

Platform Psychoanalysis: What Does the Algorithm Want?

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Matthew FLISFEDER

Platform Psychoanalysis: What Does the Algorithm Want?

So many of us today are more than aware of the common criticisms of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Google, SnapChat, YouTube, and TikTok. Who among us does not already know in detail about the critique of digital platforms?

They cause us to be anti-social.

They are addictive and psychologically damaging, leading to new forms of anxiety.

They manipulate us into following and believing in dogmatic ideologies set on feedback loops.

They have the potential to push people towards extremist views.

So much of this is already well known by users of platform media in general. Add to this the various online streaming platforms, like Netflix, Disney+, Apple TV+; online retailers, like Amazon; various different ride sharing apps, like Uber; food delivery services, like Skip the Dishes; and, dating apps, like Tinder—it is apparent that digital platforms (and what we used to call the “internet of things” (IOT)) has come to occupy so much of our real world living in twenty-first century global capitalism. Yet, while we make use of these tools in our everyday lives, we are also all hyper aware of the way they have the potential to manipulate our desires and worldviews based on the technics of big data, platform analytics, and algorithmic mediation. Not only do we question the role that platforms play in enhancing social life; also, we are increasingly concerned about problems tied to social media surveillance, distraction, and control. Books, such as Shoshana Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, and others, such as *Why Social Media is Ruining Your Life* (Ormerod) and *Anti-Social Media* (Vaidhyanathan), draw our attention to many of the deleterious aspects of using platform media and technology. The Netflix documentary, *The Social Dilemma*, has also convincingly demonstrated the ways that social media platforms, as well as the tech sector and Silicon Valley more generally, may be potentially harmful to our lives.

We hear all the time about big tech, big data, platform capitalism (Srnicsek), communicative capitalism (Dean), surveillance capitalism (Zuboff), control society (Deleuze), and so forth. The Edward Snowden leaks about the PRISM program in 2013 provided evidence for what we all already secretly believed: that our online interactions and communications are all the time being monitored and collected by mega corporations and the government. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, revealed by whistle blower, Christopher Wylie, in 2018 taught us even more about the ways platforms manipulate users’ views of the world and the ways this impacts our actions and behaviors, our ethics and our politics.

Now, during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, it seems to be the case, increasingly, that possibilities for escaping our attachments to digital platforms are shrinking; all the while, tech billionaires, like Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, and now Elon Musk are getting richer and richer, while our addictions to social technologies may be making us increasingly anxious. Some choose to retreat from more public presentations of self and selfhood into the safe position of mere “lurking.” Others more self-consciously manage their online reputations, a component of identity construction in the neoliberal age of human capital and the entrepreneur-of-the-self. Still others may be dragged into the muddy waters of the online culture wars because, after all, there’s always someone who is wrong on the internet, as one popular cartoon once suggested.

But, perhaps, the strangest aspect to all of this is the fact that many of us already know very well the ways that platforms operate, what they do, and whose interests they serve; but nevertheless, we continue to act as if this were not the case. This, of course, recalls the famous phrase from the psychoanalyst, Octave Manoni, describing the operation of fetishism: *je sais bien, mais quand même...* (I know very well, but nevertheless...). While some of this may be explained by the ubiquity of platforms in our everyday lives, materially, it is still worth asking how platforms relate to the subjectivizations of culture and our society ideologically. This issue of *CLCWeb* on Platform Psychoanalysis aims to assess this question.

What might this approach look like? If Silicon Valley is the Hollywood of the twenty-first century, might we start to consider, in the humanistic sciences, applying some of the methodologies of the previous century in the studies of cinema, popular culture and media, to our contemporary platform media, the way they reproduce ideological hegemony in the new era of crisis capitalism, and emergent forms of subjectivity?

Drawing on a combination of Marxist and psychoanalytic methodologies, in my book, *Algorithmic Desire: Toward a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media*, I argue that despite knowing so many of the harmful impacts of social media, the term (social media”, itself, is still useful. The concept of “social media,” I argue, helps us highlight many of the problems with contemporary platform media systems, pointing out the ways platforms actually *betray* our social being. But more than simply that, the critique

of social media, and especially their contexts in platform capitalism, help us to see not only what is problematic about our media, but more importantly what is problematic about the predominant (neo)liberal capitalist society. One question that people ask about social media, and platform media more generally, given the various popular criticisms, is whether or not platform companies like Facebook betray the values of our society. I think that this is a very good question because it helps us to examine not merely the problems of platform media, but also, and more broadly, the contradictory values of liberal democratic society in general.

