The Political Economy of Communication
11(2), 1-3

http://www.polecom.org

Editorial

Thomas Allmer, Paderborn University, Germany

Paško Bilić, Institute for Development and International Relations, Croatia

Benjamin Birkinbine, University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, USA

Jaka Primorac, Institute for Development and International Relations, Croatia

Jernej Amon Prodnik, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Toni Prug, University of Rijeka, Croatia

Sašo Slaček Brlek, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

The media are central institutions of modern societies, providing channels for corporate and political control and public space for disseminating and consuming information on systemic changes in politics, culture, and economics to the public. The media underwent massive restructuring through neoliberal policies in the 1970s. Introducing new communication technologies such as satellite and cable television, the internet, and web platforms went hand in hand with market liberalisation and communication commercialisation. The multiplication of channels and media outlets was accompanied by the concentration and centralisation of ownership. Recently, large transnational digital platforms have solidified their position as core companies within contemporary capitalism, restructuring the distribution of media advertising investments, speeding up the circulation of capital, automating global consumption patterns, avoiding national taxes, and syphoning revenues to offshore entities.

At the same time, they benefit from automated management of their diversified and essentially precarious workforces of content moderators, warehouse workers, and gig workers, as well as from software inputs from free and open-source communities (FLOSS). The rise of platforms and algorithms reshapes traditional institutional mechanisms that broadly safeguard freedom of expression, media pluralism, and public interests. An open political issue is how these mechanisms will be reconsidered and how private interests will shape markets and societies. Alternatives are envisioned in areas ranging from platform cooperatives and commons projects to strategic calls for technological sovereignty and public wealth creation. However, such initiatives usually need broader political support from the public. This is a difficult undertaking. The commodification of everyday life through data capture, surveillance and privacy intrusion is easily dismissed by citizens as a minor side effect of free usage and flexibility of ubiquitous digital services.

The critical political economy of communication and media explores ownership, production, content, consumption, labour, regulation, and contemporary topics such as algorithms, platforms, data, and artificial intelligence. It looks at how capital and the state(s) control, regulate and form the media (broadly conceived as ranging from traditional printed press to algorithms and software) in societies shaped by persistent social inequalities. The level of analysis can vary from the macro phenomena of geopolitics, transnational, national and institutional dynamics, through to mid-range phenomena (such as analyses of public spheres). Micro-phenomena would cover class-based inequalities of access and skill concerning the use of media in everyday life and work.

Under this broad conceptual umbrella, the inaugural 'Political Economies of the Media' postgraduate biennial course was held at the Interuniversity Centre (IUC) in Dubrovnik, Croatia, between 11 and 15 September 2023.[1] It was co-organised by the Institute for Development and International Relations from Zagreb, Croatia and the Department of Journalism, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. A total of seven co-directors were responsible for evaluating student applications and providing them with feedback: Thomas Allmer (Paderborn University, Germany), Paško Bilić (Institute for Development and International Relations, Croatia), Benjamin Birkinbine (University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, USA), Jaka Primorac (Institute for Development and International Relations, Croatia), Jernej A. Prodnik (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia), Toni Prug (University of Rijeka, Croatia), and Sašo Slaček Brlek (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia).

The course included keynote presentations by Christian Fuchs (Paderborn University, Germany) and Kylie Jarrett (University College Dublin, Ireland), presentations by course directors, and presentations by thirteen PhD students coming from Austria, Canada, Germany, Greece, Netherlands, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, UK, and USA. Through lectures and discussions with keynotes, co-directors, and their fellow participants, students gained in-depth knowledge and feedback about recent communication, media, and journalism developments from the critical perspective of the political economy.

This special issue is only a selection from a wide range of innovative, interdisciplinary and thought-provoking PhD project presentations. We are certain that all of these students will develop successful publishing track records as their projects move to more advanced stages. Our special issue is aimed at helping those who are near PhD completion gain a wider audience for their exciting work. This will open new directions to the political economy of the media.

Tobias Stadler's article situates digital capitalism within the longue durée of capitalist transformation. Drawing on Marxist conceptualisations of primitive accumulation, Landnahme, and real subsumption, Stadler examines how digital infrastructures, particularly open standards and protocols such as XMPP and ActivityPub, are being enclosed and reconfigured by corporate actors. His analysis unfolds across three key dimensions: first, the logic of datafication and exploitation underpinning commercial social networking platforms; second, the reshaping of subjectivities and modes of social reproduction within these enclosures; and third, the ideological legitimations that render these processes seemingly inevitable. Stadler argues that ideologies of technological progress and determinism obscure the capitalist logics at play, facilitating the normalization of corporate enclosure under the guise of innovation.

Building on concerns around the opacity of digital infrastructures, Thomas Zenkl's contribution explores the methodological challenges involved in studying algorithmic governance and its effects on everyday life. Inspired by the tradition of peasant resistance and the methodological device of "breaching experiments," Zenkl proposes a tactical research agenda aimed at rendering visible the often-subconscious resistances users deploy against algorithmic control. His analysis underscores how algorithmic power operates not only through technical systems but also through cultural imaginaries of neutrality and precision. In response, Zenkl advocates for an empirical approach capable of surfacing users' tacit knowledge and embodied engagements with algorithmic systems. This would reposition research participants as active agents rather than passive recipients of technological governance.

Turning toward the working conditions of media practitioners, Igor Išpanović critically examines the precarisation of local journalists in Serbia. His article foregrounds the entanglement of political and economic forces in shaping the vulnerabilities experienced by journalists in the country's transitioning post-socialist context. Based on qualitative interviews with practitioners in local newsrooms, Išpanović demonstrates that digital technologies have both enabled new forms of journalistic practice and exacerbated the precariousness of labour. Notably, he argues that this precarisation cannot be fully understood through Western-centric models of capitalism; instead, it must be contextualised within the politicised nature of Serbian media ownership, clientelism, and the uneven effects of platformisation. This contribution calls for a more expansive conceptualisation of precarious work that recognises its situated, political dimensions.

Finally, Corinne Weinstein's article interrogates the neoliberal underpinnings of identity politics within American television production. Situated in the context of recent labour struggles and shifts in industry practices, Weinstein critiques how progressive ideals of diversity and inclusion are increasingly co-opted by neoliberal imperatives. Through an analysis of the "neoliberalisation of identity politics," she demonstrates how the industry deploys representational diversity as a market strategy while disarticulating it from its political origins. The rise of "prestige television" further complicates this dynamic, as thematic complexity and aesthetic sophistication obscure the economic logics underpinning media production. Weinstein's contribution thus raises urgent questions about the commodification of identity and the limits of representational politics within a commercial media system.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue offer a critical cartography of contemporary political economy shaped by digital infrastructures, algorithmic governance, and the restructuring of cultural labour. Rather than treating these developments as discrete or technologically driven, the contributors foreground their imbrication within broader projects of capitalist regulation, ideological reproduction, and social transformation. In mapping these intersections, the issue advances a nuanced, interdisciplinary agenda for understanding the complex configurations of power, resistance, and inequality in the digital age.

The Political Economy of Communication
11(2), 4–23

http://www.polecom.org

On Open Standards and Proprietary Infrastructures: Continuous Integration and Regulation through Capitalist Enclosures

Tobias Stadler, University of Oldenburg, Germany

Keywords: digital capitalism; enclosures; infrastructure; subjectification; protocols

Abstract

Capitalism has constantly changed; it rebuilds and regulates itself through crises and struggles–digital capitalism is no exception. Often described as a historical break, its strategies and objectives are a direct continuation of all forms of capitalism prior. But the normalisation of networked devices, the datafication of everyday life and the privatisation of digital infrastructures offered capitalism a new mode of regulation built around enclosures. The recent histories of open digital protocols and standards like `XMPP` and `activityPub` illustrate the logics of platformisation, centralisation and exploitation which guide the current enclosures. This article sketches the arrival and enforcement of a new digital capitalism. With reference to the modern tools of "corporate cloud orchestration" and "configuration management", I show that the logics of capital accumulation are not fundamentally changed by digital capitalism but are reconfigured and rearranged to fit specific purposes.

Modern server infrastructures are continuously upgraded, rebuilt, rewritten, adapted or optimised. Any institution hosting their own servers today hardly ever has a physical piece of equipment in their basement anymore. Instead, they rent highly abstracted resources like processing time, storage space or bandwidth in discreet units, billed after usage. Creating a network of such virtual machines enables them to build systems automatically scaling up and down, depending on variable demand [1]. Cloud Engineers and DevOps technicians build them following a paradigm called "infrastructure as code". Here, they write actual text in a specific syntax into configuration files, often identified by their file ending `.conf`, which are then processed and deployed by "orchestration"- and "configuration-management" software. In what is called a "continuous integration/continuous deployment" (CI/CD) pipeline, several programs in sequence first connect to a cloud infrastructure provider to order resources via their API (Application Programming Interface). The resulting virtual machine is then set up by installing and configuring any software needed in order to finally integrate it into the existing network. The point of these pipelines is to seamlessly deploy changing code into running systems, so new patches and updates do not interfere with ongoing processes. They also enable systems to dynamically respond to changing requirements. If something like a surge of user activity happens, such hyperscaling systems can automatically allocate new resources to adapt to the new conditions, which will stabilise the cloud environment [2].

In this article I will analyse moments of enclosure and subsumption as crucial parts of digital capitalism's continuous reconfiguration. Following the model of cloud-based orchestration systems, I will take a look at the way digital capitalism manages and orchestrates resources (from machines and infrastructures to labour, communities and knowledge), configurations (from production processes to spaces and subjectivities) and networks (from circulation, to computers and ideologies). After a short discussion of some theories of digital capitalism and Marxist theories of enclosure, I will address the enclosure and subsumption of the social in regard to commercial social networking platforms.

Capitalism as a social order and mode of production is plagued by regular crises, both internal and external. It is therefore in constant need of continuously implemented changes. While most changes are small and seem inconspicuous, others are more obvious and involve ruptures and transformations. Analysing the patterns of capitalist reproduction shows that the transformation to digital capitalism is not simply a historical break, but also a continuation and an update of capitalism's logics. Regardless of how many changes were made to its `.conf`-files.

Outside, behind or beyond capitalism?

Most accounts of digital capitalism offer a theory of how this regime emerged and a narrative of transformation which often includes specific forms of capitalist enclosure. The process whereby a new phase of capitalism comes into view is termed by critical technology scholar Jathan Sadowski as "terraforming". This evokes the science fiction theme of transforming barren planets into hospitable surroundings: "[Terraforming] is directed at creating conditions for a specific model of human life that is engineered according to the imperatives of digital capitalism. In the process, it also changes how people live in and interact with their environments" (Sadowski, 2020: 52).

While Sadowski develops a theoretically founded and critical perspective on the emergence of digital capitalism, others use the concept more loosely or colourfully. Early usages of the concept include that of Dan Schiller (1999), who described how network technologies uniquely generalise the economic and social logics of capitalism, and Nick Dyer-Whiteford (1999), who used it to move Negri's operaismo analysis forward. But the phenomenon has been widely discussed under various different names before and after, from Alvin Toffler's "information society" (1980) to Ursula Huws' "cybertariat" (2014). A related, widely adopted concept is Shoshana Zuboff's "surveillance capitalism" (2019). Initially coming from the field of management studies, Zuboff offers an account of what she calls the "void" between the need for individual determination and the actual lack of control over one's circumstances of living. She then describes how various tech firms used emerging new technologies to fill that void with personalised forms of consumption, like Apples iTunes or Amazons book recommendations. Actual surveillance capitalism later came into being, encapsulated by the fact that one engineer at Google had the idea to use the server logs—what she describes as "data exhaust" of people using the search engine—to not only improve search results, but also to personalise ads, and to predict and influence people's behaviour. In Zuboff's tale though, it seems that surveillance capitalism began as one corporation starting to do bad things as a "rogue mutation", driven by "novel economic imperatives" independently of the surrounding capitalist economy (2019: 11).

Other accounts take longer historical processes into consideration. Specifically, these include the hegemony of global, financialised neoliberalism installed since the 1980s (Dean, 2020), the enormous public funding for digital surveillance and security technologies during the "war on terror" in the 2000s, and the increasing civil unrest of the new social movements throughout the 2000s and 2010s (Tarnoff, 2022). In these contexts, the way was paved for a handful of platform corporations to dominate entire market sectors, often operating as monopolies in their field. Lax market regulations and strategic transgressions of labour laws enabled them to circumvent anti-trust laws and to externalise the risks of their operations onto their precariously employed workers. Government money flowing into private infrastructures and the research concerning new information-communication technologies offered platform corporations their material basis. Further, cheap money through venture capital and low interest rates enabled them to buy up potential competition.

Yet another strand of discussion around the emergence of digital capitalism describes it as a new form of feudalism (Deans, (2020). Other authors speak of "data colonialism". In this context, media scholars Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias (2019: 340) describe the nebulous digital realm being framed as "terra nullis" through legal and philosophical frameworks, which ready the underlying natural resources for extraction and expropriation into the "social quantification sector". While their analysis of this changing economic regime is itself insightful, their description would work just as well without "colonialism". Terms like "enclosures" or "accumulation" could locate the same phenomena well within capitalism itself and avoid implied comparison to the atrocities of chattel slavery and colonial genocides.

Describing the expansion of capital accumulation logic into new spheres of life as a colonial process has a long tradition. The restructuring of social life according to disciplinatory factory rule as a consequence of real subsumption was termed by early autonomist Marxist Mario Tronti as an "inner colonisation" (1974: 36). The gendered logic of expropriating reproductive labour compelled the Marxist-feminist authors Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, Maria Mies and Claudia van Werlhof to describe women as "the last colony" of capitalism (1992). However, neither of these descriptions needs the term "colonialism" to describe the phenomenon taking place. Violent or ideologically normalised appropriation of value produced by (very often racialised and/or gendered) people has been a core part of capitalist accumulation in almost all of its historical stages, although in changing configurations. Silvia Federici (2004), whose feminism was also heavily influenced by autonomist Marxism, argued that this was the case for the patriarchal divisions of productive and reproductive labour as well as for the techniques of disciplining work forces. The same can be said for the cheaply produced resources and commodities flowing from global peripheries back to the imperial centres. A similar point is made by critical theorist Nancy Fraser, who talks about the difference between expropriation on the one hand—the unfree forms of labour, the value of which capitalism mostly appropriates without any compensation—and exploitation on the other—the waged labour, organised by contracts, which is often the main focus of orthodox Marxist analysis:

> I maintain that expropriation has always been entwined with exploitation in capitalist society; that even "mature" capitalism relies on regular infusions of commandeered capacities and resources, especially from racialised subjects, in both its periphery and its core; that its resort to them is not just sporadic, but a regular aspect of business-as-usual. (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 44)

Both Federici and Fraser, while differing in aspects of their analysis, are part of a strand of Marxist thought which argues for the central importance of such “regular infusions”. These analyses often draw upon Marx’ writings on “primitive accumulation” and Rosa Luxemburg’s work on capitalist economics. In both contexts, enclosures are necessary for capital accumulation. This perspective on the history and workings of capitalism enables us to look at its contemporary transformations without assuming a sharp break. Changing historical conditions bring forward new regimes of accumulation through innovation or struggle, depending on who you ask. Regardless, capital is acting and reacting to changing historical conditions in ways which are “terraforming” our world and social relations. By continuously reconfiguring its networks of production, its regimes of property and propertisation, while simultaneously rewiring its global circuits, capitalism evolves along with its own contradictions. Enclosures and subsumption are important strategies for the continuous integration of contradictions and the continuous deployment of new circuits of production, exploitation and power. In this context, one can analyse the CI/CD pipelines of digital capitalism.

The capitalist enclosure of digital sociality

There is an ongoing discussion among critical scholars about the nature of capitalism’s transformations and enclosures, reaching back at least to Marx’ chapter on “so-called primitive accumulation” in Capital I (1976). For him, primitive accumulation was the “original sin” of capitalism, initially establishing capitalist social relations and the capitalist mode of production. He notes at least five core moments in this process: (1) the violent expropriation and enclosure of collective resources and commonly owned land; (2) the creation and disciplining of the double free workers, free from any means of production and free to sell their labour power; (3) the normalisation of the commodity form as the common way of reproducing oneself and relating to others; (4) the states’ legitimation and stabilisation of a new property regime through laws and violence; and (5) the violent colonisation of the “new” world to subsidise the metropolitan centers with cheap labour and resources from the new global periphery. Silvia Federici summarises this process as the concentration of capital and labour (in a response to the deep economic and political crisis of feudal Europe). She also appends an additional important aspect, the entrenchment of modern patriarchy as a gendered division of labour. Reproductive labour is split off into the private household sphere to provide capitalism with its means of social and generational reproduction (2004: 63).

While Marx probably conceptualised primitive accumulation as a singular—though long-lasting—event marking the beginning of capitalism, Rosa Luxemburg later argued something different. She showed in her works on capitalist reproduction and accumulation, how capitalism could not reproduce solely from within itself (1951). Instead, capitalism relies on the constant enclosure of non-capitalist territories, resources or modes of production to ensure the continuity of its “enlarged reproduction”—the actual accumulation of capital. Luxemburg illustrates this in several ways, from the necessary expansion of the market to realise the value of the commodities of a continuously expanding production cycle, to the often-fluctuating demand for labour, which could not be satisfied by the generative reproduction of the proletariat itself, even with the availability of an industrial reserve army. Even “in its full maturity”, capitalism depends on “non-capitalist strata and social organisation”, a dependency which “extends over values as well as over material conditions, for constant capital, variable capital and surplus value alike" (Luxemburg, 1951: 365) [3].

If we follow Luxemburg's argument, Andrejevic's (2011) description of a new form of primitive accumulation begins to make sense. Along with other thinkers—Silvia Federici (2020), Massimo de Angelis (2001), Klaus Dörre (2021) and Nancy Fraser (2018)—he sees primitive accumulation as a recurring or ongoing process, regularly enclosing parts of our life and world which were not previously under the direct control of the accumulation process.

> Before agrarian capitalism and wage labour – on which it is based – where possible, private property rights over land had to be established, as well as a work force, which sells its labour force for subsistence. And before informational capitalism was possible, a system of private control over productive informational resources had to be established, as well as a bourgeois sociality, which leaves no choice but to subordinate oneself under the control over personal information, to get access to these resources in exchange. (Andrejevic, 2011: 37) [4]

Although the current enclosure of the social is only the newest in a long line of enclosures, it has specific and grave consequences in terms of how we interact with ourselves, each other and our communities. As the social and informational resources and infrastructures of our time are put under private ownership, the people depending on them are concentrated on just a few big platforms. User interactions on these platforms always involve the production of economic value for platform owners (Fuchs, 2014: 258). This is a core form of exploitation under digital capitalism. The social work of communication and interaction is centralised and turned into exploitable labour, producing data commodities (Stadler, 2022).

Two major objections have to be considered here: (1) Digital networks and their sociality have never existed "outside" of capitalism, since they were developed and built within the ideological framework of its subjects and institutions, often following specific economic and military interests, and (2) "the social" itself has always been enmeshed with the rationalities of the hegemonic systems it lives in, especially in capitalist societies.

But, if the social is already part of capitalist accumulation and information and communication technologies as developed under capitalism, how can it qualify as a form of "outside" to be newly enclosed? Here, I want to further examine the notion of enclosure by considering Marxist sociologist Klaus Dörre's concept of "Landnahme" [5], which builds on the already discussed writings of Marx and Luxemburg. Dörre describes a dialectical inside-outside dynamic which stabilises capitalism in times of crisis and transition, given it cannot fully reproduce itself from within itself (Amlinger, 2017). Since "land" not only refers to actual terrain, but also to non-capitalist forms of production, ways of life or even bodies of knowledge, there are many such externalities to be enclosed, while they are constantly and newly produced as well. Be it through expulsions like pushing workers into the industrial reserve army, or reaction to crises of the Fordist welfare state by taking big parts of social reproduction out of immediate class relations (structural unemployment), the contradictions of capitalist relations constantly produce their own "outsides" (Dörre et al., 2009).

As Nancy Fraser (2014) notes, this description still relies on the problematic perspective of what the "inside" of capitalist accumulation and exploitation is, namely contractual wage labour for the production of commodities. And this definitely is one core dynamic of capitalist accumulation, which may make it easy to describe irregular forms of re/production as the "outside". But this once again obscures capitalism's inherent dependency on irregular forms of labour: they are not outside its domain but necessary for it to function. For this reason, Fraser suggests the terminology "foreground and background" and notes their dynamic boundaries, which shift with each historical phase of capitalism. It is in this context that we should understand the current enclosures and transformations. The implementation and enforcement of a new regulatory regime of accumulation, adjusted to the changed historical conditions, reacting to a multitude of crises and movements of resistance, reconfigures the boundaries between background and foreground, between productive and reproductive activities and between life and work.

