consciously ordering itself to *allow for the failure* of its communication, where such failure is understood as an opening for the active practice of *sharing* together in the writing of what is means to be in common (which echoes Nancy's definition of "literature" as that which both establishes and interrupts itself (72)). Further, to care for the political means not just to allow for such a "conscious re-ordering," but to actively bring it about and make its associated practices possible and sustainable.

A crucial question this raises is how to articulate and engage in such practices of care for "the experience of community as communication," especially in the current technological moment. Because the world is realized in language, communicative practices and spaces have a central role to play in how the singular experiences alterity, as well as community. What will emerge as an event of community cannot be fully known ahead of time – moments of failure can appear as a surprise. And yet: to continue to trace, in writing or elsewhere, the fluid outline of our communities again and again preserves them through the very acknowledgment of their incompleteness, through the very act of their unworking. It cares for community through both a decisive rejection of the politics of communal purity, optimization, and coherence found in digital imaginaries. It does so through gestures of the political, like unworking or re-writing, or through an embrace of failure and error and illegibility, which nonetheless affirm the importance of being-in-common with others.

⁵ Nancy: "Singular" is Nancy's preferred term over "individual." That is because, he argues, "by its nature – as its name indicates, [the individual] is the atom, the indivisible – the individual reveals that it is the abstract result of a decomposition" (*Inoperative* 3).

Nancy warns, however, that the political is in the process of being "dissolved in the sociotechnical element of forces and needs" (40). While the dimension of the political can never fully disappear and continues to resist, it can become harder to perceive, engage with, or support. As a result, envisioning *something else* will become harder as well. Within a sociotechnical vision, communication is all about success: sender and receiver must share the same, stable code to achieve connection. Their selves and their expressions must remain legible to the system. There is no need or room for conflict, breakdown, or laborious re-interpretation – all possible ways for a moment of the political to appear. This is a kind of "alethosphere," first described by Lacan in Seminar XVII. In the alethosphere, as Joan Copjec elaborates in "May '68, The Emotional Month," "everything [...] is built on the demonstrable truths, rigorous and mathematical, of modern science" (96), and "all that remains of the world beyond the subject [...] is a kind of high-tech heaven, a laicized or 'disenchanted' space filled none the less with every techno-scientific marvel" (96). Here, a "prosthetically enhanced, plugged-in subject" (96) is "[p]atched into a surface network of social circuitry, [where] the subject 'interfaces' with the Other" (97). What is the vision underlying such "interfacing" between subject and Other instituted by the "modern science" of platform capitalism today? Facebook, for instance, urges its users to limit most of their responses to the efficiently condensed: Like, Love, Care, Haha, Wow, Sad, Angry. "What else is there to say?" or "Who even has the time to write out more?," the platform's interface seems designed to argue. As Alexander Galloway writes: "in order for protocol to enable radically distributed communications between autonomous entities, it must employ a strategy of universalization, and of homogeneity. It must be anti-diversity. It must promote standardization in order to enable openness. It must organize peer groups into bureaucracies" (192). Such is the sociotechnical vision of communication that dissolves possibilities for the emergence of the political, of saying something new and different. The political stands against and apart from such a vision of community that is informed by the aspiration to manage, to solve, to produce once and for all. It also stands against a notion of community made operational, made into a work aimed at perfect completion and informed by fever dreams of *total* communion and *total* connection – a kind of *totalitarianism*.⁶

Inoperative Hauntings in the Tech-Utopia of Total Connection

It should come as no surprise that the very spaces that are steeped in the language of renewed possibilities for experiencing community simultaneously give rise to dystopian anxieties over the breakdown of the common. Digital platforms are said to create "filter bubbles" that segregate individual users away from common concerns and into isolated interest spheres through personalized information feeds. They are accused of being a breeding ground for the viral spread of "fake news" and the proliferation of efforts at "election interference" that contribute to increasing polarization and the disappearance of a communally shared understanding of what constitutes a "fact" and what a "scandal." A recent study found extended social media use leads to higher reported feelings of depression and loneliness (Hunt et al.) rather than connection or togetherness. Successful online movements like the "alt-right" (Cooper) outspokenly use technologies of connection to exclude, oppress, belittle, and attack those they deem as lesser others. The proposed solutions still try to optimize community through technology, just differently: programming counter-bots (Little),⁷ automated fact checking (Ananny), increased transparency, more collaborative filtering, or improved programming and design (an 'Important' button! (Pariser)). All of these proposals attempt to *solve the "problem" of the political through technology*.