The values of liberal society, on the one hand, include those of freedom, equality, progress, universality, and so forth. But these are valued primarily at the level of the individual. When we speak about freedom and equality in liberal society we often mean an equality of free, private individuals at the formal level of rights. Everyone has rights of access, even if, materially, barriers to access exist that prevent equality of outcome. Progress, too, in liberal society, is often measured, as the late cultural thinker, Mark Fisher, put it, in terms of technological upgrades, rather than in terms of other measures, like the extension of freedom or cultural shifts. Rather than measuring progress in terms of technological development, we can, in the Kantian sense, examine the degree of social, cultural, and political maturity of the society in its movement towards enlightenment. Looking at things in this way, we can potentially turn our focus around to show what platform media indicate about the historical development of our culture.

Thus, on the other hand, by prioritizing individual, private, freedoms, such as the freedom to own private property, and to engage in free and equal exchange in the space of the market, liberalism is also tied to the generation of the capitalist mode of production. Therefore, when we ask whether or not platform media, and all businesses in capitalism, for that matter, betray our values, we start to see in what way the values of liberal society are split between formal rights and material access. While so many benevolent liberals desire freedom and equality, including racial and gendered equality, for instance, they remain blinded to the fact that the necessity for—as well as the artificial reproduction of—inequality in capitalism, makes it impossible for the values of freedom and equality to be actualized internal to liberal democratic society.

As a system based on production for profit generated through the exploitation of labor, inequality is an inherent feature of capitalism, a system based on the same principles of individual freedom found in liberalism. Platform media, then, too, insofar as they exist in a world structured by multinational capital, are also driven first and foremost by profit maximization; and, this is not simply the product of greed. Rather, the constant pursuit of ever-expanding profits is driven by competition. Businesses have to get bigger and better faster than their competitors, otherwise they risk going out of business. Platform media companies, we know, build revenue through the commodification of our participation and the collection of our data. Therefore, they are driven to do whatever they can to keep our attention, including curating content to users in ways that drive more and more participation. Platform companies are in competition for our attention because that's what drives profit maximization. In this way, platforms showcase for us modalities of psychosocial subjectivation and interpellation.

All of this, then, does not seem to provide an answer to the question of whether or not platform media betray the values of our society. But this question does help to show how and why the values of our society are *contradictory*. Perhaps a better question, and sticking with the very concept of *social* media, might be to ask how we can actually *socialize* and materialize the values of freedom and equality. In other words, perhaps the problem with platform media has less to do with anything inherent to the medium or the technology and has more to do with the fact that our society prioritizes the interests of private individuals over that of the public good. In fact, one of the key points about socialism (if we are still permitted to use this concept as one of emancipation) is to show that individual freedoms are best met when we prioritize the public good. Or, put differently, we might come to see that there is no freedom without *universal* freedom. A system based on inequality is under the constant threat of instability. Even in the context of supposed democracy, we start to see that when individual or particular interests are given priority over the public good, this has the potential to devolve into harmful forms of chauvinism and bigotry.

Seeing things in these terms we begin to understand that it's not that social media platforms betray the values of liberal democratic society; rather, they amplify the least sustainable dimensions of its values, showing us that the problem lies not with platforms but with the contradictions in the form of liberal democratic values. It's only in the context of society that prioritizes the public good over the private interests of individuals that our media will reflect the social values contained in the concept of social media.

Parking the question of values for a moment, I think that an even more complex question to ask is whether or not people truly *desire* such a society in the first place. One way to read the relative material and economic success of platforms is to see how far capitalism has been able to libidimize our attachment to our collective *failure* to achieve this kind of universal freedom. In *Algorithmic Desire* I explore the idea that social media algorithms have managed to tap into our collective enjoyment of *failure*. Making this claim requires understanding the psychoanalytic thesis that desire operates insofar as the object desired remains forever lost (the Lacanian concept of the object-cause of desire, or the *objet petit a*). This of course seems counterintuitive, but it helps us to grasp the fact that our enjoyment is tied in part to our ability to *transgress* norms and standards. If our enjoyment is tied to transgression, then we are in constant pursuit of limits or authorities to transgress. We enjoy, in other words, only insofar as we are able to keep searching for and pursuing what we desire. In this nexus, we are caught between an obsessional desire for limitations, and a perverse desire to impose or have limitations imposed upon us.