In what follows, I will look at the various aspects of such boundary shifts in terms of enclosures. Here, platformisation very directly concerns the literal enclosure and expulsion of collective resources. The new property regimes over informational resources and social data are often codified in data protection laws, rather than specific property laws. There are many forms of centralising enclosures, from the monopolisation of specific markets to VC-funded "disruptions" and destructions of certain industries, to the creation of technological dependencies for sometimes whole nation states. I will mostly focus on the enclosure and subsumption of the social, accomplished by commercial social networking platforms. These new enclosures do not take the form of armed platform-bailiffs swinging their binary halberds, driving people off their digital homesteads. It is not even exclusively about taking existing resources away from people who have depended on them for a long time. Rather, major parts of today's digital enclosures work by shaping emergent social interactions, making them possible only in ways that benefit capital's imperatives. Initially, a core strategy for doing this was the enclosure of common resources through the privatisation of public infrastructure. The ownership, design and function of technological infrastructures are structuring forces which push on our social relations and play an important part in constructing our sociality and subjectivities.

Infra- and intra-structures

In the previously mentioned paradigm of infrastructure as code, small snippets of declarative code are used to deploy and configure computational resources without having to manually click through web interfaces, run remote terminal commands or edit configuration files on all those servers. One of the most used tools to declare and deploy such resources is actually called *Terraform*. It works with a dedicated list of "providers" of cloud resources, the most relevant being Amazon Web Services (AWS), Microsoft Azure, Google Cloud and Alibaba Cloud. When run, Terraform connects to these providers' application programming interfaces (APIs), orders resources like virtual machines and does some very basic configuration. This short snippet orders a very small virtual machine (`t2.micro`) from Amazon Web Services (`aws`) in their datacenter in Santiago, Chile (`us-east-1-scl-1a`), installs a basic Linux operating system (`debian-12-amd64-20230723-1450`) and gives it a name (`prodserv-f12`)

```
provider "aws" {
  region = "us-east-1-scl-1a" }

resource "aws_instance" "prodserv-f12" {
  ami = "debian-12-amd64-20230723-1450"
  instance_type = "t2.micro" }
```

Almost all companies offering online services use tools like Terraform to create their virtual infrastructure elastically, to scale it up and down, depending on the changing workload. And while the list of Terraform providers shows a long tail of small cloud infrastructure providers, the biggest 5 account for more the 81% of the cloud computing market, with Amazon alone having over 40% market share [6]. Most platforms we use, from Netflix to Airbnb or Slack, depend on infrastructure as a service. This means they don't own and use their own dedicated server-hardware, but instead rent virtualised resources provided by mostly a small handful of infrastructure providers. Nick Srnicek (2017) would call these infrastructure providers "meta platforms". Centralisation, enclosure and subsumption are their core strategies. But to further explore how our collective social infrastructures and resources were reconfigured and terraformed for digital capitalism's needs, we first need to understand how the material and legal basis for this enclosure was formed.

Ben Tarnoff (2022) showed in his history of the internet how the strategy of enclosure through privatisation unfolded. The physical infrastructure came first, as the publicly built and maintained cables in the ground and under the sea were sold or contracted to private corporations (as well as many of the backbones enabling global inter-networking). This occurred shortly after usage of the internet as a professional and private communication infrastructure had been increasingly normalised, mostly in public institutions like schools, libraries and universities. This political project of privatisation fitted perfectly into the neoliberal regime of the early 1990s. Legislators all over the world tore down the protections of the early internet against corporate absorption. Technological imaginaries of immaterial cyberspace and information superhighways ideologically obscured the plunder of public infrastructures, as more corporations pushed into the digital sphere, looking for new ways to generate revenue.

Next, the sweeping privatisations went "up the stack" (Tarnoff, 2022: 72). Since selling access to the internet was already divided up among relatively few internet service providers globally, the remaining fractions of capital in the field had to monetise other aspects of our lives in an increasingly digitalised world. After the bursting of the "dotcom-bubble" in the early 2000s, a seemingly new kind of corporate structure emerged: the platform. Using platform services cost users no money; they could be personalised and using them over time became increasingly mandatory (in order to actively participate in social, political, economic and cultural life). Christian Fuchs describes this effect as a form of "ideological coercion" (2014: 263). But after almost two decades of platforms dominating central aspects of our lives, they are still hard to define. This is no coincidence, as Tarnoff argues:

> By calling their services 'platforms,' companies like Google can project an aura of openness and neutrality. They can present themselves as playing a supporting role, merely facilitating the interactions of others. Their sovereignty over the spaces of our digital life, and their active role in ordering such spaces, is obscured. It's no exaggeration to say, then, that platforms don't exist. The word isn't just imprecise; it's an illusion. It's designed to mystify rather than clarify. (Tarnoff, 2022: 75)

This is how the enclosure of the social was ideologically obfuscated. While the materiality of our communication infrastructures was made invisible by cultural tropes of immateriality and cyberspace, the power of centralised commercial platform corporations was hidden behind vague descriptions, sleek interfaces and reflexively accepted terms of service. The culture, sociality, solidarity, connections and knowledge created collectively by users are represented by platform corporations as services which are on offer. Yet this is already just us. The unpaid but exploited labour of our peers, our own dispossessed sociality, are mirrored back to us as a commercial, yet seemingly ‘free’ offering. Platform corporations control access to these social and informational resources while exploiting our usage of them through datafication [7].

In a technical sense, the platform-form is an important tool for enclosures. It leverages social network effects as well as technological design decisions to create centralised and exclusive systems—appropriately called “walled gardens”, echoing the fenced-off pastures of Marx’s historical primitive accumulation. As media theorist Anne Helmond notes, commercial social networking platforms (CSNPs) use a simultaneous motion of decentralising platform features and recentralising platform-ready data, thereby spanning infrastructures of capture beyond their immediate domain (2015) [8]. They spread their services and weave them into increasingly more aspects of our daily lives. The labour sociologist Moritz Altenried describes this “becoming infrastructure”, as lying “at the heart of the strategy of many platforms” (2022: 154). They try to become an indispensable part of our lives, while centrally controlling social interactions within their infrastructures.

Centralisation is necessary for the process of capitalist production and accumulation, a stage of enclosure Marx described as “formal subsumption” (1976). While he was talking about the destruction of small-scale production within the homes of peasants to establish the early factory system, today’s formal subsumption means the privatisation of public infrastructures and the destruction of open and decentralised networks to establish the closed data production system of the platform and the cloud. One example of such destruction is the XMPP/Jabber protocol, on which the infamous “embrace, extend, extinguish” strategy was used [9]. As an open and decentralised instant messaging protocol, XMPP/Jabber was widely established in professional, academic and activist settings during the 2000s. It was so common that both Facebook and Google initially based their instant messaging services on the protocol [10]. This promised interoperability with other servers using the same protocol, thereby offering their users an even wider group of people to interact with. But making content from their platforms available to people outside their networks obviously clashed with the two corporations’ business interests. Facebook quickly turned off this interoperability, having used the protocol and its open-source ecosystem of apps and servers merely as a technical starting point for its own developments. But Google tried to leverage their control over personal email services to take over bigger parts of the XMPP/Jabber network. After combining instant messaging with their already dominant email service, they introduced more and more features incompatible with official implementations of the protocol, urging users of what they newly declared as “legacy apps” to fully switch over to their services and platform—and many did. When Google was by far the biggest node on the network, they announced the end of their interoperability. All users of the network faced a choice: either switch to Google or lose connectivity with the biggest parts of their professional, academic or activist networks. They were effectively forced to choose the proprietary messaging service, since the existing network—with all the work that went into building and maintaining social connections—was enclosed and is now controlled by the platform [11]. The XMPP-Network is still around, but it never came close to the same level of significance because Google succeeded in doing what it is still actively trying to do to the email standard or even the HTTP protocol.

Social re|production

The enclosure of our digital and social infrastructures puts the technological means of our sociality in private corporate hands. The way they are built is therefore not informed by the needs of a caring and democratic society but structured by the needs and imperatives of digital capitalism. Our devices are built to be sticky so that users spend more time producing data [12]. Our interactions are enabled only in ways that produce as much data as possible. And our attention is not guided towards the information necessary for participatory processes of cooperation, but towards engagement-enhancing advertisements. This is not because an evil handful of people are pulling the digital strings in the background; it is the consequence of the logic of capital accumulation. Intrusive surveillance technologies align with the interests of increasingly authoritarian state actors, as well as the economic interests of platform corporations. The impacts of the new regime of digital capitalism are not distributed evenly, as Jathan Sadowksi (2020) has shown. A capitalist patriarchy built on white supremacy has enabled intensified policing of racial minorities and a growth in gendered digital violence. This maps onto Silvia Federici's (2004) observation that violence against racial and gendered minorities often increases during times of enclosure.

But the enclosure of the social for the production of data does not only attack and destroy publics and communities, it also continuously produces them. When legal scholar Salome Viljoen (2021) writes about data, she advocates ditching the terms "personal data" or "private data" in order to speak of "social data" instead. In the latter context, she argues that a vertical data relation exists between a data subject and a data collector, i.e., the user and the platform they are using. This is an obvious relation—users are individualised by the contractual form inherent to the terms of service. This is also the relation that most data governance frameworks acknowledge and regulate. Datafication is framed almost exclusively as a problem of individuated harm or personal rights. In contrast, the horizontal data relation connects users together, mostly non-consensually. Groups of users sharing the same relevant population features are connected via their social data and may have shared interests through such connections. If data subject A and data subject B are part of the same statistical group, their decisions impact each other's life—not merely in a direct relation, but on a population level. If a significant number of cyclists in a certain region stopped wearing bike helmets, insurance premiums might rise for all cyclists there. Platform corporations and data collectors are specifically interested in such horizontal data relations and the potential for population level insights, even though they approach each user individually, such that only vertical data relations are acknowledged. As Viljoen points out,

> It is this relational value of data that drives much of the imperatives to data access, processing, and use. The distinctive feature of ML- and AI-based systems is that they can be used to know things about Adam that Adam does not know, by inferring back to Adam from A_n. And, of greater legal significance (or concern), data from A_n can be used to train models that 'know' things about Bn, a population that may not be in any vertical relation with the system's owner. This is the key shift of at-scale data analysis. (2021: 30)

The enclosed and subsumed social goes beyond the actual users within a platform. And the knowledge generated by data analysis not only enables economic predictions but reinforces control as an important form of power in authoritarian, neoliberal societies. Our sociality is not just enclosed for the production of surplus value, but also to enforce power over populations, as is the case with neoliberal social policy frameworks. Control is a regime of governance that works according to certain parameters of normality and then refines this apparatus if spikes or deviations in the apparatus appear (Deleuze, 1992). While this arrangement seems to grant wide freedoms with a "near endless expression of individuality", it also demands constant observability, "each subject must render him/herself open and exposed at all times" (Sadowski, 2020: 41).

Precarity and unpredictability are important aspects of neoliberal dominance, as they force people into actively managing every risk, while taking all their security nets away (Demirovic, 2013). The transformations in labour organisation through workplace surveillance and algorithmification demonstrate the process. Gig-working platforms, for example, actively prey on the people most affected by social insecurities and economic crises. Centralised data production has given capital a tool to manage such insecurities. In private hands, trend analysis and the predictive capabilities of large-scale statistical models effectively mean secure planning for capital, and insecurity and precarity for its subjects. For this reason, it is important to take both aspects of social reproduction into account: the material side and the ideological side. Capital not only needs specific material infrastructures, technologies and institutions for its accumulation to function, but also needs to produce specific outlooks, social relations and subjectivities. Both aspects contribute to the processes of enclosure.

Configuration management

Digital infrastructures are not just built by ordering virtualised Linux computers and linking them together. These virtual machines need to be configured: software needs to be installed; settings for their specific purpose have to be entered; credentials for internal networks have to be given, and so on. Before paradigms like infrastructure as code and continuous integration, configurations had to be done manually for each new server, while considering the quirks of differing pieces of hardware. Servers managed in this older way are now called "pets", since you have to care for them individually and they grow over time (such that they often become hard to maintain). The shift to virtual cloud machines brought with it a shift from pets to "cattle". The latter are created and destroyed on demand, get configured automatically and are virtually the same, since their hardware is virtualised and abstracted from the actual machine they are running on.

Over recent years, the corporate open-source software tool Ansible has become the industry standard for the task of configuration management [13]. It processes complex arrangements of text files in the `yaml` syntax to apply roles and perform tasks on a pre-defined inventory of servers. This includes things like installing software, changing configuration files or starting programs.

```yaml
---
- name: Legacy IP
  hosts: old_network
  remote_user: root

  tasks:
  - name: Disable IPv6
    ansible.posix.sysctl:
      name: "net.ipv6.conf.{{ item }}"
      value: '1'
    loop:
      - "all.disable_ipv6"
      - "default.disable_ipv6"
```

This is a basic example of an Ansible "playbook" with the title and description "`Legacy IP`", which connects to all servers in the group `old_network` and performs a single task. It uses the module `ansible.posix.sysctl` to disable all IPv6 functionality on those servers by setting the system control variables `net.ipv6.conf.all.disable_ipv6` and `net.ipv6.conf.default.disable_ipv6` to the value `1`, which means "yes" or "true". Through using combinations of modular playbooks and dynamically targeted tasks, Ansible enables system administrators to configure vast arrangements of diverse servers declaratively and later monitor and correct any unwanted configuration changes. Using infrastructure as code, the way those servers work together and interact with each other is declared and managed centrally as they are monitored.

Configuring and reconfiguring processes, spaces and subjectivities is also a core aspect of capitalist enclosures. Since digital capitalism's imperative is to force its actors to constantly increase the production of data, these production processes need to be optimised and reconfigured. And when further enclosures become more difficult to establish in an increasingly saturated and monopolised market, the next best option is intensification. I have already introduced Marx's concept of formal subsumption, meaning the centralisation and control of the labour process, in regard to the enclosure of the social through the platform-form. Capital formally subsumes the production process "as it finds it" and then goes on to optimise the extraction of surplus value. The labour process is split apart, studied and reorganised, moving people further away from the object of their labour. This intensifies their alienation and minimises the last bit of real control over their own work and sociality. This is what Marx called "real subsumption of labour under capital" (1976: 645). That is the point when more and more forms of labour become part of the social process of production. To "work productively" now, it is not actually necessary to stand in the factory oneself, but only to be "an organ of the collective labourer, and to perform any one of its subordinate functions" (Marx, 1976: 644). Marxist communication scholar Christian Fuchs takes up this concept of a "collective labourer" to develop his notion of exploited digital labour within corporate social networking platforms (2014).

Historically, the forms of affective, social and emotional work we see formalised within corporate social networking platforms were strictly gendered and often strongly coded as female. This brings Kylie Jarrett to introduce the figure of the "digital housewife", whose work is "simultaneously inside and outside of capitalism" (2016: 67). What Jarrett discusses is mainly "consumer labour", sometimes called "playbour" or just "digital labour", but she places this in a wider context already discussed earlier by feminist Marxist scholars. The "housewifisation" or "feminisation" of all work occurs as it becomes increasingly precarious and demands both flexibility and adaptivity, as well as emotional availability (see e.g., Bennholdt-Thomsen et al., 1992). Such work now gets organised for the production of social data while being "a site of social reproduction". As Jarrett notes, it is "a site for the making and re-making of the social, affective, ideological and psychological states of being that (may) accord with appropriate capitalist subjectivities" (2016: 71).

This work is unpaid and invisible, like reproductive housework. And it is turned into productive labour for capitalism as well. It plays on our desires to be part of the social and refracts this exploitation back at us as friendship. The artist Laurel Ptak (2014) notes this in her remix of the 1970s manifesto "Wages Against Housework", which Ptak calls "Wages for Facebook". It begins with: "They say its friendship. We say its unwaged work.". Cultural critics Mareile Pfannebecker and James Smith similarly argue that "by farming our desires, capitalism not only gets free housework and free data, it also produces subjects who relate to themselves as commodities, online and offline" (2020: 75).

Many thinkers of the post-autonomist tradition have used the concepts of real subsumption, the collective labourer and social production to argue for the notion of a completely new social factory, where all forms of work became part of capitalist production. Authors such as Tiziana Terranova argued that capitalist relations were directly reorganising our daily social lives, especially through the technological advancements of digitalisation (2014). Here, Kylie Jarrett remarks that some "interpellation of subjects oriented towards the particular kinds of work-relations associated with capitalism is therefore necessary to the grounding and continuity of the capitalist mode of production" (2016: 55). This has always been the case, she argues, and did not start with the emergence of some new form of immaterial labour under digital capitalism [14]. Recognition of the historical continuities of real subsumption and capitalist subjectification need not disregard the reconfigurations associated with the transition to digital capitalism. The point of a term like "digital capitalism" is to denote an historical phase of capitalism with its distinctive configurations of material infrastructures, subject compositions and ideological subroutines.

Real subsumption and capture

Subjectification describes the creation of subjects, of people conforming to the needs of capitalism, both through their consciousness, their views, thoughts and habits, and through their bodies, their material relations and their positioning within the arrangement of infrastructures and institutions. In his notion of subjectification through interpellation, French Marxist Louis Althusser points out the modes of recognition involved. This includes the subject being recognised and called out to by the structures of power (among other subjects) and the subject recognising itself as a subject. Through this process, ideological frames move into the subject, as it recognises the interests of power as its own and acts accordingly. Producing such subjects and ensuring their consent to the relations they find themselves in is central to stabilising the shifting relations of production. In this sense the reproduction of the relations of production is about producing people who acknowledge "what is" as "what should be" (Althusser, 2014). Ideally formed subjects recognise their societies as normal, such that institutions and infrastructures can disappear into the background, only to become visible and exert their power as control if the continuously monitored parameters of the normal are exceeded (Deleuze, 1992). The normal becomes invisible.

In research on technological infrastructures, an often-made point is that functioning infrastructures become invisible, only appearing if broken or glitching (Star, 2002). Only the absence of cell phone reception reminds us of the network of radio masts across the country. App developers and designers talk in a strikingly similar way about the interfaces of their products. Thus, "the best interface is invisible" has become a standing mantra of theirs. This means that users should not have to think about using their apps and services. It should be completely normal or intuitive to interact with them. The trend of "habit forming design", with clues from addictive gambling machines, is a logical consequence of this paradigm [15].

Our apps call out to us – "What is on your mind, `$User_Name`?" The underlying infrastructures define the array of possible forms our social interactions can take, we are shaped with them, as we are by Althusser's state apparatuses (Lovink, 2016). Subjectivities are formed by the interests and imperatives of tech designers, maintainers and owners. We are trained to normalise technological affordances and their embeddedness in our daily lives. Digital technologies disappear in the ideologically formulated normal of our existence within digital capitalism. Their boundaries of control turn the ideology of capitalist societies into taken-for-granted material experiences.

These observations underscore a common theme in critical data studies: the datafication of our lifeworld is not a passive process of silently recording what we do. The enclosure of the social, the real subsumption of our social interaction, is an active process of reconfiguration. Social lifeworlds are rendered parsable for automated systems, among other things. With his concept of "capture", computer scientist Philip Agre spelled this out 30 years ago (1994). He distinguished capture from surveillance, since the latter mostly concerns secret, visual operations such as the hidden spy camera in your corner, monitored by an agent of your state's secret police. Capture, on the other hand, operates with linguistic metaphors, formulating "grammars of action", within which the newly formalised and formatted process has to function. These grammars are enforced through both ideological and technological means and ensure that the captured people and processes are parsable for automated screening systems.

Philip Agre's use of the word "capture" gestures towards its double meaning: it refers to trapping or catching data as the input of a system yet also means grasping or understanding the semantic notions of an object in a certain state (1994: 106). In regard to the first meaning, capture infrastructures need a wide net of sensors to surveil and record the acting subjects and their states within their field. The second meaning of "capture" demands both a data model fitting the process and the strict enforcement of this process. Data model here refers to a set of categories and relations in a database which can represent all the desired aspects of the process, e.g., the various stages of a production or sales process. The strict adherence to this process within the logics of the data model needs to be enforced, be it through social norms like workplace regulations, the design of machinery and interfaces or through things like written scripts for support calls or sales interactions. In the context of real subsumption, it is therefore important for digital capitalism to reconfigure the spaces of digital sociality, defining the possible ways of interaction in specific grammars of action and finally to form subjects wanting to adhere to these grammars and capture infrastructures. The ways in which people interact within commercial social networking platforms are only valuable, if they fit into the specific data models of these platforms – and their interfaces and protocols make sure they do. The production process for social data gets optimised in this way, turning friends into users and conversations into content.

Just as the neoliberal regime allows for, and actually encourages, a wide set of expressions concerning individuality, the grammars of action shaped by digital capitalism's capture infrastructures allow for many forms of sociality—from our family chat groups, to handicraft group discussions on specialised forums, or to mere physical movements in video-surveilled public places. As long as our expressions stay within those grammars, they are parsable for the production of social data.