In his 2017 open letter, Zuckerberg proposes another two such solutions: improving Facebook group suggestion algorithms as a way to "help connect one billion people with meaningful communities" in order to "strengthen our social fabric," and "making it easier to connect with all our representatives in one click" and "engage directly in comments and messages." (Wagner). In fact, he emphasizes, in "the last few months, we have already helped our community double the number of connections between people and our representatives" (Wagner). According to such technoutopian imaginaries at the heart of platform capitalism, societal progress involves continuous addition: measure and count existing connections, and work to double them; find what people might consider

⁶ Nancy: "Fascism was the grotesque or abject resurgence of an obsession with communion; it crystallized the motif of its supposed loss and the nostalgia for its images of fusion" (*Inoperative* 17).

⁷ Little: "Organizations being targeted by a malicious attack could launch 'counter bots' to distract the attackers, and disseminate supportive messages in Twitter replies and Facebook comments. Such "cognitive denial of service" tactics by good bots might reclaim the space that digital attackers use to manufacture consensus. Bots could also be used as a social prosthesis to raise awareness about social issues or to connect activist groups that might otherwise not connect" (n.pg.)

meaningful, and make it easier to click on; identify holes in the societal fabric, and fill them up to make society whole again. This is a politics of the social average, of flattening out context and difference, devoid of political antagonisms inherent in questions of history, justice, or equality. Technology will help perfect the work of community, make it better and better and better until, possibly (hopefully?), there is no longer any need for the political at all. But what if the path to elsewhere, somewhere more just, equitable, and sustainable for instance, leads through the messiness of the political and not around or above it?

The political is not a problem to be solved. Rather, it is the *site* of the inescapable fact of being-in-common – an ontological condition. For Nancy, the political is “the place of community [...], the existence of being-in-common, which gives rise to the existence of being self” (xxxvii). Being self cannot be thought apart from being-in-common. It is “co-originary and coextensive with it” (xxxvii). While the political, as the “place” or “site” of community, can partly disappear (and is doing so according to Nancy), “being-in-common” – as *the* human condition – “will nonetheless never cease to resist” (xli). His use of the term “resistance” here does not connote organized protest or anti-hegemonic collectivities. The ontological fact of being-in-common *is* this resistance purely through its existence – it hinders the smooth work of optimization, streamlining, or categorization through its inherent lack of communal essence and the unruly and indeterminate plurality such a lack gives rise to. Community can never be completed, resolved into a coherent whole; nor can it be perfectly categorized, nor averaged out.

What resists in the alethosphere? Copjec writes: “Within the seemingly well-oiled, smooth functioning alethosphere, the impossible, mythic *objet petit a* assumes the character of a malfunctioning, mechanical nuisance, a toy-like, mechanical thing that does not quite work” (“Emotional Month” 99). She continues later in the article: “The real thing – *jouissance* – can never be ‘dutified’, controlled, regimented; rather, it catches us by surprise, like a sudden, uncontrollable blush on the cheek” (“May ‘68” 110). Like being-in-common for Nancy, *objet petit a*, surplus *jouissance*, is the sand in the machine or the “lack” that the algorithm in our contemporary alethosphere is partly designed to filter out, to dissolve, to disappear, in order to uphold the abstraction of a “purposive and knowable” community around which boundaries can be drawn, identities typified, or communal behavior steered and nudged (Fourcade and Healy 20).⁸ While it can never disappear, the void at the heart of community can be obfuscated, ignored, or denied. The machine that promises authentic community connection is built to automate away this void, the site of community, as best as possible: mobilizing homogenization against indeterminacy.