This is an admittedly cynical perspective on the problem. Nevertheless, the analysis of social media algorithms and platform design and aesthetics, along with the political economic analysis of social media, helps us to understand that cynicism is the form that ideology has taken in twenty-first century capitalism. The problem today is that we cannot even imagine any alternative to neoliberal capitalism; and in place of such a lack of imagined alternative we remain caught by our unconscious enjoyment and attachment to this failure. With this in mind, though, and through the valence of the critique of platform media, I believe that we are better equipped to grasp the contradictions of (neo)liberal society. We are able to affirm the side of the contradiction we support, while identifying that which we hope to negate. While affirming the social side in the concept of social media—that is, the extension of the values of freedom and equality—we hope to negate the side prioritizing individual private interest, inequality, and exploitation. The critique of social media is not just one of the platforms, but of the contradictions of liberal democratic society itself. At the same time, our libidinal attachments to the platforms help us to identify and understand the kinds of contradictory desires that might prevent us from actualizing universal emancipation, keeping us stuck on the side of cynical reasoning. The hardest question of all is not whether platforms betray our values but whether or not there is truly a collective desire for universal freedom.

What, then, does psychoanalytic criticism offer us as a practice for critically interrogating algorithmic platform media? How do platforms and algorithms play with and feed off our enjoyment and our desires, our fantasies, and our drives? These are questions dealt with by the contributions to this special issue of *CLCWeb* on Platform Psychoanalysis. It aims to add to the growing body of literature already dealing with the psychoanalytic interrogation of platforms, and this issue includes some of the scholars who have already contributed to this field (see, for instance, Burnham; Johanssen; and, Johanssen and Krüger). The authors, here, ask, collectively: what does the algorithm want?

Reframing the prompt for this special issue, Clint Burnham, in his article, "Lacan and the Algorithm," asks, instead, about the wanting or the desiring structure of the algorithm representative of the machinic dimensions of subjectivity, as such. Burnham turns to an examination of Lacanian algorithms in response. Drawing this out, he provocatively concludes, based on Lacan's anti-humanist view of subjectivity, that the internet, with all of its various problematics, is a manifestly humanist project, perhaps one that reflects the contradictions of liberal society noted above.

Yet, another way that platforms and social media in particular conform to the liberal ideology is via their subversion of their apparently social dimensions. Playing on the notion of "creeping" or the figure of the "creeper," Alois Sieben analyzes Google, in his article, "Stalking Oneself: The Fantasmatic Intersubjectivity of Google," as a site with a troubling space of intersubjectivity. Through a comparison of Caroline Kepnes' novel, *You*, and Olivia Sudjic's book, *Sympathy*, Sieben investigates digital stalking as a transfer of "intersubjective conflict" onto the way Google facilitates mass intersubjective relations. In both novels, the stalker ultimately ends up enraptured with themselves. Similarly, Google, according to Sieben, shows us how platforms organize our desire to be social *with ourselves*. His argument may then counter some of our heightened paranoid anxieties about digital surveillance.

While, still, so much of the field of platform studies has been focused on Foucault and Deleuze inflected critiques of surveillance, psychoanalytic and particularly Lacanian analyses of platforms have sought to center enjoyment and desire. Moving away from the surveillance paradigm, Jack Black, in his article, "'Love They Social Media!': Hysteria and the Interpassive Subject," thus, looks at the way that the position of the subject as hysteric can draw attention away from popular conceptions of the algorithm as, itself, problematic, towards a reading of the algorithm as interpassive (as opposed to interactive with the subject), drawing on Robert Pfaller's understanding of the latter. Interpassivity, according to Black, challenges, while reorienting our conceptions of the algorithm.

Scott Krzych, similarly, relies on Pfaller's conception of interpassivity and Lacan's conception of wit to look at ways Right-wing memes and misinformation relate to questions of contemporary subjectivity on platform media. In his article, "'There is no pandemic': On Memes, Algorithms and other Interpassive Forms of Right-wing Disbelief," Krzych looks at examples of Right-wing memes that circulated during the Covid-19 pandemic. He sees the various memes circulated as a representation of a form of ambivalence towards the pandemic—neither wholly dismissive of the situation, nor completely embracing of regulations put in place to grapple with it. Krzych uses a psychoanalytic framework to address such ambivalent reactions to the pandemic from the conservative and Trumpian Right, as well as the proliferation of misinformation online. Krzych's framework tries to avoid the false choice between more utopian perspectives of participatory culture on the internet and the more dystopian framings regarding algorithmic manipulation.