Within social networking platforms, social interaction is mostly made possible within frames of competition and consumption, nudging users to relate to themselves and to others as if they were commodities. The grammars of action within digital capitalism's social spaces are shaped by exploitation and commodity production. This is part of the updated normalisation of the commodity form as the common way of reproducing oneself and of relating to others. But the statistical methods deployed by platform corporations on the vast amounts of social data produced by their users, enable them to further use these users as actual commodities. Through what Birch, Cochrane and Ward (2021) describe as "techcraft", platforms regularly assetise user engagement and access to users—made parsable by capture systems—rather than the actual social data itself. This is enabled when states legitimise and stabilise digital capitalism's new property regimes through legislation and enforcement. The past decades' programs of neoliberal privatisation of public infrastructure and welfare laid the material and social base for the following enclosure of the social. Even supposed protection legislation like the EU's GDPR has the stated goal of enabling and stabilising a market for social data, or rather its applications [16].

activityPub

At the end of their work in 2018, the "Social Web Working Group" at W3C, the main international standards organisation for the World Wide Web, put a question at the very top of their website: "Don't you miss the days when the web really was the world's greatest decentralised network? Before everything got locked down into a handful of walled gardens?" [17]. This question not only implies that enclosure is a pressing problem facing our current internet, but also a stand against the corporations currently configuring our infrastructures. The main output of the by now dissolved Social Web Working Group was the `ActivityPub` protocol, which aimed to transpose the structure and features of social networking platforms into an open and decentralised protocol. The continuously growing network forming around this protocol is referred to as the Fediverse and it is largely formed by servers using the protocol's best known implementation Mastodon.

The Fediverse's name gestures towards a federated network structure. Instead of one central complex of servers handling all the traffic as in commercial social networking platforms, there are many autonomous servers exchanging messages, likes, posts, profiles, etc. An account on one server can interact with accounts on other servers, just as I can send emails from my university's email server to people with mailboxes on other email provider servers. Even though Google and Microsoft are working hard to enclose it, this kind of architecture is still a decentralised, federated system.

In regard to the enclosures of digital capitalism, the decentralised structure of the Fediverse works against the consequences of formal subsumption. Avoiding the platform-form and its centralisation enables different servers in the Fediverse to build communities on their own terms. Self-determined rules and practices of content moderation make vastly different social spaces and communities possible. Public institutions as well as small server collectives create diverse ways to fund and maintain digital infrastructure.

The `activityPub` protocol works by sending "activities" comprised of a relatively small but extendable set of actors, activities and objects. Each exchange between two servers includes an actor doing an activity on an object: an account likes a picture; a server blocks a profile; a bot joins a group. This vocabulary builds a literal grammar of action, and unfortunately a well-known one. The continuities of real subsumption are visible all over the protocols vocabulary, as it opens mostly the same possibilities of social interaction developed for the optimised production of social data (Stadler, 2022).

Open protocols often turn out to be perfect tools for future enclosures. Just as Google was able to take over almost the whole `XMPP`/Jabber network, so did Slack and Discord enclose the biggest chunks of the `irc` network (neatly separating professional and recreational uses between themselves). Facebook/Meta is already positioning itself with the Threads app to do something similar to Mastodon, the Fediverse and the `activityPub` protocol. By connecting to a wider network via an open protocol, the platform corporation offers its users access to subculturally coded niche communities and shields itself from regulators calling for them to open up their core networks (such as Instagram or Facebook).

The second biggest project in the social networking protocol space right now is Bluesky with its Authenticated Transfer Protocol (`atproto`). The company was started by Twitter's founder Jack Dorsey. The protocol does not actually federate yet, but the company already uses classic Silicon Valley tactics such as artificial scarcity to build up hype around their network. In its structure, `atproto` is built around small servers hosting the actual user data, while access to the actual network and other people is made possible only via centralised relays. These need a huge amount of processing power, since they need to crawl and distribute all the content of the network. This makes hosting such a relay only possible for a very few institutions with a very large amount of resources. Therefore, centralisation is built right into the structure of the protocol itself [18].

Ben Tarnoff points out that, "it's not quite accurate to say that the web was once open and now is closed – rather, it is the open parts of the web that make the closed parts possible" (2022: 173). This is true in the sense of enclosing existing standards, say, via strategies like "Embrace, Extend, Extinguish", by moving early into an emerging network or to gain influence on its further development and to steer this towards corporate interests. Other strategies include the creation of competing standards to open projects, rivalling their values while using the same language of openness. Corporations like Google and Meta liked to describe themselves as 'open' until very recently.

Whose `.conf`?

The structures of digital capitalism continually integrate challenges to its workings and deploy new configurations in the face of a multitude of crises, but this is increasingly costly. The reconfiguration of our social relations becomes more and more intrusive and dysfunctional, while the returns on capture and datafication seem to reduce. The fine-tuned and highly complex deployment and networking of resources have turned out to be brittle and unstable in the face of supply line challenges, conflicts and economic crises. An era of data accumulation may be coming to an end, notwithstanding the frenzied hype around AI.

I have considered various aspects of what I called the enclosure on the basis that enclosures are a continuously necessary part of capitalist accumulation. They actually have a double role, though. On the one hand, enclosures or processes of "accumulation by dispossession," as Marxist geographer David Harvey would call them, are a constant means for capitalism to stabilise itself. But at some points, they become the "dominant form of accumulation" and become vehicles for historic shifts in the broader regimes of accumulation (Harvey, 2003: 153). In my view, the enclosure of the social should be understood as such a historic shift and a means for asserting digital capitalism. The immense power of this new round of enclosures comes from the infrastructuralisation of digital capitalism's key players. Embedding themselves into all aspects of life and society is a core tenet of the platform-form. Therefore, addressing these infrastructures and their standards needs critical analysis and politicisation.

In his work on the politics of technology, the philosopher Langdon Winner made it clear that we cannot accord all the political and social implications of technological artefacts to "the interplay of social forces" (Winner, 1980: 123). Technology is not inherently neutral, and its politics are not just determined by their usage. He instead shows how some technologies require specific social formations to be implemented, while some others are at least strongly compatible with particular social and political relationships. He additionally points out how "specific features in the design or arrangement of a device or system could provide a convenient means of establishing patterns of power and authority" and that the flexibility of such systems therefore gives the social actors who influence their design and arrangement immense power (Winner, 1980: 134).

The problem we are facing is not that technology and infrastructure form our daily lives and structure our social reproduction. This has always been part of how people, communities and societies reproduce themselves. Engineering scholar Deb Chachra has noted that "infrastructure is care at scale" (Chachra, 2021). She shows how infrastructures enable personal freedom by taking care of most of the basic needs of our bodies. But more importantly, she underscores how infrastructural systems collectively position us in relation to each other and connect us. This is not necessarily a good thing though, as our existing infrastructural networks and especially our global energy systems are not built with equality in mind. Instead, they "are largely built around the idea of localising the benefits to their consumers and distributing the harms.…Carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is allowed to go everywhere. People are not" (Chachra, 2021: para 22).

In the context of my arguments thus far, this suggests putting care at the center of how we want to build our technological infrastructures. Moving beyond the inevitability of technological progress in its current form allows us to open a democratic conversation about which technologies are wanted and needed. And a critical inquiry into how these technologies are configured and networked for the people and societies using them has to be part of that conversation. Staying with the logic of configuring our infrastructure declaratively, we need to ask—which configuration file is used, and which interests and imperatives are written into it. The question is: Whose `.conf`?

Author Bio

Tobias Stadler is a graduate researcher at the University of Oldenburg, Germany, where he is working on critical theory, digital infrastructures and the propertisation of data. He received his master's degree in media studies from the University of Vienna, Austria, and is currently working on his dissertation about alternative social networks within digital capitalism.

Endnotes

[1] In a very strict sense, the term virtual machine (VM) is often not fitting any more, since most cloud environments nowadays are built by orchestrating even smaller units and containers, sometimes called micro-service architectures.

[2] The company Red Hat was centrally important for the development of open-source software for corporate cloud infrastructures and was acquired by IBM in 2019. Their company blog offers a deeper explanation of CI/CD-systems and hyperscaling: https://www.redhat.com/en/topics/devops/what-is-ci-cd; https://www.redhat.com/en/topics/cloud/what-is-a-hyperscaler

[3] In this sense, Luxemburg's argument is a continuation of the phenomena described by the colonial imperative noted by Marx and the patriarchal division of labour noted by Federici.

[4] Original in German, translated by Tobias Stadler.

[5] The term was never translated satisfyingly, since the terms “land grabbing”, “land enclosure” or “land conquest” all have diverging connotations. Dörre himself uses the German term in his English writings (e.g., Dörre and Haubner, 2018).

[6] As reported by the consulting firm Gartner in July 2023: https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2023-07-18-gartner-says-worldwide-iaas-public-cloud-services-revenue-grew-30-percent-in-2022-exceeding-100-billion-for-the-first-time

[7] How data commodities realise their value can differ drastically. Direct sales are rare, but access to dossiers on individual people as a service of interest to financial institutions, insurance companies or “security” forces is increasingly common. The most common way to generate profit by utilising social data is through personalised advertisements. Increasingly though, social data is used to train generative machine learning models to later sell their capabilities as a service.

[8] Platform features can include sharing buttons, tracking beacons, development frameworks, authentication services, and so on. Platform-ready data can also take many forms, including social interactions, consumption choices, or location data.

[9] The phrase “Embrace, Extend, Extinguish” became synonymous with the strategy of tech corporations to use open standards and protocols to dominate potential competition. The strategy involves adopting a standard, then expanding on it with proprietary features incompatible with other software using the standard, and then finally abandoning the standard, positioning one’s own product as the next standard others should adhere to. The term came to light from Microsoft’s internal communication concerning an investigation from the US Department of Justice looking at the firm’s anti-competitive practices in the so-called “browser wars”: https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/atr/legacy/2006/06/01/V-A.pdf

[10] “Facebook Developer Blog: Using Facebook Chat via Jabber” from 2008: https://developers.facebook.com/blog/post/110; “Google Talkabout: XMPP Federation” from 2006: http://googletalk.blogspot.com/2006/01/xmpp-federation.html

[11] “EFF: Google Abandons Open Standards for Instant Messaging” from 2013: https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2013/05/google-abandons-open-standards-instant-messaging

[12] “Sticky” websites or apps are designed in a way that compels users to spend a lot of time there and return regularly. The term is loosely defined but widely used, as this article from 2000 shows: https://www.computerworld.com/article/1359024/sticky-business.html

[13] While Ansible is open-source software, it is owned by RedHat, which was acquired by IBM in 2018. In early 2024, IBM also bought Hashicorp, the corporation behind Terraform. This means IBM now owns two of the most important and widely used tools for cloud automation and modern DevOps.

[14] The concept of immaterial labour brings with it several other problems for the analysis of (digital) capitalism. The description “immaterial” is questionable in itself, as all bodies and their social relations are very material.

[15] This concept of “Habit Forming Design” was partly popularised by the computer scientist Nir Eyal’s book “Hooked!” in which he himself described this concept as inspired by the addictiveness of gambling slot machines (2014).

[16] Article 1(3) of the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) states that “free movement of personal data within the Union shall be neither restricted nor prohibited” as one of the four core functions of the legislation. This effectively means the protection of the EU’s internal data market.

[17] See https://activitypub.rocks

[18] Relays (formerly described as Big Graph Services) are described in the protocols specification: https://atproto.com/specs/atp#protocol-structure

References

Agre PE (1994) Surveillance and capture: two models of privacy. *The Information Society* 10(2): 101–127. DOI: 10.1080/01972243.1994.9960162

Altenried M (2022) *The Digital Factory: The Human Labor of Automation.* University of Chicago Press.

Althusser L (2014) *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Verso.

Amlinger C (2017) Klaus Dörre: Die neue Landnahme [The new land grab]. In Kraemer K and Brugger F (eds) *Schlüsselwerke der Wirtschaftssoziologie.* Springer Fachmedien, pp. 471–480.

Andrejevic M (2011) Facebook als neue Produktionsweise [Facebook as a new mode of production]. In: Rohle T and Leistert O (eds) *Generation Facebook: Über das Leben im Social Net.* Bielefeld: Transcript, pp. 31–48.

Bennholdt-Thomsen V, Mies M and Von Werlhof C (1992) *Frauen, die letzte Kolonie. Zur Hausfrauisierung der Arbeit* [Women, the Last Colony. On the Housewifisation of Labour]. Rotpunktverlag.

Birch K, Cochrane DT and Ward C (2021) Data as asset? the measurement, governance, and valuation of digital personal data by Big Tech. *Big Data & Society* 8(1). DOI: 10.1177/20539517211017308

Chachra D (2021) Care at scale: bodies, agency and infrastructure. *Comment.* Available at: https://comment.org/care-at-scale (accessed 22 November 2023).

Couldry N and Mejias UA (2019) Data colonialism: rethinking big data’s relation to the contemporary subject. *Television & New Media* 20(4): 336–349. DOI: 10.1177/1527476418796632

De Angelis M (2001) Marx and primitive accumulation: the continuous character of capital’s ‘enclosures’. *The Commoner* 2.

Dean J (2020) Neofeudalism: the end of capitalism? *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Available at: https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/neofeudalism-the-end-of-capitalism (accessed 22 November 2023).

Deleuze G (1992) Postscript on societies of control. *October* 59: 3–7.

Demirovic A (2013) Ist der Neoliberalismus Hegemonial? Gramscis Hegemoniekonzept und Sicherheit als Herrschaftsform [Is neoliberalism hegemonic? Gramsci's concept of hegemony and security as a mode of domination]. *Widerspruch: Beiträge zu Sozialistischer Politik* 32(62): 127–139. DOI: 10.5169/seals-651984

Dörre K (2021) Kampf um Öffentlichkeit. Kapitalistische Landnahme und die Zerstörung von Vernunft [Struggle for the public: capitalist land grab and the destruction of reason]. In: Borchers N, Güney S, Krüger U and Schamberger K (eds) *Transformation der Medien – Medien der Transformation. Verhandlungen des Netzwerks Kritische Kommunikationswissenschaft*. Westend, pp. 103–127. DOI: 10.53291/TMQO5163

Dörre K and Haubner T (2018) Land grab through tests: a useful concept for the sociology of work. In: Dörre K, Mayer-Ahuja N, Sauer D and Wittke V (eds) *Capitalism and Labor: Towards Critical Perspectives.* Campus, pp. 71–112.

Dörre K, Lessenich S and Rosa H (2009) *Soziologie − Kapitalismus − Kritik: Eine Debatte* [Sociology – Capitalism – Critique. A Debate]. Suhrkamp.

Dyer-Whiteford N (1999) *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High Technology Capitalism*. University of Illinois Press.

Eyal N and Hoover R (2014) *Hooked – How to Build Habit-Forming Products*. Princeton University Press.

Federici S (2004) *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation.* Autonomedia.

Federici S (2020) *Die Welt wieder verzaubern: Feminismus, Marxismus & Commons* [Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons]. Mandelbaum Verlag.

Fraser N (2014) The significance of Rosa Luxemburg for contemporary social theory. Presented to *The Accumulation of Capital* [Workshop] at the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zk2VJAW_jHw (accessed 22 November 2023).

Fraser N and Jaeggi R (2018) *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory.* Polity.

Fuchs C (2014) *Digital Labour and Karl Marx.* Routledge.

Fuchs C and Sevignani S (2013) What is digital labour? what is digital work? what's their difference? and why do these questions matter for understanding social media? *TripleC* 11(2): 237–293. DOI: 10.31269/triplec.v11i2.461

Harvey D (2003) *The New Imperialism*. Oxford University Press.

Helmond A (2015) The platformization of the Web: making web data platform ready. *Social Media + Society* 1(2). DOI: 10.1177/2056305115603080

Huws U (2003) *The Making of a Cybertariat: Virtual Work in a Real World*. Monthly Review Press.

Jarrett K (2016) *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife.* Routledge, Taylor & Francis.

Jarrett K (2019) Through the reproductive lens: labour and struggle at the intersection of culture and economy. In: Chandler D and Fuchs C (eds) *Digital Objects, Digital Subjects: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Capitalism, Labour and Politics in the Age of Big Data.* University of Westminster Press, pp. 103–116.

Lorusso S (2020) The user condition: computer agency and behavior. Available at: https://theusercondition.computer/ (accessed 22 November 2023).

Lovink G (2019) *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism*. Pluto Press.

Luxemburg R (1951) *The Accumulation of Capital (1913).* Kegan Paul.

Marx K (1976) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1887). Penguin.

Noble DF (1983) Present tense technology - Part One. *Democracy* 3(1): 8–24.

Pfannebecker M and Smith JA (2020) *Work Want Work: Labour and Desire at the End of Capitalism.* Zed Books.

Ptak L (2014) Wages for Facebook. Available at: http://wagesforfacebook.com/ (accessed 22 November 2023).

Sadowski J (2020) *Too Smart: How Digital Capitalism Is Extracting Data, Controlling Our Lives, and Taking Over the World.* MIT Press.

Schiller D (199) *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System*. MIT Press.

Srnicek N (2017) *Platform Capitalism.* Polity Press.

Stadler T (2022) Grammatiken der Alterity. Das Protokoll als Labor der Sozialität [Grammars of alterity. Protocol as a laboratory of sociality]. *Zeitschrift Für Medienwissenschaft* 15(1): 30–42. DOI: 10.25969/mediarep/19406

Star SL (2002) Infrastructure and ethnographic practice: working on the fringes. *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems* 14.

Tarnoff B (2022) *Internet for the People: The Fight for Our Digital Future*. Verso.

Terranova T (2014) Red stack attack! Algorithms, capital and the automation of the common. In: Mackay R and Avenession A (ed) *#Accelerate# the Accelerationist Reader*. Urbanomic Media, pp. 279-297.

Toffler A (1980) *The Third Wave*. Bantam.

Tronti M (1974) *Arbeiter und Kapital* [Worker and Capital]. Verlag Neue Kritik.

Viljoen S (2021) A relational theory of data governance. *Yale Law Journal* 131(2): 370–781. DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.3727562

Winner L (1980) Do artifacts have politics? *Daedalus* 109(1): 121–136.

Zuboff S (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. Public Affairs.

The Political Economy of Communication
11(2), 24–42

http://www.polecom.org

Exploring Algorithmic Resistance and Breaching

Thomas Zenkl, University of Graz, Austria

Keywords: algorithmic power, algorithmic regimes, resistance, breaching experiments, friction, resistance

Abstract

Advanced algorithmic systems are widely assumed to exercise social power by latently structuring everyday experiences and knowledges via processes of selection, ordering, curating of information, and the automation of decisions. Nevertheless, their entanglement with human practices is never deterministic, as humans do not always comply but enact agency, contest algorithmic truth claims and "resist" automated decisions. Researching such acts of resistance poses great methodological challenges: algorithmic power is mediated by pre-existing forms of domination, enforced by invisible infrastructures, and embedded into the political economies of platforms and applications. Since algorithmic literacies are rare and unequally distributed, most users are unaware of algorithmic influences, limiting empirical inquiries to a few informed "elites". Following an analysis of what algorithmic resistance could encompass, this contribution suggests a methodological inquiry inspired by "breaching experiments." By introducing friction into human-machine relations, this approach enables the research of the subtle, informal, and not politically articulated acts of "everyday resistance" against algorithmic truth claims. Advocating for a broad notion of resistance, "breaching" serves as a heuristic to conceive practices of algorithmic dissidence that would otherwise go unseen. The analysis seeks to inspire future empirical work that understands resistances as tactical bottom-up responses to algorithmic subordination and that allows inquiries into how "ordinary" users can resist algorithmic power.

Advanced algorithmic systems have become an integral part of everyday life, increasingly influencing and shaping human practices, experiences, spaces and culture (Chayka, 2024). Following "sterile" textbook definitions of computer science, algorithms merely transform inputs into outputs along a sequence of defined steps (e.g., Cormen et al., 2009). However, their designs, applications, and outputs are inherently social: as "intricate, dynamic arrangements of people and code" (Seaver, 2019: 419), algorithmic systems are inextricably linked to specific historical conditions and the interests and values of those who design, develop and deploy them. By automating processes of selection, supervision, decision-making, and steering, these technologies assume key roles within the political economies of digital platforms (e.g., Kassem, 2023; Srnicek, 2019) and are essential assets for the global digital oligopolies that both produce and facilitate them.

Because algorithmic systems "operate as a logic of repetition, ardently reviving and amplifying stereotypes" (Ruckenstein, 2023: 138) and distribute rewards, opportunities, or punishments by mirroring prevailing societal conditions, they computationally and "implicitly rework the process of social class-making" (Burrell and Fourcade, 2021: 223). By reinforcing economic inequalities and societal exclusions (Eubanks, 2017; O'Neil, 2016; Carr, 2014), by "tak[ing] on the historical forces of capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and racism and disseminat[ing] and rigidify[ing] these logics in society, asymmetrically influencing social groups" (Yolgörmez, 2020: 145), algorithmic systems are never neutral. Rather, they are technological devices through which power operates and articulates (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022).

However, despite the ubiquity of present-day computation, both the political economy of algorithm utilisation and user engagement with them pose great challenges for empirical research. Addressing questions of algorithmic power in practice means investigating obscure phenomena that are unknown to many people and hidden in plain sight (Burrell, 2016). Ever-tightening webs of algorithmic governance (Just and Latzer, 2017) are encroaching on various societal domains (e.g., labour organisations, the public sector, digital communication) and are becoming ever more sophisticated. Woven into the fabric of everyday life, subtle algorithmic guidance and subliminal manipulation often affect unaware consumers (Gran et al., 2021). In trying to make sense of them, people rely on the industry's carefully crafted "imaginaries" (Bucher, 2017) of algorithmic precision and infallibility (Beer, 2017). However, research into algorithmic influences must not make the mistake of rewriting history "from above". Positioning users as passive subjects of measurement and control overlooks how hegemonic positions are being challenged (Pasquinelli, 2023: 12).