Community made operational, geared toward perfected coherence, eradicates the conditions for its own existence. The drive towards smooth fusion aims to eradicate experiences of failure, breakdown, sharing, interruption, exposure, clash, *mêlée* (to name just a few associated gestures). The political is not a project to be doubled until completed, or a perfect average to be achieved, but a demand made by being in the world. A machine cannot take on the burden of the political in place of the *we/self*. One cannot even know in advance what might constitute a moment of political possibility – it could emerge as a shock or a surprise. However, this challenge, to come to terms with what it means to be “in common,” to share a world with others, to name the spaces proper to this experience, is also the very condition of being in the world. For Nancy, “community is given to us with being and as being, well in advance of all our projects, desires, and undertakings,” and, ultimately, “it is impossible for us to lose community” (*Inoperative* 35). So what is at stake in critiquing impulses to make community operational is not a fear of loss or degradation of community, but a concern that we might be alienated from this underlying condition – from the fact of being-in-common and the unruly void of indeterminacy that does not precede the self, but is coextensive with it.⁹

Since such a description of community might seem to engage in the same universalizing project I am critiquing, one must recall the political has no positivist content, but exists only as void or opening or an assertion of radical plasticity. To think community as incompleteness is to acknowledge

⁸ I reformulated the original quotation, which is about individual actors, to be about community, since it arguably applies to how community formation is treated and tracked as well.

⁹ As Nancy writes about such a bond: “What we have in common is always also what distinguishes us and differentiates us. What I have in common with a Frenchman is that I am *not* the same Frenchman as he, the fact that our “Frenchness” is nowhere to be found, in no essence, no completed figure. In saying this, it’s not a matter of the nothingness of the figure, but a matter of an outline that is always in the process of being traced, a fiction that is always in the process of being invented, a *melee* of traits” (“In Praise” 286).

fragmentation, antagonism, and dissensus.¹⁰ The political is never finished. Nor is there one proper way to experience or sustain communal relation – there is, indeed, no one, locatable community.¹¹ All the associated gestures and phenomena listed above are contingent on cultural and historical contexts.¹² While relation in this sense can be considered an ontological condition, it is still connected to practices. The void is what we share, but it also animates the sharing we do. As such, its gestures are culturally and historically specific. What was a political event yesterday might no longer hold today. The tracing of an incomplete figure continues.

The Spacing of Experience

How space and spacing of experience are governed by digital logics is a crucial question for identifying gestures of community under contemporary platform capitalism. It points towards how a "politics of the political" might translate into certain practices of caring for spaces of appearance and communication: where and how one could be exposed to, or experience moments of, community. Nancy argues in *The Inoperative Community* that one encounters "the modern experience of community as neither a work to be produced, nor a lost communion, but rather *as space itself*, and the spacing of the experience of the outside, of the outside-of-self" (19, emphasis mine). For him, the experience of community furnishes the "spacing" and "rhythm" of the relation between inner experience and an incommensurable outside (18f). As such, what is at stake in this experience of community is not necessarily a physical space, but a spacing of experience that happens in and through communication as well. The practice of writing can communicate its own particular spacing: it can be a reminder that community is incompleteness, does not make 'sense,' or does not exist as a soon-to-be finished product one can log into and unthinkingly fuse with. Through such reminders, Nancy claims, we can further open up the figure of community to the practice of *sharing* together in the writing of what it means to be in common. He also argues against understanding communication as "a continuity and a transfer of messages" and insists that it is "not a question of establishing rules for communication, it is a question of understanding before all else that in 'communication' what takes place is an *exposition*" (xl), a stepping out from one's self. It is this exposition that "I" share with the other, that makes us the same without making us alike.