Focusing further on reactionary dimensions of platform and algorithmic media, Anthony Faramelli and Imogen Piper, in their article, "Everybody Wants to be a Fascist Online: Psychoanalysis and the Digital Architecture of Fascism," develop a psychosocial examination of fascist radicalization on digital platforms, like YouTube. They draw on Félix Guattari's understanding of fascism as the unification of love and death, Thanatos and Eros. Focusing on online radicalization, they emphasize the micropolitics of desire produced by digital platforms, as well as the technological infrastructure that facilitates this movement. Platforms, they claim, have thus created a bridge between the drive for life and the drive for death.

Turning things back around towards the algorithm, Sarah Thorne writes, in her article, "#Emotional: Exploitation & Burnout in Creator Culture," about forms of anxiety and burnout felt by YouTube content creators insofar as they seem to directly satisfy the desire of the platform algorithm. Thorne draws, specifically, on the clinical structures of neurosis and perversion to ask about the cultural psychosocial impacts of content creation as a career in digital capitalism. The platform structure of sites, like YouTube, according to her, command extraordinary powers in practices of subjectivization conducive to the digital culture industry.

Again, noting the myriad of difficulties and problems with social media platforms I've already listed above, and with a particular attention to their practices of individuation, Ryan Engley, in his article, "The Social Sinthome," proposes that the only hope of responding must consider the impacts of group dynamics on the individual subject. For psychoanalysis, according to Engley, the social is, itself, a problem. The social becomes a burden for the individual subject. Engley addresses this problem, as it relates to our dilemmas with social media, with reference to the Lacanian concept of the *sinthome*, or the "radical" kernel of enjoyment. Doing so, according to Engley, allows us to grasp the individual, via platform media, as always already a social being.

Connected to the question of the social, Irina Kalinka, in her article, "Community Despite Connection: Resisting the Digital Logics of Optimization and Failure," asks about the construction of community in platform media. Community, according to her, gets deployed, yet is mischaracterized by digital spaces, such as Facebook, in order to facilitate the work of the platform. Kalinka, thus, proposes a *counter-reading* of the category of community. Similar to Joan Copjec's interpretation of "sex" as a negative phenomenon that cannot, as such, be located anywhere in positive reality, Kalinka argues that "community" functions in the same way, resembling what Jean-Luc Nancy has called the "inoperative community."

In her article, "Algorithms as Allegories: COMPAS and the Purloined Word," Macy McDonald draws on Edgar Allan Poe's short story, *The Purloined Letter*, and Jacques Lacan's well known essay on Poe's text, to read the function of algorithms allegorically, specifically project management software used to make decisions regarding recidivism by parole boards. McDonald asks about the public impact of automated decision systems, particularly when they contain unconscious and racist biases.

Considering ways to apply psychoanalytic interpretation to cloud computing platforms, Marshall Armintor, in his article, "Amazon Web Services, The Lacanian Unconscious, and Digital Life," shows how networks, like Amazon Web Services (AWS), recall the function of the unconscious, and the operation of fantasy, in the Lacanian sense. While mainstream discourse tends to compare artificial intelligence to humanity on the grounds of rational decision-making practices, Armintor shows that it is, precisely, non-rational decision making that psychoanalysis reveals on the side of the subject. AWS, in a similar fashion, according to Armintor, is driven by a pulsation of desire.

Finally, Jacob Johanssen, in his article, "'For the Moment, I am Not Fucking', I am Tweeting: Platforms of/as Sexuality," argues that social media platforms emulate relations in infantile sexuality. He develops this argument by showing that social media platforms mimic sexuality, itself. Social media users, he claims, are drawn to platforms because of the way they draw on a desire to return to infantile sexuality. In a fascinating way, Johanssen demonstrates how users revert to infantile sexuality, which, because of

their social and ideological function, platforms transform into adult sexuality. For him, this function is tied to the subject's desire for recognition. Johanssen claims, nevertheless, that there is creative potential in this process, which is, however, undermined by platform capitalism.

Completion of this collection of articles and essays would not have been possible without the generous work of Oded Nir. I want to thank him for his patience and for inviting me to edit this special issue on Platform Psychoanalysis. I also want to thank all of the contributors for their exciting work in this field. To readers, I cannot conclude this introduction without prompting you with the superego injunction: Enjoy!

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