How, then, do people, and especially "ordinary" people, who often lack professional knowledges or literacies around algorithmic systems, resist the power that is computationally exerted over them? How can such resistance be investigated empirically? To answer these questions, I will first outline how modern algorithmic systems are encountered and argue that they are best understood as algorithmic regimes. This will prefigure considerations concerning conceptual frameworks for empirically researching algorithmic practices. After reflecting on understandings of resistance and proposing a perspective that is rooted in the experience of "friction", I will consider the theoretical consequences. Then, a research heuristic based on "algorithmic breaching experiments" will be set out.

Algorithmic regimes

Algorithms, by mediating and selecting information, and by acting as an "invisible structural force that plays through into everyday life in various ways" (Beer, 2013: 69) enable, shape, and limit the possibilities of our "algorithmic lives" (Amoore and Piotukh, 2016). With algorithmic systems enclosing social domains and computational logics increasingly "penetrating the everyday" (Ruckenstein, 2023: VIII), interactions with these technologies increasingly become necessary to achieve certain goals. Algorithms can be seen as governance mechanisms, as "autonomous actors with power to further political and economic interests on the individual but also on the public/collective level" (Just and Latzer, 2017: 245). Originally conceived as techniques for the management of labour, subsequent automation of cultural spheres has "turned all of society into a 'digital factory' through the software of search engines, online maps, messaging apps, social networks, gig-economy platforms, [and] mobility services" (Pasquinelli, 2023: 6).

However, standalone algorithms do not exist and cannot be applied in isolation. As socio-technical systems, they must be conceived as part of techno-institutional "apparatuses" that manifest specific sociocultural effects (Seaver, 2019: 418). Thus, the profound changes yielded by an algorithmic colonisation of daily life cannot be grasped with simple, monistic conceptions of power as a unilateral and direct algorithmic "force". Rather, algorithmic systems reflect and perpetuate far-reaching cybernetic transformations of knowledge (and its production). In this context, "algorithmic thinking" (Beer, 2023) appears as an epistemological practice that affects how people think about and through computation. Shaping "the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth" (Foucault, 1980: 93), "algorithmic regimes" manifest as "coherent patterns of thinking and acting in the world" (Jarke et al., 2024: 4). However, algorithmic systems are not "applied" deterministically, but are dynamically enacted (Seaver, 2017), ascribed certain meanings, and "domesticated" (Hirsch and Silverstone, 2003). People are not merely exposed to algorithmic force, but instead actively participate in the negotiations of algorithmic truth claims through their situated enactments of algorithmic practices. Additional to this social contingency, every complex system is characterised by moments of indeterminacy and uncertainty (Parisi, 2015). Unforeseen "novelty" can be introduced into social situations, blurring the often-assumed linear relationship between in- and outputs of computational systems and allowing for the emergence of the unexpected (Yolgörmez, 2020).

Due to this double contingency, users relate to algorithmic systems through recursive "feedback loops" that mutually shape both humans and machines in the process. Or, as Bucher (2018: 117) notes: "algorithms do not just do things to people, people also do things to algorithms". Despite often being applied to human actors "from above", focusing on user agency and the creative ways in which technologies are embedded into social practice makes evident not only their dynamic, reactive, and contingent uses, but also the possibilities of resistance contained therein. While "algorithms of oppression have been around for a long time", they coincide with the "radical projects to dismantle them and build emancipatory alternatives" (Ochigame, 2020). Resistant, antagonistic or deviant acts towards algorithmic subordination are manifest in a wide variety of activities: as public outcries, deliberate manipulation, silent refusal or as Neo-Luddite ambitions of purposeful destruction (Glendinning, 1990). Reflecting both the technological affordances and social conditions under which they are being enacted, such resistances are the "composite of human algorithm relations" (Amoore, 2020: 9).

Researching algorithmic regimes

With their expanding relevance for social life, multiple ways of empirically researching algorithmic practices have emerged. Critical for these efforts is the understanding that "any investigation into how people relate to algorithmic regimes needs to consider how they understand the presence or absence of these technical systems" (Storms and Alvarado, 2024: 66), and thus how they make sense of their everyday algorithmic encounters. However, research shows that knowledge around the presence of algorithms, despite their ubiquity, is often lacking or highly situational (Gruber and Hargittai, 2023). Awareness of their influence is generally low and unequally stratified (Gran et al., 2021; Gruber et al., 2021; Cotter and Reisdorf, 2020). The very term "algorithm" is either unknown to many people (Swart, 2021; Siles et al., 2019) or used inconsistently (Langer et al., 2022). While users may be "nominally aware of the role that algorithmic processes play in their lives, few understand the basic functions of algorithmic platforms…from a critical and rhetorical perspective" (Koenig, 2020: 1). Against this background, concepts resulting from (and applied in) empirical research are "algorithm awareness" (Eslami et al., 2015), "algorithmic literacy" (Dogruel, 2021), "algorithmic imaginaries" (Bucher, 2017) and "folk theories" (Eslami et al., 2016).

Algorithm awareness

Studies show that being aware of, and knowing how, content is being moderated, information is curated and decisions are automated around algorithms is unevenly distributed, reproducing exclusions and digital divides. For example, Gran et al. (2021) found that 61% of the Norwegian population showed low or no awareness of algorithms, with significant associations between participants' age, gender, and level of education. This was seen to perpetuate and amplify inequalities (Siles et al., 2022; Gran et al., 2021).

Algorithmic literacy

Defined as "being aware of the use of algorithms in online applications, platforms, and services and knowing how algorithms work" (Dogruel et al., 2022: 117), algorithmic literacy is based on cognitive and behavioural dimensions (coping behaviours and abilities for creation) (Dogruel, 2021). Literacy expands beyond basic awareness to include knowledge about inner workings. Thus, "algorithmic skills" are an important asset for the informed use of algorithmic applications but "remain the domain of a select few users" (Klawitter and Hargittai, 2018: 3505).

Algorithmic imaginaries

Examining how algorithms make people feel, the ways in which users know and perceive algorithms, and the subsequent ways of thinking about them have been the subjects of so-called "algorithmic imaginaries" (Bucher, 2017). Going beyond a "mental model" of specific functions, an imaginary entails an affective dimension and is productive in the sense that certain imaginations of algorithmic functioning afford corresponding usage scenarios and perceived possibilities of action. Contrary to public discussion, where algorithms are discursively shaped through newsworthy revelations, the everyday workings of algorithms and their subsequent imaginaries are "mostly observed alone, with associated feelings of astonishment or distress, particularly when their operating principles are not understood" (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020: 17).

Folk theories

Closely related to imaginaries, folk theories of and around algorithms are "intuitive, informal theories that individuals develop to explain the outcomes, effects, or consequences of technological systems, which guide reactions to and behaviour towards said systems" (DeVito et al., 2017: 3165). Folk theories are commonly used as rationalisations that make sense of algorithms and their behaviours (Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021; Siles et al., 2020; Eslami et al., 2016) as speculative, but comprehensible narratives.

In order to gather information around algorithmic practices, researchers might design quantitative survey questions testing people's awareness about an algorithmic presence. They might measure knowledge of, and around, algorithmic systems or test users' literacy by assessing their skills (such as the critical evaluation of results or the ability to employ privacy-related measures against algorithmic surveillance) (Dogruel, 2021). Another option includes assessing people's affective experiences when enacting algorithms (Bucher, 2017) and analysing the folk theories and related metaphors that they utilise for rationalising algorithmic results (French and Hancock, 2017). Alternatively, one might explore ethnographically how people and algorithms interact (Christin, 2020).

Yet, however helpful these approaches are in understanding certain algorithmic practices, they often seem insufficient for analysing the specific effects and consequences of power operating through algorithmic means. Here, algorithmically imposed influences on action might not be perceived directly. Gentle "nudging" and the exploitation of psychological insights ("dark patterns") might be contained within experiences and imaginaries. Processes of datafication may not be humanly comprehensible, but infused by opacity (Burrell, 2016) and experienced as misrepresentations. Enacting algorithms might lead to unintended, unexpected, and even undesirable results that contradict, challenge and expose users' convictions. This might be perceived as "algorithmic violence" (Bellanova et al., 2021) or as the discontent necessary to participate in digital systems. Such effects would be conceivable as part of everyday experience without individuals having full awareness, understanding, or "imagination" of their algorithmic encounters. However, methodological questions arise about how to research such experiences, when users themselves do not understand them as "algorithmic". As both researchers' access to the intimate situations in which algorithmic encounters occur and participants' vocabularies are limited, suspected dissidences must be investigated in alternative ways.

To conclude, many people—regardless of whether they perceive, comply with or resist algorithmic power—do not qualify for research about their algorithmic encounters. They lack the awareness and literacy to recognise subtle algorithmic influences or the skills to express them within surveys. The ability to deconstruct harms associated with algorithms or even to recognise their presence within daily practice requires specialized knowledge and literacy. As a common understanding of resistance against algorithmic systems "relies on measurement and documentation of harms, often requiring computational science skill sets" (Ganesh and Moss, 2022: 4). Often only acts that are organised, open, observable, and articulated can be captured. Informal, hidden, or unconfrontational actions (Scott, 1985) remain unaccounted for, with the result that research into the powerful aspects of algorithmic regimes is often unintentionally elitist. But while it does not deny ordinary people's agency and critical skills, it practically disregards them.

To design perspectives for researching resistances, it must therefore be determined what resistance encompasses, how it emerges and how it is different to other ways of engaging with algorithms.

Resistance in algorithmic regimes

Manifold algorithmic practices have been labelled as "resistant," and this has led to the creation of diverse terminologies: users "hyperdodge" (Witzenberger, 2018) an algorithmic hunger for data to circumvent systems' "hypernudges" (Darmody and Zwick, 2019). Actions are "obfuscated" (Brunton and Nissenbaum, 2011) to counteract or misguide attempts of datafication, the social power of platforms is "avoided" by disengaging politically (Magalhães, 2022), and "refusal" is mobilised as a resistant "knowledge project" (Ganesh and Moss, 2022). Systems are "gamed" to exploit the imagined functions of algorithms (Cotter, 2019; Bishop, 2018) while the "artificial bosses" of "algorithmic management" (Kellogg et al., 2020) are "ridiculed" (Schaupp, 2023). The "fissures" in algorithmic power that these acts provoke can lead to "moments in which algorithms do not govern as intended" (Ferrari and Graham, 2021). Subjects of algorithmic control organise publicly to counteract disruptions (DeVito et al., 2017) or tackle the consequences of algorithmic decision making artistically (Weckert, 2020; Bridle, 2017). Other examples include social movements campaigning against the use of specific algorithms (Heemsbergen et al., 2022) or watchdog organisations targeting algorithmic subjection on a discursive level (AlgorithmWatch, nd). Some of these practices "explicitly leverage computational affordances to tactically shift power dynamics" rather than comprehensively "resist[ing] algorithmic ways of life" (Heemsbergen et al., 2022: 2). Others can be seen as "a complicit form of resistance" (Velkova and Kaun, 2021: 535) that, without denying algorithmic power, mobilise it for different ends.

While a broad range of practices can be framed as "resistance", these examples underline that making them visible empirically often depends on user' awareness of algorithmic operations and their vocabulary, their background knowledge about data collection, infrastructures and the inner workings of algorithmic technologies. Furthermore, what is discussed and labelled as practices of resistance often draws from an implicit terminological understanding without providing greater detail on what it means to "resist" and especially who is able to do so. It thus becomes necessary to clarify what resistance is before further elaborating on its algorithmic version.

Understanding resistance

In their widely discussed meta-analysis, Hollander and Einwohner (2004) identify the core elements of resistance. It is an act that operates in opposition to power. But there are also definitional disagreements: must resistance be recognisable as such? If so, by whom? Must actors be aware of their own resistance? Of significance within this discussion is Scott's (1985) concept of "peasant resistance", referring to those "everyday acts of resistance [that] make no headlines" (Scott, 1985: XVII). Scott argues that resistances do not necessarily have to be visible, since in fact they often go unseen to those they resist against. However, following his understanding, those who resist have to act with political consciousness and intent.

Bayat (2000) points out that such an understanding serves to "confuse an awareness about oppression with acts of resistances against it" (543). Focusing on people's intentions would thus exclude a great variety of "everyday" resistances. Instead, he proposes the competing notion of "quiet encroachment": the "silent, protracted but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive and improve their lives" (545). Examples of such practices include the (illegal) tapping of electricity or water pipes in poor neighbourhoods or digital file sharing. Evidently, such resistances do not always arise from an outspoken opposition to powerful institutions or an intent to destroy them. They can simply reflect people's needs to fulfil their desires or improve their subjective situation.

However, by focusing on resistance "as a response to power from 'below'; a subaltern practice, which has the possibility to negotiate and/or undermine power" Baaz et al. (2016: 142) propose another analytical distinction. As, in principle, resistance may arise from any social position, they centre their understanding upon actions that "dissolve, undermine, question, or challenge subordination – and which ultimately could produce non-subordinate relations" (141). Such resistances are being performed from a subaltern position or on behalf of a subaltern (as in being of "inferior rank" and subject to a ruling hegemony) (Gramsci, 2011). Yet, one must acknowledge simultaneous interlocking systems of hierarchy, power relations, and resulting degrees of subordination; rigid dichotomies between resisters and dominators elide contextual and situational evaluation (Baz et al., 2018).

Building on these insights, it is evident that resistances are not exclusively found where they are proclaimed via megaphones, strikes, and riots. Consequently, my endeavour seeks to map out theoretical and methodological spaces that allow a deeper understanding of an already multifaceted phenomenon (and its algorithmic amplification). At the same time, however, it is important to notice that there can be no final definition of "resistance", as claiming one could be seen as an expression of hegemonic ambitions (which would likely inspire resistance, Baz et al., 2018: 19). Analytically, and to broaden an understanding of resistances in algorithmic regimes, we need to appreciate the "everydayness" of resistances (Vintage and Johansson, 2013) that might not be politically articulated or formally organised.

For these purposes, algorithmic resistance must be seen as an *act* rather than a quality of an actor or a state of being. Such acts might entail a broad spectrum of practices, ranging from actively challenging algorithmic outputs and the tinkering with inputs, to the refusal, avoidance, and ridiculing of algorithmic systems. However, a mere attitude of mistrust is not in itself enough to qualify as "resistance" (though it could inspire acts of resistance). Such resistance also encompasses acts of critique, which, as discursive practices (Reckitt, 2016) and normative articulations, challenge or dissent from algorithmic systems.

Reflecting upon the notion of *intention* suggests that resistances can address and relate to positions of subordination without consciously intending to do so. For example, contributing to online practices such as "Voldemortian" (van der Nagel, 2018), i.e., altering or avoiding certain keywords to prevent their algorithmic readability can be done out of habit or because of their perceived aesthetic, without understanding the initial purpose of the practice or intending obfuscation.

Furthermore, acts of resistance do not have to be *recognised* as such by resisters or targets of resistance; "various actions or practices—even when the intent is ambiguous, unknown, or nonpolitical—still qualify as resistance" (Baz et al., 2016: 140). This argument goes beyond the view that any definition of resistance is solely derived from the perception of actors. Rather, acts are "resisting" as long as they relate to actors' subordination. The renunciation of both an articulated intention and the need to define one's own action as "resistant" allows one to consider those routinised or affective practices as resistance that challenge relations of subordination (in ways that escape the attention of the actors themselves).

Finally, resistance necessarily arises from a *position of subordination*. While there are countless examples in which subordination appears to be obvious, e.g., as within institutional environments that facilitate algorithmic control (workplace surveillance, automated welfare allocation, job applicant screening), most everyday encounters with algorithms are optional. Algorithmically curated newsfeeds or suggestions about a playlist's next song are not obligatory and do not "force" us to follow or use them. However, political and cultural participation, the cultivation of friendships, the search for love, relationships or professional opportunities are activities that increasingly necessitate the use of algorithmic systems. An apparent voluntarism, therefore, is framed by the possibilities and rules set out by algorithmic regimes. As Burrell and Fourcade (2021) observe, "not participating may guarantee a certain kind freedom, but it may also mean social isolation" (229). Interacting within algorithmic regimes means participating according to the affordances set out by them. Although allowing for choice, contingency is often already algorithmically constrained within the specific political economies in which algorithms operate and the affordances they set out. In practice, algorithmic governance depends on the mechanisms, structures, degrees of institutionalisation, distribution of authority and the respective actors. Thus, even though many algorithmic practices necessitate at least a certain degree of subordination, different magnitudes of "force" depend on situational features. But, is it legitimate to speak about subordination when interacting with, for example, a highly transparent algorithmic system that seeks to aid (but not determine) human decision making?

In this context, Airoldi and Rokka (2022) suggest approaching algorithmic outputs as "articulations", and therefore as a "techno-social process mediated and actualized by the opaque, authoritative, non-neutral, and recursive actions of automated systems" (418). This understanding suggests that algorithmic systems have inherent normative claims. By building on the intimate imaginings of its designers, "depending on a multitude of *recursive* past iterations of consumer behaviour and human-machine interactions through digital data" (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022: 418–419), algorithmic systems are being iteratively "socialised". Therefore, every algorithmic articulation reflects the normative expressions of the surrounding environment and continually contributes to its reproduction. Despite often being disregarded as "biased", this "culture in the code" is inevitable within complex machine learning algorithms that manifests as "machine habitus" (Airoldi, 2022).

With these considerations in mind, I am suggesting that algorithmic outputs—recursively referring to and reproducing previous practices by opaque and non-neutral means—inherently contain normative truth claims which authoritatively "articulate" themselves into human practice. This does not necessarily mean that human agency is, as often feared, comprehensively undermined. It should, however, sensitise us to the fact that every algorithmic articulation (by constraining and shaping contingencies of action) already necessitates a moment of subordination, a "control through limits" (Beer, 2016: 173). Actions rendered possible and bounded by algorithmic affordances imply and necessitate a submission to algorithmically articulated truth claims (insofar as acting with or through the algorithm continues to be pursued). Such submission is not per se violent, nor does it inevitably produce resistance. But the fact that submission can be voluntary (because enacting a system is accepted as a legitimate means for achieving a goal) or even affirmative (because a result is perceived as superior) should not distract from requiring subordination. Algorithms, in many cases, do not exercise their power in a Weberian sense as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance" (Weber, 1978: 53). However, algorithmic governance establishes a link between goals and means: in order to participate, users have to play along by the rules [1]. There are plentiful examples in which algorithms improve participation, foster decentralised bottom-up coordination, and offer new opportunities for inclusiveness, diversity and democratic involvement (König 2020; Scrape, 2019). Yet, even "benign" applications require subordination to their calculative authority. Algorithmic results may be presented in a transparent and understandable way, grant users agency in decision-making, and strictly adhere to inclusive, democratic, or even non-hierarchical principles. But, they can still be observed as an authoritative expression of superior computational power and as an attempt to maintain the normative order that is inevitably embedded into them [2].

Resistance as rooted in friction

While this rather expansive notion of resistance results from an emphasising a permanent subordination under algorithmic articulations, the theoretical omnipresence of technological domination is accompanied by a dilution of its explanatory power. Furthermore, it favours the labelling of actions as "resistant" from the privileged epistemological position of researchers and their implicit (and possibly romanticized) ideas of what resistance should look like. As hierarchies may contain subordinates that are "not only willing to but also enthusiastic in their obedience to the power with which they identify and live" (Baz et al., 2016: 141), those engaging in such practices may at the same act as "parasitic on power and/or nourish as well as undermine it" (Baz et al., 2016: 142). Any classification without knowledge of a user's "intention" would solely depend on a researcher's verdict. Although conceptual openness can be fruitful to allow for broader examination of various forms of resistant practices (articulated and silent, intentional and unconscious, calculated and affective), it carries the inherent problem of arbitrarily labelling resistances.

In order to counteract these tendencies and to focus on the experiences of users assumed to be capable of criticising and resisting their subordination (rather than a researcher framing their actions as such), one must aim for a causal criterion from which resistance emerges. Here, I suggest the concept of situational "friction". Tsing (2011) proposed that the universal claims of global phenomena (capitalism, science, and politics) lead to frictional reconfigurations of local practices. Highlighting how algorithms articulate powerful claims within human-machine relations, Rosenstein (2023) observes that this "notion of friction aids in addressing tensions and contradictions involved in processes of datafication and related to informational asymmetries" (8–9). Frictions within algorithmic relations manifest as "ambivalences and contradictions" caused by and rooted within normative algorithmic articulations and experienced through actors' situated knowledge and expectations. As an affective dimension, this emphasizes the importance of "how algorithms are felt and accommodated" (Rosenstein, 2023: 10) within people's practices. Notions of "friction" highlight that within users' mundane experiences and practices, they are capable of recognizing and counteracting algorithmic domination. However, the mere perception of friction does not necessarily imply resistance against hegemony (Tsing, 2011). On the contrary, accepting friction as inevitable might even inspire the very practices that stabilise and uphold domination. It is therefore important to highlight that rooting resistances within experiences of friction does not offer a clear criterion for distinguishing the quality of actions that they inspire. However, it can inspire further questioning concerning people's motives and intentions (in which such demarcations are made by the actors themselves). By making tangible what often lies beyond actors' own grasp, discussing frictions seeks to encourage reflection upon the intentions and goals that their actions contain. It further allows the investigation of the very modalities and conditions that sometimes spark resistance (and sometimes do not).