By contrast, the logic of community made operational embodied by platform capitalism institutes a space of illusory fusion. For Benjamin H. Bratton, one of the functions of platforms is to serve as "framework for a political architecture." He continues: "what society used to ask of architecture – the *programmatic organization of social connection and disconnection* of populations in space and time – it now (also) asks of software" (43, emphasis mine). That is why "it is far less important how the machine represents politics than how 'politics' physically is that machinic system" (44). Here, again, the medium is the message (McLuhan 7). The content hosted on platforms might be related to this political program or that, but the underlying format, what Bratton calls the machinic system, has its own regulating and disciplining power – its architecture is itself a politics that precludes the political with its own hegemonic rhythm of standardization. As such, it aims to efface the underlying antagonism that defines the space of togetherness with its own simulacra of community, which justifies efforts at predictability, order, and optimization. For Zupančič, "the antagonism of the discursive field is not due to the fact that this field is always 'composed' of multiple elements, [...] competing among themselves and not properly unified; it refers to *the very space* in which these different multiples exist" ("Sexual Difference" 5, emphasis mine). Possibilities for endless participation within the boundaries of such a sociotechnical vision of communication and connection mask an alienation from *the very space of generative antagonism* with plentitude (Hu 147f).¹³ The "political and technological economies" (*Inoperative xli*) of platforms can impose their own spacing of experience through the power to "partition," "distribute," and "institute categories" (Rancière), for example. This

¹⁰ Rancière defines the concept of dissensus as modes "of dissensual subjectification that reveal the difference of a society to itself" (10:32).

¹¹ As Fynsk argues, "'community' cannot be thought as subsisting somewhere beyond the singular acts by which it is drawn out and communicated" (x, Footnote 4).

¹² Copjec argues that "*the real universal is a living surplus* able to negotiate within historical circumstances, not an abstraction added to an already existing world" ("Sexual Compact" 34).

¹³ According to Hu, "What gathering spaces emerge within the cloud are closest to the ambiguously named privately owned public open spaces found in an American city's financial district. Though the landscaping of these pocket parks and rooftop gardens bears a superficial resemblance to public space, these overly tidy zones are nevertheless administered by banks, insurance companies, and the like. The eventual consequence is that the lived knowledge essential for imagining and discussing public space has begun to atrophy." The cloud "increasingly masks the sense of a shared space with plentitude" (147f).

kind of governing power is often exercised through the proxy of the ranking algorithm, yet it is far from neutral. There is a clear politics inherent in determining which content gets to appear first and "most relevant," and which is excluded as "fake," "confusing," "irrelevant," or "inappropriate." At its worst, such a spacing orders communication before it even appears on our screens, "makes seeing unforeseen things more difficult" (Steyerl). This is another way of "solving" the political by making it disappear. It keeps the user from being confronted with an as-yet unintelligible demand that one would "normally have no reason to see or hear" (Rancière 8:24). Such a demand works by catching us off guard and reminding us that the political is never finished, that its demands are constant. We might have thought we knew, for instance, what it means to be a citizen, racialized, gendered, communal, but in fact we can never know conclusively, can never have a complete definition – the outline is still being traced, sometimes for the better, but often through violence.

As part of a starkly different political discourse, Thomas Friedman predicted at the turn of the millennium that the "Internet is going to be like a huge vise that takes the globalization system [...] and keeps tightening that system around everyone, in ways that will only make the world smaller and smaller and faster and faster" (141). What he probably meant to sound uplifting, painting globalization and progress as inevitable, reads much more as an unheeded prophecy of doom. Something crucial is lost in a global system that "keeps tightening ... around everyone" with little escape from its logics, formats, categories, or language. Nancy, writing about a decade earlier, already saw such a "snare": "[C]ommunity, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is *what happens to us* – question, waiting, event, imperative – *in the wake of society*. [...] We alone are lost, we upon whom the 'social bond' (relations, communication), our own invention, now descends heavily like the net of an economic, technical, political, and cultural snare" (*Inoperative* 11f). To think community as "question, waiting, event, imperative" against such a "snare" of social bond rendered operational is still what is at stake: even as technological possibilities for connection are constantly changing, the underlying efforts at control and coherence remain.