Rooting resistances in "friction" seeks to broaden the perspective while avoiding arbitrary judgements from researchers. Instead, emphasis is given to users' experiences of ambiguities, ambivalences and contradictions that somehow "do not feel right". Resistance in and against algorithmic regimes is defined here as practices performed from a subordinated position (or in solidarity with one) within or against an algorithmically structured environment (when algorithms are used or have to be used to achieve a certain goal). Resistant practices are rooted in affective encounters and experiences of "friction". As outlined, mobilising this understanding of resistance is not definitive, nor does it provide unambiguous criteria as to what actions oppose power and what reaffirm it. However, it seeks to include such practices within notions of resistance that challenge a prevailing hegemony yet escape the gaze of common operationalisations.

Frictional algorithmic resistance

To accommodate this notion of "friction" within practices of resistance, its emergence and entanglement within powerful algorithmic articulations must be specified. As some resistances occur routinely, a temporal dimension must be considered. Frictions perceived in the past can inspire resistant practices, which over time become entangled within other layers of meaning to a point where the original experience of friction is no longer recognised.

These processes can be understood by drawing from theories of practice (Reckitt, 2002) and more specifically from the concept of "practical knowledge" to describe people's abilities to "to accomplish X, Y, or Z within algorithmically mediated spaces as guided by the discursive features of one's social world" (Cotter, 2022: 1). If "we can know more than we can tell" (Polanyi, 2009: 4), then "knowledge may not necessarily be that which can be verbalised"; it should instead be understood as "tacitly expressed via action" (Cotter, 2022: 7). Knowledge is part of routinised bodily activities and manifests "in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (Reckitt, 2002: 249). Embedded in circulating and socially incorporated knowledge orders, actors "know-how" to enact algorithmic applications within practices, without having to "know-what" these applications actually do. The specific skills that surround algorithmic practices are closely related to their meanings (as to why a certain practice is being performed) and the materials (algorithmic systems, infrastructures, interfaces) with which they are being combined. Such elements are already "linked" in practices and are being performed by practitioners who don't necessarily understand every aspect of them (Shove et al., 2012: 14). In this sense, we practically know, and implicitly understand, how to start a computer without requiring detailed knowledge about the processes that happen in the background. We experience algorithmic encounters affectively, based on expectations towards their functioning that are mediated within practices, and perceive whether or not they "feel right". However, no situational context is alike and both human and algorithmic articulations are contingent. Thus, every performance of a practice may produce "novelty" and such "awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (Tsing, 2011, 4) that are perceived as friction.

Practices and their discursive shaping are not isolated instances but always relate to the spatial, temporal and social contexts of their performances. One can then consider the social conditions under which (resistant) algorithmic practices are being shaped and locate the emergence of frictions at the point where normative algorithmic articulations intersect with the contexts that they are being enacted within. Specific articulations open trajectories for action that enable, exclude and particularise depending on situational affordances. Consequently, "encounters across difference can be compromising or empowering" (Tsing, 2011: 6) and can cause both "everyday malfunctions as well as unexpected cataclysms".

However, not every resisting act has to be initiated in situ: frictions may have been perceived in the past and inscribed into practices. Being continuously reiterated within practice, frictions can appear as detached from the irritations they initially resulted from. As habitual repetition, such routinised acts of resistance can manifest as quiet deviances, as unquestioned certainties, or as rituals of opposition detached from their original meaning [3].

Algorithmic breaching experiments

This understanding of "resistance," informed by theories of practice, doesn't just allow the consideration of direct, outspoken, and open acts of opposition to algorithmic articulations, which necessarily depend on users' knowledge, literacy, awareness and skills. Resistance also includes the subtle, silent, routine, not politically articulated or formally organised acts that would otherwise remain unseen. For empirical investigation, established tools of social research (in particular, qualitative interviews, participant observation and ethnographic work) along with related concepts ("imaginaries", "folk theories") remain important. However, the proposed understanding also enables a novel approach, one that is inspired by a famous, but seemingly antiquated social science heuristic: the breaching experiment.

Originating from Garfinkel's (1964, 1967) ethnomethodology, breaching experiments represent an attempt to make implicit norms recognisable through the conscious disregard of social conventions. By disrupting everyday, routinised processes of action, breaching experiments aim at forcing actors to de-familiarise themselves from immediate social surroundings. Classical examples of such experiments include researchers initiating a conversation with someone and "bring[ing] their faces up to the subject's until their noses were almost touching" (Garfinkel, 1967: 72), requesting people to give up their seat in public transport (Milgram and Sabini, 1978), and asking students to act as if they were subtenants in their parents' house (Garfinkel, 1967).

Due to algorithms' hidden nature and subtle blending into everyday life as invisible infrastructures, an intended or non-intended malfunctioning created by breaching experiments could be facilitated to violate internalised practical assumptions around algorithmic applications. Drawing from an understanding that locates resistance in frictions, breaching experiments thus offer potentials not only for researching algorithmic practices in general (Zenkl, 2025), but in particular for the investigation of resistant practices. By intentionally generating "friction" within a research setting, normative claims of a (faulty) system may interrupt usually undisputed practices and urge participants to "surface" the expectations they associate with an intended functioning. Since both algorithmic articulations and users' expectations reflect respective normative positions, such breaching allows an analysis of how users perceive friction and of what "tactics" (Certeau, 2002) they employ to tackle it. It was acknowledged earlier that not every perception of irritation and ambivalence causally determines resistance. On the contrary, friction may also inspire new ways of upholding power and validate submission. Nevertheless, in some cases, breaching might incite those acts that are considered "resistant" and allow for their empirical study. Moreover, reviewing the analytical framework provided by Johansson and Vinthagen (2014), analysis could infer repertoires of action, configurations of power between humans and algorithms, and relations of time and space. The attempt to provoke resistant action by introducing friction into an experimental setting and to make resistant practices into the object of analysis thus leads to a second-order sociological observation concerned about the contexts and effects of such resistance (Vobruba, 2013).

In regard to algorithmic breaching experiments, multiple approaches for researching resistances within this framework can be considered. For example, participants could use commonly known algorithmic applications that, being modified for the research setting, deviate from their "normal" form of operation and violate practical expectations. Users would be presented with flawed outputs and confronted with dysfunctional algorithmic assessments. Introducing friction would seek to disorganise user's practices, discredit habitualised background expectations and therefore disrupt tacit know-how (Patzelt, 1987). This would create situations under which normative algorithmic claims and users' everyday understandings collide. Such breaching experiments seek to observe affective reactions (the "feeling" that something is not right), the tactics applied to confront dysfunctional algorithms, the discursive accounts of critique and the performances of resistance that they inspire. The purpose is to manufacture the very "experiences of irritation [that] offer concrete examples of how algorithms are seen to operate in the world" (Ruckenstein, 2023: 136).

Most importantly, by intentionally producing errors and studying breakdowns, accidents, and anomalies, breaching experiments seek to surface algorithms in a way that actors can describe them from practical experience. Algorithmic breaching experiments therefore share similarities with what Storms and Alvarado (2024) describe as “sensitising activities”. These are preparatory exercises for research participants that, without even naming “the algorithm”, are meant to foreground algorithmic experiences, raise awareness or bridge gaps in vocabulary [4]. However, instead of trying to develop a shared understanding among participants around algorithms as a basis for questioning, breaching experiments may be conducted without invoking such an initial awareness or vocabulary.

Furthermore, and by acknowledging that actors are not only capable of conducting “breaching experiments” themselves, but in fact widely and often facilitate practices of “breaching” in their daily lives (Celikates, 2009, 130), experimentally created confrontations with friction could leverage further questioning about such experiences. Algorithmic breaching experiments to investigate resistances may, for example, include the:

- Cloning and manipulation of commonly known interfaces (e.g., Search Engines, Social Media Platforms) producing outputs that could be perceived as unpredictable, useless or wrong.
- Tampering with results or ridiculing algorithmic assessments of relevance to intentionally create mismatches between algorithmic outputs and everyday experience (e.g., navigation apps suggesting detours).
- Deliberate misclassification of users’ actions or attributes that lead to a datafication of the self that is perceived as incorrect. As Burrell and Fourcade (2021: 229) note, algorithmic processes can be experienced as particularly oppressive when “algorithms are disturbingly wrong in their assessments (rather than spookily accurate)”. Such operationalisations, in order to inspire resistances, will, however, require a careful consideration of research ethics.
- Violation of expectations within domains where algorithmic articulations collide with “expert” knowledge, e.g., support systems in professional everyday life. This may generate results which do not correspond to the usual routines of action or one's own convictions about how work “should be done”.
- Exposure of algorithmic practices that are often perceived as “harmful” by making them visible and confronting users with this experience. For example, clearly warning about surveillance by presenting data that has been collected from a user within a certain situation/environment or by communicating the automatically assigned identity/behaviour categories that have resulted from certain actions.

Breaching algorithms follows a methodological “broken tool approach” (Adams and Thompson, 2016) in which a technology and its usage is observed in its most taken-for-granted, ready-to-hand moments. Disrupting the everyday knowledge and routinised practices surrounding algorithms confronts users with an “outright breakdown” in order to initiate their “puzzling over incongruencies in everyday actions” (Adams and Thompson, 2016: 56). This, in turn, seeks to “produce reflections through which the strangeness of an obstinately familiar world can be detected” (Garfinkel, 1967: 38). By manufacturing perceptions of friction, by surfacing “fissures in algorithmic power” (Ferrari and Graham, 2021), researchers seek to study infrastructures when they cease to work as they normally do. This, Graham (2010: 3) finds, is “the most powerful way of really penetrating and problematising those very normalities of flow and circulation to an extent where they can be subjected to critical scrutiny”.

By not only observing users’ direct reactions but also employing the research setting as a referential lever to further examine previous experiences of frictions, algorithmic non-functioning, and non-conforming, breaching experiments are expected to “sensitise” participants to recognise and articulate further subtle acts of resistance without relying upon expert knowledge or vocabulary.

Despite the opportunities that algorithmic breaching experiments offer, their limitations must not be overlooked. Most obviously, sterile research environments are detached from the algorithmic messiness of layered, intersecting systems and the hierarchies of everyday life. Introducing friction into human-machine relations still relies on researchers’ preconceptions about what such friction could consist of and what an “error” might encompass. To mitigate these potential biases, participants would need to be actively involved in the research design so that their own practical understandings of friction are recognised. Furthermore, implementing these experiments depends on their convincing practical realisation, which requires an imitation of "practically known" applications as close to everyday experience as possible. In addition to the skills required for this, the very "opacity" of platforms and applications are key barriers to be taken into account.

Conclusion

Algorithmic regimes closely follow Tsing’s (2011: 6) imaginative comparison of “roads”. They “create pathways that make motion easier and more efficient, but in doing so they limit where we go. The ease of travel they facilitate is also a structure of confinement”. Normative algorithmic claims are, in many cases, not experienced directly as something that is forcefully asserted. Rather, they are manifest as friction: in fissures of users’ expectations, the breaking of accountabilities, disruptions of routines, or as algorithmic violence. People resist such articulations not only by politically outspoken activism, but by rooting subtle acts of resistance in perceived and affectively experienced friction within everyday practices. Their “tactics” applied to counteract algorithmic subordination are manifold: from avoidance, contamination and exploitation of algorithmic flaws to disengagement and strategies for gaming and beating the system.

This article has sought to critically acknowledge common conceptualisations of algorithmic power and resistance and their operationalisation for empirical research while identifying their shortcomings. Notions of resistance are inherently controversial, multifaced, ambiguous and contested. I have sought to provide a perspective that sheds light on those acts of resistance that often go unseen, happen silently, and are not politically articulated. As one possible point of departure for empirical research, a methodological heuristic based on algorithmic breaching experiments has been proposed in which intentional algorithmic error is meant to collide with users’ expectations. Such experiments could “start with familiar scenes and ask what can be done to make trouble” (Garfinkel, 1967: 37). Then, interviewees would be invited to observe those “‘whoa’ moments—events in which the intimate power of algorithms reveals itself in strange sensations” (Bucher, 2017: 35), while making visible the implicit knowledge that “ordinary” users facilitate within their everyday algorithmic practices. This approach could help sensitise both researchers and users to the everydayness of small, invisible, and petty acts of resistance and their part in the shaping of digital technologies.

Resistances occur as neo-luddite disruptions, strikes, and protest, but are not restricted to these practices; hegemonic power is contradicted in silent encroachment as well as in open confrontation. Thus, understanding “how power and resistance interact, and how they factor in the struggle for social change” (Vinthagen and Holloway, 2015: 5) cannot restrict the ambition to investigate revolutionary uprisings, but must always consider everyday acts of opposition. Even though “challenging algorithms takes effort” (Swart, 2021: 7) and platforms and applications often create environments in which passive usage is made attractive, it can be assumed that everyday acts of resistance are common, that code might indeed be law, but that law can be (and often is) broken.

Author Bio

Thomas Zenkl is a research assistant in the Institute of Sociology at the University of Graz and examines interactions between society and advanced automated technologies. His doctoral project considers the proliferation of algorithmic systems, how users perceive algorithmic power in relation to algorithmic subordination and their enactment of resistant practices.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the participants and reviewers of the 2nd "WIP Hybrid Workshop" of the thematic group "Digital Sociology" in Belgrade (14-15 December 2023) for their comments on an early manuscript.

Endnotes

[1] In this understanding, the willingness to continue interaction can be differentiated from practices of "refusal".

[2] This argument could be extended through the following consideration: superior access to the world through mass datafication, categorisation of the world within metrics that exceed or enhance human perception, and the epistemological consequences that arise from this can be seen as another source of subordination that leads to a hierarchisation in human-machine relations. So-called "neutral" algorithms, as proposed by efforts of "platform neutrality" (Pasquale, 2016), could not counteract this momentum, as any algorithmic system that relies on the datafication of social practices and extrapolates them to arrive at predictive results implies (voluntary) subordination.

[3] While this temporal dimension of resistant practices, whose meanings are propagated or dissipated through repetition and lead to what theories of practice describe as the "sedimentation of knowledge" (Reckwitz, 2016) offer interesting starting points for future research, they must be neglected here. However, special attention must be given to the circumstance whereby "rituals of rebellion" may, in the trajectory of practice, invert their initial opposition to power and serve to reinforce its practical acceptance by merely disputing it symbolically (Gutmann, 1993).

[4] Examples for such activities include applying "walk-through interview" techniques (Swart, 2021), asking participants to find a movie they wanted to watch on a streaming platform followed up by questions about what they knew about the recommendations that came with that choice, or sensitising participants to algorithmic rankings of platforms via diaries documenting their experiences (Storms and Alvarado, 2024).

References

Adams C and Thompson TL (2016) *Researching a Posthuman World*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Airoldi M (2022) *Machine Habitus: Toward a Sociology of Algorithms*. Polity Press.

Airoldi M and Rokka J (2022). Algorithmic consumer culture. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 25(5): 411–428. https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2022.2084726

AlgorithmWatch (nd) Available at: https://algorithmwatch.org/en/ (accessed 2 August 2023).

Amoore L (2020) *Cloud Ethics: Algorithms and the Attributes of Ourselves and Others*. Duke University Press.

Amoore L and Piotukh V (eds) 2016 *Algorithmic Life: Calculative Devices in the Age of Big Data*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Baaz M, Lilja M, Schulz M and Vinthagen S (2016) Defining and analyzing 'resistance': possible entrances to the study of subversive practices. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 41(3): 137–153. https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375417700170

Baaz M, Lilja M and Vinthagen S (2018) *Researching Resistance and Social Change: A Critical Approach to Theory and Practice*. Rowman & Littlefield International.

Bayat A (2000) From 'dangerous classes' to 'quiet rebels': politics of the urban subaltern in the global south. *International Sociology* 15(3): 533–557.

Beer D (2013) *Popular Culture and New Media*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Beer D (2016) *Metric Power*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Beer D (2017) The social power of algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society* 20(1): 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1216147

Beer D (2023) *The Tensions of Algorithmic Thinking: Automation, Intelligence and the Politics of Knowing*. Bristol University Press.

Bellanova R, Irion K, Lindskov Jacobsen K, Ragazzi F, Saugmann R and Suchman L (2021) Toward a critique of algorithmic violence. *International Political Sociology* 15(1): 121–150.

Bishop S (2018) Anxiety, panic and self-optimization: inequalities and the YouTube algorithm. *Convergence* 24(1): 69–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517736978

Bridle J (2017) Autonomous trap 001. Available at: https://jamesbridle.com/works/autonomous-trap-001 (accessed 2 August 2023).

Brunton F and Nissenbaum H (2011) Vernacular resistance to data collection and analysis: a political theory of obfuscation. *First Monday* 16(5). https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/3493/2955

Bucher T (2017) The algorithmic imaginary: exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society* 20(1): 30–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154086

Bucher T (2018) *If...Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics*. Oxford University Press.

Burrell J (2016) How the machine 'thinks': understanding opacity in machine learning algorithms. *Big Data & Society*, 3(1). https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2660674

Burrell J and Fourcade M (2021) The society of algorithms. *Annual Review of Sociology* 47(1): 213–237. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-090820-020800

Carr N (2014) The limits of social engineering. *MIT Technology Review*. Available at: https://www.technologyreview.com/2014/04/16/173156/the-limits-of-social-engineering/ (accessed 15 April 2023).

Celikates R (2009) *Kritik Als Soziale Praxis: Gesellschaftliche Selbstverständigung Und Kritische Theorie* [Criticism as Social Practice: Social Self-Understanding and Critical Theory]. Campus.

Chayka K (2024) *Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture*. Doubleday.

Christin A (2020) The ethnographer and the algorithm: beyond the black box. *Theory and Society* 49(5–6): 897–918. DOI:10.1007/s11186-020-09411-3

Cormen TH, Leiserson CE, Rivest RL and Stein C (2009) *Introduction to Algorithms*. MIT Press.

Cotter K (2019) Playing the visibility game: how digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram. *New Media & Society* 21(4): 895–913. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818815684

Cotter K (2022) Practical knowledge of algorithms: the case of BreadTube. *New Media & Society* 26(4): 2131-2150. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221081802

Cotter K and Reisdorf BC (2020) Algorithmic knowledge gaps: a new horizon of (digital) inequality. *International Journal of Communication* 14: 745-765.

Darmody A and Zwick D (2019) Manipulate to empower: hyper-relevance and the contradictions of marketing in the age of surveillance capitalism. *Big Data & Society*, 7. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2053951720904112

de Certeau M (2002) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Univ. of California Press.

DeVito MA, Gergle D and Birnholtz J (2017) ‘Algorithms ruin everything’: #RIPTwitter, folk theories, and resistance to algorithmic change in social media. In: *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* CHI ’17. Association for Computing Machinery, pp 3163-3174.

Dogruel L (2021) What is algorithm literacy? a conceptualization and challenges regarding its empirical measurement. In: Taddicken M and Schumann C (eds) *Algorithms and Communication*. Berlin, pp. 67-93.

Dogruel L, Masur P and Joeckel S (2022) Development and validation of an algorithm literacy scale for internet users. *Communication Methods and Measures* 16(2): 115–133. DOI: 10.1080/19312458.2021.1968361

Eslami M, Karahalios K, Sandvig C, Vaccaro K, Rickman A, Hamilton K and Kirlik A (2016) First I ‘like’ it, then I hide it: folk theories of social feeds. In: *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. Association for Computing Machinery, pp. 2371-2382.

Eslami M, Rickman A, Vaccaro K, Aleyasen A, Vuong A, Karahalios K, Hamilton K and Sandvig C (2015) ‘I always assumed that I wasn’t really that close to [her]’ : reasoning about invisible algorithms in news feeds. In: *CHI '15: Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. Association for Computing Machinery, pp 153-162.

Eubanks V (2017) *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor*. Martin’s Press.

Ferrari F and Graham M (2021) Fissures in algorithmic power: platforms, code, and contestation. *Cultural Studies* 35(4–5): 814–832. DOI: 10.1080/09502386.2021.1895250

Foucault M (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (C Gordon, ed) Pantheon Books.

French M and Hancock J (2017) What's the folk theory? reasoning about cyber-social systems. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2910571 (accessed 13 January 2024).

Ganesh MI and Moss E (2022) Resistance and refusal to algorithmic harms: varieties of 'knowledge projects'. *Media International Australia*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X221076288

Garfinkel H (1964) Studies of the routine grounds of everyday activities. *Social Problems* 11(3): 225–250.

Garfinkel H (1967). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Polity Press.

Glendinning C (1990) Notes toward a neo-luddite manifesto. Available at: https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/chellis-glendinning-notes-toward-a-neo-luddite-manifesto (accessed 25 August 2023).

Graham S (ed) 2010 *Disrupted Cities: When Infrastructure Fails*. Routledge.

Gramsci A (2011) *Prison Notebooks. Vol. 1* (JA Buttigieg and A Callari, Trans). Columbia University. Press.

Gran A.-B, Booth P and Bucher T (2021) To be or not to be algorithm aware: a question of a new digital divide? *Information, Communication & Society* 24(12): 1779–1796. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1736124

Gruber J and Hargittai E (2023) The importance of algorithm skills for informed internet use. *Big Data & Society* 10(1). DOI: 10.1177/20539517231168100

Gruber J, Hargittai E, Karaoglu G and Brombach L (2021) Algorithm awareness as an important internet skill: the case of voice assistants. *International Journal of Communication* 15: 1770–1788.

Gutmann MC (1993) Rituals of resistance: a critique of the theory of everyday forms of resistance. *Latin American Perspectives* 20(2): 74–92.

Heemsbergen L, Treré E and Pereira G (2022) Introduction to algorithmic antagonisms: resistance, reconfiguration, and renaissance for computational life. *Media International Australia* 183: 3-15. DOI: 10.1177/1329878X221086042

Hirsch E and Silverstone R (2003) Information and communication technologies and the moral economy of the household. In: Hirsch E and Silverstone R (eds) *Consuming Technologies*. Routledge, pp. 25-40.

Hollander JA and Einwohner RL (2004) Conceptualizing resistance. *Sociological Forum* 19(4): 533–554. DOI: 10.1007/s11206-004-0694-5

Jarke J, Prietl B, Egbert S, Boeva Y and Heuer H (2024) Knowing in algorithmic regimes: an introduction. In: Jarke J, Prietl B, Egbert S, Boeva, Y, Heuer H and Arnold M (eds) *Algorithmic Regimes: Methods, Interactions and Politics*. Amsterdam University Press, pp 3-25.

Johansson A and Vinthagen S (2014) Dimensions of everyday resistance: an analytical framework. *Critical Sociology* 42(3): 417–435. DOI: 10.1177/0896920514524604

Just N and Latzer M (2017) Governance by algorithms: reality construction by algorithmic selection on the internet. *Media, Culture & Society* 39(2): 238–258.

Kassem S (2023) *Work and Alienation in the Platform Economy*. Bristol University Press.

Kellogg KC, Valentine MA and Christin A (2020) Algorithms at work: the new contested terrain of control. *Academy of Management Annals* 14(1): 366–410. https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2018.0174

Klawitter E and Hargittai E (2018) 'It's like learning a whole other language': the role of algorithmic skills in the curation of creative goods. *International Journal of Communication* 12: 21.

Koenig A (2020) The algorithms know me and I know them: using student journals to uncover algorithmic literacy awareness. *Computers and Composition* 58, 102611.

König PD (2020) Dissecting the algorithmic leviathan: on the socio-political anatomy of algorithmic governance. *Philosophy & Technology* 33(3): 467–485.

Langer M, Hunsicker T, Feldkamp T, König CJ and Grgić-Hlača N (2022) Look! it's a computer program! it's an Algorithm! it's AI!': Does terminology affect human perceptions and evaluations of algorithmic decision-making systems? In: *CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems.* Association for Computing Machinery, pp 1-28.

Magalhães JC (2022). Algorithmic Resistance as Political Disengagement. *Media International Australia*.

Milgram S and Sabini J (1978) On maintaining social norms: a field experiment in the subway. In: Baum A and Singer JE (eds) *Advances in Environmental Psychology: The Urban Environment*. Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc, pp. 31-40).

Ochigame R (2020) Informatics of the oppressed. *Logic* (11): 53–71.

O'Neil C (2016) *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. Crown.

Parisi L (2015) Instrumental reason, algorithmic capitalism, and the incomputable. In: Pasquinelli M (ed) *Alleys of Your Mind: Augmented Intelligence and Its Traumas*. Meson Press, pp. 125-137.

Pasquale F (2016) Platform neutrality: enhancing freedom of expression in spheres of private power. *Faculty Scholarship*. Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/fac_pubs/1603

Pasquinelli M (2023) *The Eye of the Master: A Social History of Artificial Intelligence*. Verso.

Patzelt WJ (1987) *Grundlagen Der Ethnomethodologie: Theorie, Empirie Und Politikwissenschaftlicher Nutzen Einer Soziologie Des Alltags*. W. Fink.

Polanyi M (2009) *The Tacit Dimension*. University of Chicago Press.

Reckwitz A (2002) Toward a theory of social practices: a development in culturalist theorizing. *European Journal of Social Theory* 5(2): 243–263. DOI: 10.1177/13684310222225432

Reckwitz A (2016) *Kreativität und Soziale Praxis: Studien zur Sozial- und Gesellschaftstheorie*. transcript Verlag.

Ruckenstein M (2023) *The Feel of Algorithms*. University of California Press.

Ruckenstein M and Granroth J (2020) Algorithms, advertising and the intimacy of surveillance. *Journal of Cultural Economy* 13(1): 12–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2019.1574866

Schaupp S (2023) Ridiculing the artificial boss: organisational technocultures and the humorous criticism of AI at work. *Work in the Global Economy* 1–18. DOI: 10.1332/273241721X16790493150493

Schrape J-F (2019) The promise of technological decentralization. a brief reconstruction. *Society* 56(1): 31–37.

Scott JC (1985) *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Yale University Press.

Seaver N (2017) Algorithms as culture: some tactics for the ethnography of algorithmic systems. *Big Data & Society* 4(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951717738104

Seaver N (2019) Knowing algorithms. In: Vertesi J and Ribes D (eds) *digitalSTS*. Princeton University Press, pp. 412-422.

Shove E, Pantzar M and Watson M (2012) *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and How It Changes*. SAGE.

Siles I, Espinoza-Rojas J, Naranjo A and Tristán MF (2019) The mutual domestication of users and algorithmic recommendations on Netflix. *Communication, Culture and Critique* 12(4): 499-518. DOI: 10.1093/ccc/tcz025

Siles I, Segura-Castillo A, Solís R and Sancho M (2020). Folk theories of algorithmic recommendations on Spotify: enacting data assemblages in the global south. *Big Data & Society* 7(1). DOI: 10.1177/2053951720923377

Siles I, Valerio-Alfaro L and Meléndez-Moran A (2022) Learning to like TikTok . . . and not: algorithm awareness as process. *New Media & Society*. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221138973

Srnicek N (2019) *Platform Capitalism*. Polity.

Storms E and Alvarado O (2024). Sensitising for algorithms Foregrounding Experience in the Interpretive Study of Algorithmic Regimes. In: Jarke J, Prietl B, Egbert S, Boeva Y, Heuer H and Arnold M (eds) *Algorithmic Regimes: Methods, Interactions and Politics*. Amsterdam University Press, pp. 66-90.

Swart J (2021) Experiencing algorithms: how young people understand, feel about, and engage with algorithmic news selection on social media. *Social Media + Society* 7(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211008828

Tsing AL (2011) *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton University Press.

van der Nagel E (2018) 'Networks That Work Too Well': Intervening in Algorithmic Connections. *Media International Australia*, 168. DOI: 10.1177/1329878X18783002

Velkova J and Kaun A (2021) Algorithmic resistance: media practices and the politics of repair. *Information, Communication & Society* 24(4): 523–540. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1657162

Vinthagen S and Holloway J (2015) Editorial: an invitation to develop 'resistance studies.' *Journal of Resistance Studies* 1(1).

Vinthagen S and Johansson A (2013) 'Everyday resistance': exploration of a concept and its theories. *Resistance Studies Magazine* (1): 1–46.

Vobruba G (2013) Soziologie und kritik [Sociology and Criticism]. *Soziologie* 42(2): 147–168.

Weber M (1978) *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. University of California Press.

Weckert S (2020) Google maps hacks. Available at: https://www.simonweckert.com/ (accessed 2 August 2023).

Witzenberger K (2018) The hyperdodge: how users resist algorithmic objects in everyday life. *Media Theory* 2(2): 29-51.

Yolgörmez C (2020) Machinic encounters: a relational approach to the sociology of AI. In: Roberge J and Castelle M (eds) *The Cultural Life of Machine Learning*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 143-166.

Ytre-Arne B and Moe H (2021) Folk theories of algorithms: understanding digital irritation. *Media, Culture & Society* 43(5): 807–824. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720972314

Zenkl T (2025) *The Trouble with Algorithms: Conceptualizing Algorithmic Breaching Experiments*. Master's Thesis, University of Graz, Austria.

The Political Economy of Communication
11(2), 43–57

http://www.polecom.org

The Double-edged Sword of Digital Technologies: Exploring Precarious Work and Life in Serbia's Local Newsrooms

Igor Išpanović, University of Belgrade, Serbia

Key words: journalism, precarity, digital technologies, local media, illiberal democracy

Abstract:

Digital technologies and platforms have fundamentally transformed journalism and the media industry. Their position within the routines and everyday life of newsrooms has provided tools for the reinvention of the craft, but also overburdened journalists whose working conditions are becoming increasingly precarious. Such is the case for those working in local media outlets in Serbia, a post-socialist country in a state of permanent transition, where the political and the economic are continually entangled. Because of a media privatization process, local newsrooms shrunk or completely shut down. How journalists' precarious work interacts with precarious life, and vice versa, has rarely been explored, especially in regard to the influence of technology. Thus, the aim of this article is two-fold. Firstly, it expands the notion of precarious work to include the ontology of journalistic practices in countries such as Serbia. Secondly, I empirically map the points at which the digital intersects with precarious work in given political and economic conditions. The research is based on ten semi-structured, in-depth interviews with journalists working in Serbian local media. As the findings show, the pressures they experience go beyond the market, since the financial certainty is often a political outcome rooted within the polarizing Serbian landscape. In such an environment, digital exacerbates and expands the economic and the political perils of doing local journalism.

Technological tools are an enabling and disruptive force within the labour and everyday life of media workers (Örnebring, 2010). Such has occured with the intensification and widespread use of new technologies and digital platforms for the production, distribution and consumption of news. Although their accessibility and affordability in certain cases cannot be overlooked, they have also overburdened already depleted newsrooms. Journalists are asked to do fieldwork, produce and edit content for both the analogue and the digital, get involved in the distribution of the articles and video features, interact with audiences and monitor social media feeds, etc. Furthermore, these tools are not only used by journalists, but also on them, as they are pressured to meet daily quotas or or achieve high numbers of views, likes and clicks. Finally, new technologies have contributed to journalists' increasing exposure to hate speech, surveillance and violence, especially in polarized societies and illiberal regimes.

However, many of these changes and pressures "are not inherent to digital technologies", but are an outcome of transforming production processes and management strategies within the broader political-economic context (Cohen, 2018: 572). Technologization of the working environment, as well as the individualization and flexibilization of the labour market, combine to cut capitalists' expenses, control labour and increase production levels. These phenomena didn't occur simultaneously worldwide, but since the 1980s, they have cut journalists' jobs, decreased workers' autonomy and affected control of the work process. The uncertain labour market has come to be experienced as precarity (Millar, 2014).

In journalism studies, precarity has often been approached from this political-economic perspective. Here, I contribute an ontological understanding of precarity. This aligns with Kathleen Millar's (2017: 5) engagement with the concept, as it enables the analysis of precarity as a "specific labor regime and political–economic structure" and as a configuration of subjectivities and lived experiences.

Digital technologies and platforms can be seen as a tool for surveillance and harassment of journalists. This is evident in the case of journalists working in local media outlets in Serbia, an illiberal democracy characterized by the politicization of markets and societal polarization.

From precarious work to precarity as an ontological regime

Precarity can be thought of as a labour, class and human condition. The first two categories are brought together by political-economic tendencies, rooted in the transition from Fordist to the post-Fordist capitalist development. Its key feature is flexibility, whether in terms of production process, capital accumulation or regulation (Jessop, 2005). In this context, the growth of a service-oriented economy was facilitated by the proliferation of new information and communication technologies. Thereby the prototypical neoliberal worker emerged—a flexible, always available and unattached subject, who could perform their job anytime and anywhere (Cohen, 2015). Stepping out from conventional working arrangements, the promise was that the changes would allow the individual to take back control of their labour and gain freedom in choosing what, when and how to employ it. This quickly turned sour.

The standard employment model, a staple of the Keynesian welfare state, had provided workers with the expectation of long-term, full-time jobs, stable income and protection of workplace rights (Chadha and Steiner, 2021). However, under neoliberalism the risks and responsibilities of securing these conditions shifted from employers to workers. This is epitomized by the practice of atypical employment, whereby individuals are hired on short-term, temporary or service contracts, and by the rise in new part-time jobs and gig-work (Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018). Due to the non-permanent nature of these employment relations, workers are constantly at risk of losing their job, and uncertain about finding one. Consequently, atypical work rarely offers income, "health benefits, maternity leave or other benefits" associated with standard employment (Gollmitzer, 2014: 827). Thus, workers are primed for (self-)exploitation, as the processes of flexibilization and individualization mask systemic insecurities through the illusion of personal choice (Sybert, 2023).

Guy Standing (2011) saw labour insecurity as only one aspect of precarity. In his view, the recent market transformations had resulted in the creation of a novel class, which he called 'the precariat', a neologism accounting for the heterogenous group of individuals, from clandestine, undocumented workers to intellectuals in academia, who lost (or never had) certain labour protections. As such, precarity cuts through class structure to form multiple socioeconomic groups. However, experiences of precarity vary across historical periods, geographical locations and social positions. Trying to bring the heterogenous individuals together under one umbrella can be dubious (Millar, 2017). Furthermore, Eloisa Betti (2018) argues that stability and security of standardized employment was only a moment in the history of capitalism, localized in Western Europe and North America during the brief era of the Keynesian welfare state. Additionally, Ronaldo Munck (2013) points out that the precariat cannot be considered a new class, as class relations haven't been radically changed, a necessary requirement for the generation of a novel social formation.

Political-economic understanding of precarity has informed journalism studies over the last decade (Gollmitzer, 2014; Cohen, 2015; Örnebring, 2018; Hayes, 2021; Hayes and O'Sullivan, 2023). At first, this erosion in working conditions was attributed to the proliferation of new digital tools and platforms, lessening advertising revenue and the emergence of different kinds of media content outside journalistic institutions and organizations (Chadha and Steiner, 2021). In these circumstances, media businesses cut their expenses by offering gig-work or short-term contracts, while reducing the number of permanently employed staff, even to the point of closing newsrooms. Willingly or not, more and more journalists found themselves in various forms of casualized and atypical employment, based on "short-term rolling contracts, subcontracted work, casual work, temporary work, and freelance work" (Rick and Hanitzsch, 2023: 202). Caught in a race to the bottom, the increase of non-permanently or unemployed journalists on the labour market dropped the price of journalistic work, as they also faced the challenges of "automation, outsourcing, deskilling" (Chadha and Steiner, 2021). Simultaneously, Gollmitzer (2014) suggests that those thought of as 'typical' journalists are increasingly occupied by administrative and managerial tasks, contributing to work overload and exhaustion. For this reason, Richard Stupart (2021) doubts whether innovation and flexibility can compensate for the loss of financial, technical and personal security. All of this diminishes the capacity of journalists to perform their democratic role and hold those in power accountable. Associated stress and burnout can influence journalists to leave the profession (Matthews and Onyemaobi, 2020; Badram and Smets, 2021; Mireya Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2021).

Because precarious work spills over into other aspects of one's lifeworld, it is also necessary to conceptualize precarity as a human condition. This perspective is inspired by Judith Butler (2006; 2010), who makes a distinction between *precariousness* and *precarity*. The first is understood as an ontological state, a fundamental dependency inscribed into our existence—to be sustained, (human) life always relies on others, pure will to live isn't enough. On the other hand, *precarity* is the political reproduction of this existential vulnerability through which certain groups are disproportionately more exposed to the risk of illness, poverty, starvation or death (Butler, 2010). This approach to precarity can be particularly useful in examining journalists harsh working conditions and socially antagonistic environments, such as those in authoritarian regimes. The governments and ruling parties in these countries often target journalists and use precarity as a disciplinary tool through "severe judicial, economic, and administrative sanctions" (Aydin, 2022: 678). In other words, journalists' well-being and, sometimes, life are at risk because of the work they do, which makes the relation between work and life indivisible.

Political Economy of (Local) Media in Serbia

In 2015, more than two thirds of journalists in Serbia were in a worringly precarious position (Mihailović, 2015). In 2016, the average journalists' salary was still below the country's average (Kulić, 2020). In 2021, almost half of journalists in northern Vojvodina region had more than one job (Milić et al, 2021). Many were willing to accept unsteady and difficult working conditions to keep their jobs at whatever salary, working hours or contracts they were offered (Mihailović, 2015). A typical journalist in Serbia can be described as:

> …a person who carries significant responsibility and potential but is underestimated in society, inadequately compensated, and does not live with dignity. They have low self-confidence due to the conditions they live in.… They might not have a family, live as a tenant or with their parents, be single, earn an average salary in Serbia, and live in fear of job loss.… They work a lot, without fixed working hours, earning little or having irregular income, with an unsettled status, lacking health insurance, having compromised health, under stress, worried about their future, exposed to pressures, and with no time for family.… They don't see a perspective for their career. (Milivojević, 2011: 29)

These conditions became exacerbated for journalists working in local media outlets following the completion of a major privatization process in 2015. As a post-socialist state, Serbia committed to liberalizing the sector by withdrawing from media ownership and control (Krstić, 2023). However, the speed and simultaneity of privatization, deregulation and globalization politicized the economy and facilitated the growth of informal institutions. This continues to shape the living and working conditions of journalists today (Bandelj, 2016). Numerous "local and regional media outlets were privatized under shady circumstances" (Krstić, 2023: 10). Their new owners had ties with the political elite, without any relevant experience in running and managing outlets. Some owners only "appeared as buyers in order to take over the real estate of the media company, but not the business itself, which led to fatal consequences for the media" (Jevtović and Bajić, 2019: 1036). These backdoor purchases eventually brought about the shutdown of many regional and local media, leaving communities without information services.

Due to the fragility of the local media market, news outlets depended heavily on state and local government subsidies. The main mechanism for receiving public funds is project co-financing. Similarly to the privatization process, the allocation of money in this way is deemed unfair, biased and non-transparent, "and under strong influence of the state and the relevant ministry who favored media close to the regime" (Krstić, 2023: 11). Critical voices claimed that this process simply continued the state's control of the media by making them financially dependent on public money and the advertising agencies (which were often close to the government) (Jevtović and Bajić, 2019). In such an environment, media outlets felt the need to report favourably on their financiers' activities at the expense of information quality and political pluralism (Milojević and Krstić, 2018). This has been especially visible on a local level, where outlets, instrumentalized as mouthpieces for public authorities, became caught up in a clientelist relationship with municipal administrations. At the same time, local independent media are often prevented from receiving public funds if they are deemed critical of the government. For that reason, they often rely on the civil society sector and international donor community. In best-case scenarios, media outlets break even, generating earnings for the duration of their projects while constantly seeking out new funding opportunities

(Jakobi, 2015). Besides irregular revenues and low salaries, the political threats and long-term court cases, they are subject to existential insecurity.

Methodology

The reseach of this article addresses the mismatch between the theoretically focused literature on precarity, which emphasizes the role of technology, and the small amount of empirically oriented work which would support those claims. In response, I conducted ten semi-structured, in-depth interviews with journalists working in local media outlets in Serbia. I focused on this specific group as they received less attention than journalists in large, for-profit legacy media environments. Such local journalists are caught in a harsh and restraining political-economic web. There is seldom a “large enough audience to financially support local coverage” (Pickard, 2020: 88), while the threats and violence they experience are those of an insecure democracy, a categorization which neatly fits Serbia’s current historical moment (Hughes et al., 2017). For these reasons, situating my research topic within an expansive understanding of precarity, which incorporates both the political-economic and ontological dimension, seems appropriate.

Since reconciling the ontological notion of precariousness with the analysis of precarity as a labour condition has rarely been attempted in journalism studies, especially with digital technologies as the centerpiece of consideration, I opted for an exploratory approach. This would allow me to map the key issues and establish future research questions (Millar, 2017). Accordingly, I used snowball sampling, basing the selection of interviewees on my previous experience as a journalist and on recommendations from research participants. Journalists are not a difficult-to-reach population, but there is no official or comprehensive record of working media professionals in Serbia which would enable a more representative sample. In this regard, the limitations of snowball method cannot be entired avoided. The sample potentially lacks variability, and this may restrict the generalisability of findings (Kirchherr and Charles, 2018).

Notwithstanding this, I set out to gather as diverse material as possible and conducted interviews with eight female and two male journalists. The main criterion for selection was that they had dedicated at least half their working hours to doing journalism (many local media workers in Serbia have additional roles within the newsroom, whether administrative, managerial, editorial, etc.) For a more detailed description of research participants, see Appendix: List of Interviewees.

All interviews, with one exception, were done online via the Zoom platform and lasted approximately fifty mintues each. The questions were informed by previous research on precarity, digital technologies and journalism (Cohen, 2018; Hayes, 2021; Matthews and Onyemaobi, 2020; Örnebring, 2010; 2018; Sybert, 2023). The initial segment of each interview covered included general questions concerning journalists’ employment situation and working conditions. The main interview part was more loosely structured, focused on digital technologies in respect to issues previously outlined by the interviewee. Each of them were given the details of my research and signed declarations of consent. They were informed they could withdraw at any point without explanation. The interviews were later manually transcribed, and thematic analysis was used to examine the material. This approach allows for “the perspectives of different research participants” to become evident, “highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights” (Nowell et al., 2017: 2). After multiple readings and familiarizing myself with the data, the themes were defined and guided by the distinction between the political and economic dimensions of precarity in light of the digital transformation.