To slightly and slowly loosen the hold of such a snare, as well as to expand notions about the event of the political, we must think deeply about how gestures of the political might take root, could be protected, or be made sustainable. In order to build a "community ordering itself to the unworking of its communication" (40), for instance, there has to be an ongoing, collective commitment to a certain set of values – first and foremost a rejection of a politics of purity and fusion. While the concept of the inoperative community is deliberately not a project-oriented one, it does not preclude rethinking, confusing, and resisting platforms, reimagining the limits and guiding visions of technology and language alike, and further enabling gestures of co-writing community. To care for shared spaces of the political, sites of communication and appearance, is intimately bound up with the committed work of bringing about "another *praxis* of discourse and community" (26). Emphasizing the persistent temporality of nurture, while still acknowledging the importance of moments of clash, also recognizes that they do not surface out of nowhere: counter-infrastructures were maintained, collectivity slowly built, food cooked, time and resources freed up for thought, writing, or protest.

Against the oft-repeated suggestion to simply opt out of digital gathering spaces stands the threat that their logics are not confined to the internet. While opting out might coincide with collective interventions of opting into a digital public life reimagined according to different sets of values than those upheld by private corporations, strategies of opting out tend to deemphasize the potential of such communal interventions in favor of a more isolated and individualized approach. However, given the large reach and influence of digital platforms, as well as their capacity for productive failures *despite* their avowed aspirations, it is crucially important to acknowledge the need to take collective responsibility for these kinds of discursive spaces and to build and nurture alternative logics of appearance – in an attempt to care for the conditions of possibility for the political.

Conclusion

If community happens in digital gathering spaces, it happens *despite* – despite the architectures that regulate and partition experience, despite the logic of attention and click economies, despite the nudging toward behavior modification and the optimization of connections, despite the facilitation of ever more "engagement" and data accumulation. It happens despite the logic of an information economy built on the commodification and quantifiability of communication. It happens despite the corporate efforts to institute an operationalized community and against yet "another techno-economical imperative, and the social forms that such an imperative creates" (*Inoperative* 23). Instead, moments of being-in-common might be found in the irrelevant, the inconvenient, the unexpected, the breakdown – when the authoritative architecture of the platform is negated, ignored,

or confused or when unruly plurality disturbs the work of the social average and refuses to be optimized away.

As such, gestures of inoperative community are embodied in the figure of the "failed" user, who in various ways refuses the slogan "Become an active subject" and "represents the queer stoppage of technological (re)productivity" (Hu 50). Communal misuse and the emergence of the political, however limited, are possible and present online: users give false identifying information, create design mods and install obfuscation applications, deliberately confuse the algorithm, or crash servers through collective attacks. Users also, quite simply, fail to live up to the vision of the platform and act in any way close to a harmonious unity. Reminders of the void of the political might also be found in a human embrace of technological failure, like the glitch. Artist and theorist Rosa Menkam describes the glitch in this regard as a "wonderful interruption that shifts an object away from its ordinary form and discourse, towards the ruins of destroyed meaning" and "as an (actual and/or simulated) break from an expected or conventional flow of information or meaning within (digital) communication systems that results in a perceived accident or error." These examples and others might help illuminate how to "recognize in the thought of community a theoretical excess (or more precisely, an excess in relation to the theoretical) that would oblige us to adopt another *praxis* of discourse and community" (Inoperative 25f) in the current technological moment. Another such *praxis* is ultimately at stake. This practice does not arise out of a will to realize an essence and achieve ever greater connection and coherence, but in order to be able to continue asking, thinking, or writing what it means to be in common, to share the world with others, *anew and differently*. This is an ongoing practice: not towards a particular goal or greater fusion, but in moments of sharing in the never completed writing of community.

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