"I'm the only journalist on the books"

"There used to be ten of us here", said one journalist, "but a few years ago, the owner came and said he can only pay five of us" (Interviewee 1). Once a regional public broadcasting service, this journalist had witnessed the privatization of this local television station in Western Serbia. The local town newspaper on the banks of the river Sava encountered a similar fate, another journalist told me. After several years of struggling to make ends meet, the print edition of their outlet got cancelled and their entire staff is compelled to work on a voluntary basis.

Thus, the question is not whether the traditional media were affected by the privatization but to what extent. Staff shortages and the shutting down of departments were the most common occurrences. As one journalist working on a local television station in Vojvodina told me: "Let's say I'm the only journalist on the books" (Interviewee 8).

Another difficulty facing local journalism is that contracted permanent employment is not the norm. Journalists working for legacy media organizations and those in digital-borne outlets covered by this research had the same experience. "We all work on a voluntary basis", repeats another journalist from an online portal in north-western Serbia, "and in line with our salaries, if I may call them that" (Interviewee 7).

There is a double process of precarity at work here. Firstly, journalists in non-standard employment relationships are not entitled to most of the rights granted by Serbian labour legislation (e.g., the right to limited working hours and for paid holiday and sick leave). Secondly, the journalists interviewed were not freelancers, nor did they work as such for their parent organization. They may have had side jobs (one interviewee told me she also worked as a therapist). In another case, a journalist whose print edition got cancelled said they had lawyers and former police detectives writing for them. Nonetheless, the primary source of income for my interviewees arose from atypical employment arrangements at their local news outlet. This meant that, unlike freelancers, they didn't choose who they worked for, or the kind of job they did. Such workers were subordinated to perform delegated tasks for their media organization. This socio-economic fragility puts journalists at existential risk. Without stable employment and long-term contracts, they cannot even plan their future. One television journalist told me that their bank instalments were approved by the bank.

This dire situation is not ubiquitous. As previously mentioned, digital-borne local newsrooms do fare a little better, with some of them providing stable work environments. However, as one journalist admitted, this was an exception to the rule. Another journalist, on a long-term contract at an online portal covering northern Serbia, said:

> This is the first time since we founded the outlet that I am employed by the media I work for. So, that happened. I hope this lasts, but, of course, it depends on whether you have projects or not. So, even this contractual situation is not certain, as you cannot plan long-term, only short-term. (Interviewee 6)

This quote shows that there is inherent uncertainty even when journalists can regulate their working conditions in a more standardized way. One major factor which maintains this precarious position is the instrument of project co-financing (used by the state as well as the national or international donor community). For the government, project co-financing was imagined as a remedy to promote independent journalism reporting in the public interest. However, media outlets, especially on a local level, see this as a lifeline due to decreases in advertising and other revenues. Moreover, the stark polarization between the ruling structures, dominated by the Serbian Progressive Party and the opposition, spills over into the media environment. Consequently, the so-called ‘pro-regime’ and critical outlets emerge. In this context, the authorities often use project co-financing as a disciplinary tool which favour politically aligned media:

> Well, it’s very tricky when it comes to, especially if you are a professional and responsible journalist, as you cannot secure funding through the only available route in Serbia, and that is project co-financing. The criteria change every year to make it harder for local media to compete in the process; in addition, it is almost impossible to get the funds if you are a professional, politically unbiased and not close to that ruling structure. Consequently, we've been left without financial support: our responses to local and regional calls for project proposals as well as ministry-sponsored contests were rejected. (Interviewee 3)

The ruling Serbian Progressive Part first came into power after the presidential elections in 2012. Since then, the country has experienced a significant “decline of press freedom, slow media law enforcement, severe political pressures, marginalization of quality and investigative journalism, political instrumentalization of media, controlled advertising market, numerous judicial proceedings against journalists and overall economic insecurity of media across the country” (Krstić, 2023: 6). All of this coincided with the completion of the privatization process. Most of the local news outlets which were on sale were purchased under shady circumstances or had buyers politically close to the government. Dissatisfied with the conditions in mainstream national, as well as some local media, many journalists established new outlets to practice unbiased and objective reporting (Drašković and Kleut, 2016). However, as the above quote shows, they rarely receive public funds and subsidies, and are forced to look for money elsewhere, usually from the international donor community. This economic predicament has political reprecussions, as these journalists and outlets are often targeted as ‘mercenaries’ and ‘foreign agents’, which further jeopardizes their work and existence.

> For these reasons, journalistic precarity in Serbia must be expanded to include both the ontological experience and specific political-economic conditions, which constantly interact, especially within critical or independent media. This is not to say that those working in ‘pro-regime’ media do not face political pressure or censorship. Precarious work and precarious life are two sides of the same coin—the journalistic profession, at large, is disproportionately exposed to job uncertainty and existential vulnerability. It is made economically and politically undesirable and risky. In the next couple of sections, I examine how digital technologies exacerbate these already precarious conditions of local journalists in Serbia.

“I do stories when the ringing stops”

Digital platforms, or website and social media, were seen by those in legacy media as both the cause and cure for the multifaceted existential crisis facing journalism. “The reality is that the print edition won’t last, I cannot say when will that be, but we need the portal to survive someday in the future”, explained a journalist on their decision to go online (Interviewee 9). A similar story was told by another interviewee about the founding of an online media outlet in Southern Serbia:

> You couldn’t find news about Nis and your hometown on RTS (Serbian Public Broadcasting Service) unless a major crime happened, or a big corruption case, things that usually spark the interest of the entire country.… So, social media and sites

> increased our visibility and interest. People want to know what is happening in their town if they are not there.…The digital platforms made the local news more accessible. (Interviewee 4)

In a way, being online was experienced as a demand, "journalists must follow the trends." One interviewee remarked that "you need to have different networks, Viber groups, account on social media, video and audio content, you need to do podcast, you need to do short features and graphics" (Interviewee 6). Others also felt they were forced to engage with new technologies and be there, since "it is not enough to only post something on your website and say: "Look what I wrote about today!" (Interviewee 5).

Whether an expansion, or an inception, digital initiatives put additional pressure on already overburdened local newsrooms by exposing the consequences of privatization and the impoverished media market. Due to staff shortages, not a single interviewee told me they had an employee who was specifically in charge of moderating the website or managing social media. In a political-economic sense, online journalism "is a potential rationalization factor because knowledge production, publishing, and distribution can be combined in one or a few employee positions" (Fuchs, 2010: 21). Thus, digital technology enabled cutting the initially high costs of news production, such as printing and distribution (through telecommunications networks for example). They enhanced the individualization process advanced by neoliberal capitalism, since these tasks could be transferred onto a single person who could do what was required with their mobile phone or laptop, which they own anyway. Therefore, not only do local journalists have to cover everything, they also have to simultaneously take up a multitude of roles and become knowledgeable across different formats, from video features to podcasts:

> So, besides being a journalist, you're often a cameraperson and frequently the editor. Then, as an editor, you're not only editing news but also packaging the features. You enter the studio, read the instructions to the editor, producer, or director, explaining how everything should be, and so on. (Interviewee 3)

As with the atypical working arrangements described in the previous section, entrepreneurialism here was not purely voluntary, but was also forced upon them (by themselves or the management). This kind of self-initiative is reflected in the experience of one journalist working for an online news outlet in Vojvodina who took on the job of managing their Instagram account, since she did not want to "see that part suffer" (Interviewee 2). This clearly shows how the burden of responsibility shifted from the organization to the individual, who out of his or her passion for the job takes up more work which often requires learning new skills. All the interviewees involved with social media and multimedia production still see journalism as their primary occupational role, which is why these tasks disrupt their workflows and muddy their working hours. "It impacts your journalistic work when you have to share something every twenty-thirty minutes; you cannot start something, then switch to sharing, and then continue where you left off", recounted one journalist (Interviewee 4).

For this reason, complex and serious journalistic pieces are often done after hours, during the night, when there are no text messages or phone calls. One journalist remarked that "Some serious stories I do after 8 pm, when there is no ringing, so I sit, start writing and work until midnight". The sentiment was echoed by all participants (Interviewee 6). This ties in with the dedication and understanding of journalism as a job. These professionals conceive their practice as a 'call', with interviewees comparing their work to that of doctors and police officers in terms of their availability and public service orientation (even though this can be detrimental to their health). Not working but being available for work all the time is exactly what Hardt and Negri (2009) emphasize in their description of precarity. Switching off becomes difficult, if not impossible:

> It happens that I get tired, and then I turn off one phone, and on the other, nobody even knows the number. So, sometimes, I turn off that phone, and then I think, 'What if someone needed me?' And then, well, I should turn on that phone just to see if there's anything. But, you know, messages are regularly checked every day, even those that end up in the spam folder, just in case. So, I check everything several times a day just to be on the safe side. There's not really that complete switch-off. (Interviewee 3)

It can be discerned from the interviews that technological changes enter the newsrooms bottom-up. Understaffed and financially depleted local media outlets cannot afford to undertake technological initiatives on a systemic level. Previous research shows that "incomplete and nonsystematic changes within newsrooms throughout Serbia still represent one of the main problems in adapting to the digital age" (Krstić, 2023: 5). Understandably, the implementation of new technologies in legacy media is reported as slower and more difficult since they operate within rigid and hierarchical structures. Nonetheless, journalists in general still "score best in terms of sending emails and using various messaging and communication apps", while more sophisticated activities are among the lowest ranked competencies (Krstić, 2023: 5). Thus, an individual's entrepreneurial initiative should work to integrate new technologies and skills into their everyday work, an added layer of responsibility which rests upon journalists, not organizations. Through incorporating the digital into journalism, they are "called upon to renew journalism's relevance and reinvigorate stagnating business models", while simultaneously trying to find balance not only between multiple, and mounting, job-related tasks, but also their work and life (Cohen, 2015: 514).

"This guy is filming you"

Local journalists are under intense political scrutiny. Due to the distinct polarization of the political and media scene, they are often on the receiving end of threats, censorship, and institutional silencing. According to the numbers annually updated by the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia, attacks on journalists have drastically increased since 2017—which is when the current president Aleksandar Vucic came to power—with more than a hundred incidents recorded per year. For example, 69 attacks occurred in 2016; two years later, there were 102, while the peak was reached in 2020 with 195 incidents (IJAS, 2023). As one interviewee noted, the aggressive rhetoric from the top is reflected at the municipal level as well. This behaviour comes as a surprise to her, since they are not doing "investigative journalism" or interrogating official links with the criminal structures, but are just asking regular communal questions, e.g., about the water supply in a local district (Interviewee 8).

Avoiding answering questions or not providing invites to public events and assemblies is one method of hampering journalistic work. "We were asking about some restrictions on water, nothing serious, just service information, what is the reason behind them. The authorities told us that they cannot give that information to our media, so we should ask our colleagues from other outlets" said a journalist from an online portal in southern Vojvodina province.

In such an environment, different forms of pressure and risk came about via digital means. As most interviewees remarked, in local communities everybody knows everyone. "They can find me on the street, they can discover where I live, what I do, what car I drive, your financial situation, everything", one journalist explained (Interviewee 2). Personal information, obtained through surveillance or social media platforms, is then used to discredit, shame, or threaten journalists, who are thus exposed to greater risks within the current political configuration in Serbia:

> They filmed me for a while. My colleague Nikola, who now works at N1 (Regional Television Station), and I, we were sitting and talking, and he just told me, 'This guy is filming you.' I asked, 'Why would someone film me?' Then we realized, you could really see the person adjusting and filming. We paid and left that café intentionally and went to another. But after 10 minutes, the same guy showed up and sat near us. (Interviewee 5)

Digital technologies are not only used to further blur the boundaries between journalistic work and personal life, but also to marginalize and excommunicate journalists from local communities. One journalist was labelled as a public enemy and her face appeared on 'wanted lists' all over the town where she lived. This impacted both her online and offline behaviour, for example, she forbade her family and friends from posting photos of her:

> I had this issue where I posted a photo in a swimming suit, and they used that photo of me to discredit everything I was doing. So, they would post it on fake pages, write some captions, and similar things, all to try and discredit me. Therefore, you don't even have the right to take breaks, go swimming, or anything like that. There's a clear boundary now between my private and professional life. But my private life means that I must hide; I can't go to places where all my peers go or do similar things, because I can't allow someone to take a photo of me with a beer or a cigarette in hand. There's also a clear boundary on that side of things, where I go, when I go, and how many people can be at that place at that moment for me to join. (Interviewee 3)

Digital technologies allowed for another, novel type of organized attack on journalists and local media. They are popularly known as 'bots', a term which originally signified programs that do automated tasks. However, it evolved to encompass people who act as such on social media by sharing, commenting, and posting in favour of or against a certain policy or political figure. In 2020, the company X (Twitter) announced that it had deleted over eight thousand accounts related to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party that served to promote the party and its leader Aleksandar Vucic (Danas, 2023). Similarly, in 2022, the company Meta announced that it had shut down the bot network of more than 6 thousand profiles on Facebook and Instagram which were linked to the party (N1, 2023).

As one journalist recollected, they had a "swarm of bots" which forced them to turn off the comments section, as well as the option for readers to suggest a topic for reporting (Interviewee 7). Another, who works for a prominent online portal in Vojvodina, said they had a situation with bots for years:

> We have the option to turn off the pluses and minuses we have in our comment section because the bots are a disaster.…They are assigned tasks. You can clearly see on which news articles you get what kind of comments, number of pluses and minuses. You can tell by the news.…You know exactly what will happen if you publish something related to Vucic, or some other high-ranking officials, basically from the government, you know you'll expect an influx of bots there. (Interviewee 2)

Journalists are, thus, increasingly pushed into a regime of political and social persecution via digital technologies. Most often, they are facing and enduring these challenges by themselves, without adequate, empathetic, organizational or institutional protection. These are the networks of support, in a Butlerian sense, which they have been stripped of, but that are necessary for a life to be lived and livable. Precarity is, then, a "politically and socially produced state in which some lives have to 'beg' more – and more often – not to be exposed to injury, violence and death" (Zaharijević, 2023: 43). They are disenfranchised as a group precisely due to their profession. Similarly, various ethnic, religious or gender populations are put through politically motivated sanctions and harms in other contexts. The vulnerabilities journalists experience are especially present in insecure democracies, such as Serbia, which have "appeared after political liberalization established (or re-established) competitive elections in post-colonial or transitional authoritarian regimes without addressing highly unequal economic structures or reforming justice systems" (Hughes et al., 2017: 646). Journalists adhering to the ethics of the profession threaten authoritarian and hybrid regimes, which employ extensive resources to silence them. Critical, local journalists are especially vulnerable. Research shows that attacks on them are "less likely to attract unwanted attention when they occur in politically remote areas and where impunity is high" (Gohdes and Carey, 2020: 158).

Concluding Remarks

Digital technologies and social media platforms have changed journalism in terms of everyday tasks, newsroom roles, production processes and professional identities. The transformation has coincided with the neoliberalization of the global media market, which has exacerbated and expanded insecurities already embedded in the dominant model of waged labour and standardized employment. Presented as the solution for the failing media industry, digital technologies, such as social media platforms, and neoliberalism facilitated the construction of the entrepreneurial self—a flexible and unattached subject who could move from one company to another, from one job to the next, organizing their work according to interests and available time.

However, these changes were never designed to benefit the workers at large. They are rarely, if ever, in control of the labour process, and, as individualized subjects, they are left with very little negotiating power. Employment flexibility and casualized contracts allowed capitalists to lower their labour expenses to evade the obligation to allow labour rights and to render workers dispensable. This is why precarity is the condition of the contemporary labour market (Millar, 2014).

This is not to say that work has become precarious only since the 1980s. For the Global South, or any other non-Western society which has never experienced the Fordist welfare state, work has always been precarious (Munck, 2013). This article is not calling for the return to such a model; one must recognize that all kinds of standardized wage labour bring a particular set of insecurities, degradations and exploitations (Millar, 2017). The aim should be to use precarity as a critical concept to articulate an alternative configuration of labour relations.

This article, more modest in its contribution, examined precarity as a labour condition and as an ontological regime in order to evaluate journalists' working environments and experiences. Precarious work strips journalists of their networks of organizational, institutional and social support, and exposes them to professional, bodily and existential harm. This is especially the case for local news outlet journalists in countries where they are downgraded, attacked or discriminated against. In addition, I have argued how these risks are amplified with the incorporation of digital technologies into newsrooms and everyday life. The capitalist market and the government can use such technologies as levers to further generate dependency and insecurity.

Author Bio

Igor Išpanović is a Junior Research Assistant at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade. He is a third-year PhD student in the Cultural Studies program at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade. His areas of interest include journalism and cultural studies, the political economy of media and communication, and media ethnography. Igor holds an MA in Communication Studies (2021) and a BA in Journalism (2020). In addition to his academic work, he is an active freelance investigative journalist, collaborating with several national and regional investigative centers in Serbia and the Balkans.

References

Aydin B (2022) Politically motivated precarization of academic and journalistic lives under authoritarian neoliberalism: the case of Turkey. *Globalizations* 19(5): 677-695. https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2021.1902036

Badran Y and Smets K (2021) Anatomy of a precarious newsroom: precarity and agency in Syrian exiled journalism in Turkey. *Media, Culture & Society* 43(8): 1377-1394. https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437211011556

Bandelj N (2016) On postsocialist capitalism. *Theory and Society* 45(1): 89–106. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-016-9265-z

Betti E (2018) Historicizing precarious work: forty years of research in the social sciences and humanities. *International Review of Social History* 63(2): 273–319. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859018000329

Butler J (2006) *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Reprint edition). Verso.

Butler J (2010) *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Reprint edition). Verso.

Chadha K and Steiner L (2021) Precarity: the concept, evolution, forms, and implications. In Chadha K and Steiner L (eds) *Newswork and Precarity*. Routledge, pp. 15-30.

Cohen N (2015) Entrepreneurial journalism and the precarious state of media work. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114(3): 513–533. doi: https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-3130723

Cohen NS (2018) At work in the digital newsroom. *Digital Journalism* 7(5): 571-591. doi: 10.1080/21670811.2017.1419821

Danas (2023) *I Tviter gasio botovske mreže naprednjaka, a Vučić rekao da mora da postane,, glavni bot* [Twitter shuts down progressives' bot networks, while Vucic says he has to become the chief bot], 25 February. https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/i-tviter-gasio-botovske-mreze-naprednjaka-a-vucic-rekao-da-mora-da-postane-glavni-bot/

Drašković B and Kleut J (2016) Mediji civilnog društva kao neiskorišćena šansa za transformaciju lokalnih medija u Srbiji: perspektiva medijskih poslenika [Civil society media as an untapped potential for transforming local media in Serbia: media professionals' perspective]. Car UV, Matović M and Turčilo L (eds) *Mediji i Javni Interes*. Fakultet političkih znanosti, pp 37-53.

Fuchs C (2010) Grounding critical communication studies: an inquiry into the communication theory of Karl Marx. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34(1): 15-41. https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859909338409

Gohdes AR and Carey SC (2017) Canaries in a coal-mine? what the killings of journalists tell us about future repression. *Journal of Peace Research* 54(2): 157-174.

Gollmitzer, M. (2014) Precariously employed watchdogs? *Journalism Practice* 8(6): 826–841. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2014.882061

Hayes K (2021) The networked newsroom: navigating new boundaries of work. *Journalism Practice* 1-23. doi: 10.1080/17512786.2021.1949627

Hayes K and O' Sullivan M (2023) Labouring the news: management control strategies and work intensification in the digital newsroom. *Journalism*, 14648849231174059. https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849231174059

Hughes S, Mellado C, Arroyave J, Benitez JL, de Beer A, Garcés M, Lang K and Márquez-Ramírez M (2017) Expanding influences research to insecure democracies. *Journalism Studies* 18(5): 645–665. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1266278

Indepedent Journalists' Association of Serbia (nd) Baza podataka napada na novinare. Available at: https://www.bazenuns.rs/srpski/napadi-na-novinare (accessed 9 November 2023)

Jakobi T (2015) Prekarnost, (auto)cenzura i (auto)destrukcija medija u Srbiji [Precarity, (self-)censorship and (self-)destruction of media in Serbia. Mihailović US (ed), *Od Novinara do Nadničara. Prekarni Rad i Život*. Dan graf; Fondacija za otvoreno društvo; Centar za razvoj sindikalizma, pp. 89-108.

Jessop B (2005) Fordism and post-fordism: a critical reformulation. In Scott AJ and Storper M (eds) *Pathways to Industrialization and Regional Development*. Taylor and Francis, pp 42-62. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203995549

Jevtović Z and Bajić P (2019) Neuspela tranzicija medijskog sistema Srbije [Unsuccessful transition of media in Serbia]. *Sociological Review* 53(3): 1020-1045.

Kalleberg A and Vallas SP (2018). Probing precarious work: theory, research, politics. *Research in the Sociology of Work* 31: 1–30.

Kirchherr J and Charles K (2018) Enhancing the sample diversity of snowball samples: recommendations from a research project on anti-dam movements in Southeast Asia. *PloS one* 13(8): e0201710. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0201710

Krstić A (2023) Digital transformation of journalism and media in Serbia: what has gone wrong? *Journalism* 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849231151798

Kulić M (2020) Redefinisanje uloge novinara u novom medijskom okruženju: ideologija novinarstva, polarizacija medija i socioekonomski položaj novinarar [Redefining the role of journalists in new media environment: journalistic ideology, media polarization and socio-economic position of journalists]. *CM Communication and Media* 25(48): 115–135.

Matthews J and Onyemaobi K (2020). Precarious professionalism: journalism and the fragility of professional practice in the global south. *Journalism Studies* 21(13): 1836-1851. doi: 10.1080/1461670X.2020.1797524

Mihailović S (2015) Sve nesigurniji rad i život medijskih radnika [Increasingly insecure labor and life of media workers]. Mihailović US (ed) *Od Novinara do Nadničara. Prekarni rad i život*. Dan graf; Fondacija za otvoreno društvo; Centar za razvoj sindikalizma, pp 51-88.

Milivojević S (2011) *Profesija na raskršću – novinarstvo na pragu informacionog društva* [Profession at a crossroads – journalism entering information society]. Fakultet političkih nauka - Centar za medije i medijska iztraživanja. https://www.fpn.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Profesija-na-Raskr%C3%85%C2%A1%C3%84%E2%80%A1u.pdf

Milić V, Kleut J, Milinkov S and Šovanec S (2021) *Percepcije socio-ekonomskog položaja novinara i medijskih radnika u Vojvodini* [Journalists' and media workers' perceptions of their socio-economic status in Vojvodina] [Report]. Nezavisno društvo novinara Vojvodine.

Millar KM (2014) The precarious present: wageless labor and disrupted life in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. *Cultural Anthropology* 29(1): Article 1. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca29.1.04

Millar KM (2017) Toward a critical politics of precarity. *Sociology Compass* 11(6): e12483. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12483

Milojević A and Krstić A (2018) Hierarchy of influences on transitional journalism: corrupting relationships between political, economic and media elites. *European Journal of Communication* 33(1): 37-56. doi:10.1177/0267323117750674

Márquez-Ramírez M, Amado A and Waisbord S (2021) Labor precarity and gig journalism in Latin America. In: Chadha K and Steiner L (eds) *Newswork and Precarity*. Routledge, pp. 137-150.

Munck R (2013) The precariat: a view from the south. *Third World Quarterly* 34(5): 747-762. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.800751

N1 (2023). Šta su zapravo botovi i po čemu je Srbija specifična u odnosu na ostatak sveta [What are bots really and what makes Serbia specific to the rest of the world?] 12 July. https://n1info.rs/vesti/sta-su-zapravo-botovi-i-po-cemu-je-srbija-specificna-u-odnosu-na-ostatak-sveta/

Nowell LS, Norris J M, White DE and Moules NJ (2017) Thematic analysis: striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Örnebring H (2010) Technology and journalism-as-labour: historical perspectives. *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* 11(1): 57–74. doi:10.1177/1464884909350644

Örnebring H (2018) Journalists thinking about precarity: making sense of the 'new normal'. *#ISOJ Journal* 8(1): 109-127.

Pickard V (2020) *Democracy without journalism? confronting the misinformation society*. Oxford University Press.

Rick J and Hanitzsch T (2023) Journalists' perceptions of precarity: toward a theoretical model. *Journalism Studies* 25(2): 199-217. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2293827

Standing G (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Stupart R (2021) Precarity, technology, identity: the sociology of conflict reporting in South Sudan. In: Maweu J and Mare A (eds) *Media, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Africa Conceptual and Empirical Considerations*. Routledge.

Sybert J (2023) Navigating precarity: disruption and decline at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. *Journalism Practice* 17(4): 737-754. doi: 10.1080/17512786.2021.1939105

Zaharijević A (2023) Equal bodies: the notion of the precarious in Judith Butler's work. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 30(1): 37-48. https://doi.org/10.1177/13505068221137695

Appendix: List of Interviewees

Identifier	Gender	Geographic Area	Media Type	Position
Interviewee 1	F	Western Serbia	Television station	Journalist and Director
Interviewee 2	F	Vojvodina	Radio station and online news outlet	Journalist
Interviewee 3	F	Central Serbia	Press and online news outlet	Editor-in-chief
Interviewee 4	F	Southern Serbia	Online news outlet	Journalist
Interviewee 5	M	Vojvodina	Online news outlet	Journalist
Interviewee 6	F	Vojvodina	Online news outlet	Journalist
Interviewee 7	M	Vojvodina	Online news outlet	Journalist and Deputy Editor-in-chief
Interviewee 8	F	Vojvodina	Television station	Journalist
Interviewee 9	F	Vojvodina	Weekly and online news outlet	Journalist
Interviewee 10	F	Central Serbia	Weekly and online news outlet	Editor-in-chief

The Political Economy of Communication
11(2), 58–76

http://www.polecom.org

The Neoliberalization of Identity Politics in American Television Production

Corinne Weinstein, Rutgers University, New Jersey

Keywords: neoliberal, identity politics, television, prestige television, diversity

Abstract

This article provides a political economy analysis of the television industry in relation to the 'neoliberalization of identity politics'—the process by which progressive movements around identity politics become co-opted by neoliberal logics, depoliticized, and reoriented towards serving the needs of cultural elites. The television industry has been shaped by neoliberal business practices that appear at odds with progressive concepts such as diversity that are built into the emergence of complex, artistic, 'prestige' television. I argue that instead, television elites accommodate progressivism within neoliberalism as a strategy for profit accumulation. To do so they advance practices emblematic of 'plastic representation.'

My argument is presented in five parts. First, I show how neoliberal logics have impacted upon the television industry. Second, I trace the emergence of prestige television and consider its limited ability to meaningfully disrupt the traditional television business. Third, I define and explicate the neoliberalization of identity politics through examples of on-screen representation. Fourth, I consider how television audiences are governed and constructed to serve neoliberal goals. Fifth, from case studies of the streaming service Max and television show *The Idol*, I illustrate how the neoliberalization of identity politics undermines the potentials of prestige television by prioritizing profit at the expense of television creators and consumers.

Streaming service Max generated controversy in 2022 for shelving the already-completed film *Batgirl*. Throughout 2023, headlines announced the removal of library titles and the cancellation of finished projects across streaming services as cost cutting measures prevailed. This was a disorienting change for consumers who had come to consider streaming services as destinations of content permanence (Salazar and Vilas-Boas, 2022; Whitten and Rizzo, 2023). In May, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) went on strike to protest unfair economic conditions and were joined in July by the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA). This created a historic work stoppage that severely affected the production of television content (Wilkinson, 2023). As the year came to a close, journalist think pieces declaring the end of television's golden age began to surface (Schulman, 2023). Some referred to the current age of television as "trough TV," whereby television producers aim for the lowest-quality content possible that can still return a profit (Adams, 2023). Amidst this turmoil, 2023 was the first year since 2012—excepting 2020, when COVID-19 impeded entertainment production—to see a decline in the production of original, scripted television content. Analysts attributed this trend to the aforementioned strikes and to the decision of streaming services to place fewer season orders than in years past (Carr, 2024).

Since the start of the 21st century, but especially since 2014, television has been considered to be operating at its cultural peak. The term 'prestige television' has come to encapsulate the qualities of television programming. It has become a marker of high cultural status, substantial production budgets, complex storytelling, morally ambiguous characters who transform over episodes, and association with 'auteur' storytellers (Coon, 2023; Friedman and Keeler, 2023; Mittell, 2015; Perkins, 2015). In line with decade-long gains in diverse representation both in front of and behind the television screen (Ramón and Hunt, 2022), prestige television has increasingly embraced more diverse character ensembles, associating prestige with high cultural status as well as with social progress (Friedman and Keeler, 2023; Hassler-Forest, 2018; Martin, 2023). Prestige television may be contributing to social progress by embracing a particular value set, but an increasingly crowded prestige television market places the goals of serving the public good and generating profit into conflict. The choice by television producers to prioritize profit informs much of the unrest the industry experienced throughout 2023.

The television industry can be examined in the context of what I term the neoliberalization of identity politics—the process by which progressive movements around identity politics become depoliticized and reoriented towards serving the needs of cultural elites. On television, this process is captured by Warner's (2017) concept of 'plastic representation,' whereby diverse representation is engaged with superficially to serve the goals of profit accumulation. Here, I take a political economy approach by "tracing political and economic entities, forces, and structures that foster the production, distribution, and continuation of some kinds of expression" on television (Meehan, 2020: 345). To develop my argument, I first offer a definition of neoliberalism and identify how its precepts drove restructuring of the US television marketplace. Next, I trace the business of prestige television and its limited ability to meaningfully disrupt the traditional television industry. Then, I theoretically develop the term 'neoliberalization of identity politics' and provide examples of how this process emerges through on-screen representation. I go on to show how the television audience is constructed to serve neoliberal goals, contrasting the view that audiences are liberated by diverse streaming content. Finally, I examine the streaming service Max to show how the neoliberalization of identity politics has undermined the potentials of prestige television by prioritizing profit at the expense of those who participate in the television industry and those who consume television content.

The neoliberal economics of television

In his seminal text *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as an ideology which considers social goals as best achieved through economic means:

> Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (2)

Neoliberal ideology thus serves as a guide to all human action, with the most ethical behavior being that which maximizes contributions to the marketplace, rather than that which seeks to redress persistent social inequality. This latter reality undermines the neoliberal promise of equal opportunity (Bloom, 2017; Callison and Manfredi, 2020; Harvey, 2005; Ventura, 2012).

Under Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and Bill Clinton and Tony Blair in the 1990s, neoliberal economic policies of privatization and deregulation allowed wealthy businesses and corporations to assert themselves as central to society because of their economic contributions. How such policies might reinforce wealth inequality and bolster the power of economic elites was ignored (Harvey, 2005; Ventura, 2012). In a society in which neoliberal ideology circulates, the individual's most important role is to accumulate capital, justifying the social position of those at the top of society regardless of the means they use to gain that social position (Bloom, 2017; Salzinger, 2020). Ventura (2012) takes note of how this false premise circulates in American culture:

> In American neoliberal culture, the state's emphasis is increasingly placed on promoting the financial wellbeing of the wealthiest using the justification that they are the job creators and the engines of the economy; in the popular political rhetoric, code words such as 'innovators,' 'entrepreneurs,' and 'risk takers,' come to replace not only loaded terms such as 'filthy rich' but even comparatively neutral terms such as 'the rich.' (69)

By emphasizing the potential economic benefits the wealthy elite can offer, such rhetoric obscures the unequal conditions from which these supposed benefits are derived.

Neoliberal policies have had major implications for the structure of the television industry. Legislation passed during the Regan administration to limit restrictions on corporate activity, followed by legislation such as the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which scaled back media ownership rules (Harvey, 2020), advanced consolidation among media companies across the television business. Meanwhile, cable television was marketed to audiences as offering an expansion of viewing choices. Recent mergers such as that between Disney and 21st Century Fox, or purchases such as the sale of Time Warner to AT&T and then to Discovery Inc. to form Warner Bros. Discovery, reflect the reality that a few large corporations control the television industry including production and viewer access (Harvey, 2020; Lotz, 2018; Meehan, 2020; Shattuc, 2020). Meehan (2020) argues that in these circumstances the television industry does not serve the public interest but the needs of economic elites. As just one example, she notes how large corporations recycle content across as many media properties as possible in order to maximize profit (instead of taking on the risk of producing new and innovative content). The dubious claim that neoliberal economic policies enhance competition is contradicted by the net result: a small number of corporations have closed off access to the television industry. This in turn limits the potential for innovation, choice, and a variety of perspectives to thrive (Byerly, 2019; Friedman and Keeler, 2023; Lotz, 2018).

Television streaming services, which are often seen as industry disruptors with the potential to eliminate traditional television altogether (Lotz, 2018), largely emulate the neoliberal business practices that have shaped the traditional industries of broadcast and cable. This is because television streaming is often only a small part of a larger company's business goals (Johnson, 2023a), a consequence of the corporate consolidation and wealth accumulation previously described. Petruska's (2023) analysis of Amazon's Prime video service exemplifies this: "TV is not a hobby for Amazon, nor is it a side hustle. Instead, it is a thoroughly integrated piece of a much larger commercial structure" (235). Amazon's streaming service situates customers in its corporate ecosystem with the goal of boosting purchases of other products and services they offer (Petruska, 2023). Clearly, this strategy is utilized to serve corporate and commercial interests, rather than those of the consumer. Hunting and Gray (2023) explain how Disney uses its Disney+ service to capitalize on the nostalgia of its legacy content while forging connections between old and new characters and texts, sustaining brand loyalty while appealing to new audiences. Johnson (2023b) likewise notes how Paramount+ has focused on reducing audience churn by leveraging legacy and franchise content to create a long-term flow of programming that keeps audiences indefinitely tied to the service. In the streaming space, having an established brand, a deep library of content, and diverse economic goals enhances the chances of success while pushing out those who cannot compete on the same terms.

The business of prestige television

While the television industry has increasingly been shaped by neoliberal economic policies favourable to corporate elites, content on television has also become increasingly complex, leading to what has been described as 'prestige television' (or other related terms that seek to classify content as superior to 'regular' television of the past) (Keeler, 2023). The epithet 'prestige' captured television's newfound association with serious art forms as high-quality productions became the new industry standard (Friedman and Keeler, 2023; Keeler, 2023). Such television is characterized by high production costs (Cardwell, 2007; Rawlins, 2023) that reflect the artistic vision of an 'auteur' who elevates the program beyond simple commercial interest (Coon, 2023; Wayne, 2018). These programs are expected to tell highly serialized, complex stories (Bottomley, 2023; Cardwell, 2007; Rawlins, 2023) which stray from traditional storytelling conventions to surprise the viewer (Bignell, 2007; Mittell, 2015), such as blending multiple genres into a single program (Coon, 2023; Keeler, 2023). Storytelling trends include featuring anti-hero characters that confront viewers with challenging moral questions, and long-form stories explore the profound transformation of a character's personality, beliefs, and goals (Perkins, 2015). While the earliest iterations of prestige television defaulted to the white, heterosexual, middle-/upper-class male perspective (Newman and Levine, 2011), it subsequently became increasingly associated with physically diverse casts and social justice issues related to identity politics (Friedman and Keeler, 2023; Hassler-Forest, 2018; Martin, 2023). For example, rape culture was addressed through a feminist lens in the Netflix series *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* and *Unbelievable* (Havas and Horeck, 2021).

Bignell (2007) discusses how the trend of complex television took shape on broadcast and cable in the 1980s and 1990s, as serial storytelling and distinct visual styles became more commonplace and sustained viewing was increasingly expected. Shows like *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–1987) were emblematic of this shift. Lotz (2018) notes that for many television scholars, the premium cable HBO series *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007), which premiered in 1999, marked an important shift for the industry due to its embrace of complex narrative and moral themes. HBO's original slogan—"it's not TV, it's HBO"—was coupled with a monthly subscription rate and a slate of high-quality programming. Following the success of *The Sopranos*, shows such as *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001-2005), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004-2006) fortified the idea that television could be moved up the cultural ladder and away from the least objectionable programming strategy that was traditionally associated with broadcast networks (Newman and

Levine, 2011; Vaage, 2016). As a premium cable, advertisement-free network that requires a paid subscription to gain access, HBO's cultural prominence at this time did represent a disruption of television's standard economics. As Smythe (2001) has observed, the demographically profiled audience was once the principal commodity produced by television and sold to advertisers. By contrast, HBO and other premium cable outlets modelled a closed ecosystem for profit in a way that would later be emulated by subscription-based streaming services.

In order to show advertisers that more niche cable audiences could be of value, ad-supported cable outlets soon followed the lead of HBO and developed flagship shows such as *The Shield* on FX (FX, 2002–2008), *Monk* on USA (USA, 2002–2009), and *Mad Men* on AMC (AMC, 2007–2015) that purposefully embraced the attributes of prestige television (Lotz, 2018). In regard to the prestige series *The Americans* (FX, 2013–2018), Coon (2023) notes how FX used the show to generate cultural capital and establish itself as a brand willing to take creative risks. They adopted the slogan "Fearless" and kept the show on air for six seasons despite lacklustre ratings. The short-term goal of prestige content on cable was not, initially, profit driven; rather, it was about standing out in a crowded television landscape. As Lotz (2018) writes, "Studios needed to make not simply television shows people would watch on Sunday night, but television shows people would watch and talk about ten years later" (148). The streaming services that soon followed were not originally designed to mimic this strategy. They began as repositories for library media content that could provide an extra source of revenue for traditional television outlets (Lotz, 2018). However, Netflix's business model readily aligned with the prestige television business once they entered the original content space, as evident in their first high-budget, star-power-driven, original series *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018) (Lotz, 2018). While cable networks relied on individual flagship series to make their brand distinctive and appealing for advertisers, streaming services, led by Netflix, subsequently positioned themselves as portals of seemingly unlimited content where any viewer could find high-quality options to match their personal tastes and interests (Lotz, 2018). Tryon (2015) posits that Netflix's branding aligns their identity with the very notion of prestige: "Netflix's self-promotion places emphasis on its ability to provide original, groundbreaking television that challenged the norms of traditional TV storytelling" (110). By combining a deep library with the promise of prestige content, streaming services have positioned themselves as the future of television by claiming to offer a quality and breadth of storytelling that has never been offered before (Tryon, 2015; Wayne, 2018).

Certainly, the embrace of prestige television by streaming services has led to notable improvements in the television viewing experience, as viewers are now offered a vast array of high-quality content and greater agency over when, how, and what to watch within flexible pricing models and sleek digital environments (Lotz, 2018). But the tendency to romanticize prestige content as ushering in a television golden age fails to account for the social and economic implications. Newman and Levine (2011) are particularly concerned with how the connotations of prestige television may reinforce social taste hierarchies and overlook how such television ultimately serves the interests of corporate elites. Prestige television has achieved cultural legitimation by disparaging television in its original form and associating modern television content with art forms considered more worthwhile. The very design of television streaming contributes to this association by transforming television into something that can be preserved, revisited, and appreciated over time (Newman and Levine, 2011). Although prestige television conventions can be found across the television domain, more traditional outlets continue to struggle for legitimacy, as *their* efforts in producing prestige content tend to be ignored by critics and scholars (Bottomley, 2023; Friedman and Keeler, 2023; Keeler, 2023; Martin, 2023). Newman and Levine (2011) argue that elevating television's cultural status is the project of cultural elites, who are "nudging it closer to more established arts and cultural forms and preserving their own privileged status in return" (7). Deciding what is culturally 'good' through television effectively reinforces the idea that elite culture is desirable and preferable to that of the lower classes. This serves the neoliberal goal of justifying economic elitism in the first place.

The neoliberal tenet that an unregulated marketplace inevitably fosters competition, which in turn incentivizes television producers to create the best possible television content, ignores the reality of television economics. Broadcast networks may continue to struggle for legitimacy in the prestige television hierarchy, but this struggle is often internalized; for example, Disney owns broadcast network ABC, but it also owns an array of cable channels including FX, has its own streaming service, Disney+, and has bought out Comcast to take full ownership of the streaming service Hulu (Barnes, 2023). Clearly, competition is delimited by market dominance and upward wealth accumulation. Consequently, it follows that those who produce prestige television are most likely to focus on its economic value and how to replicate it, developing a formula for a type of storytelling that, ironically, has been lauded for novelty and innovation. Cardwell (2007) draws an early distinction between 'good' and 'quality' television, positing that having all the relevant aesthetic markers makes something quality, but stylistic integrity is what makes it good. A program has stylistic integrity if its themes and style are intertwined to reflect serious or contemporary social issues. Viewers are thereby rewarded for deep engagement with program content. Recent high-profile yet unsuccessful television series that relied on notions of prestige in their marketing—including diverse casting, high quality cinematography, the involvement of an auteur, and complex, gritty themes (Barth, 2023; Geraets, 2023; Martin, 2023)—were accompanied by a strategy which prioritized potentially profitable elements rather than the integrity of the product as a whole. Likewise, series with wide appeal—reminiscent of the early days of broadcast television—have been marketed to audiences as prestige whether or not they genuinely live up to the qualifier. Any association with the low-class television of the past—found on broadcast television outlets and produced for the broadest audience possible—is thereby mitigated (Kozak and Zeller-Jacques, 2021). Strict dividing lines between old and new television are all the more questionable when one considers how some traditional television business practices, such as free ad-supported viewing, live channels, and streamed shopping services, have resurfaced in digital spaces (Johnson, 2023a; Vlessing, 2023; Whitten and Rizzo, 2023). The assumption that prestige television is inherently good for society and reflects cultural progress is therefore complicated, if not entirely undermined, by the economic practices behind it. Instead, the business of prestige television reflects the goals of a neoliberal society: to engage with the notion of prestige only insofar as it can contribute to wealth accumulation. As the following section will show, this conflation of profit and cultural progress can have profound political consequences.

The neoliberalization of identity politics on television

With the changing economic structure of the television industry and its constraints upon the critical potential of prestige television elucidated, we can now turn to the seemingly progressive concept of diversity. This key marker of prestige television (Hassler-Forest, 2018; Martin, 2023) can be co-opted by wealthy television industry elites in the service of wealth accumulation and subsequently stripped of its political meaning. This reflects what I refer to as the 'neoliberalization of identity politics.'

The term 'identity politics' was first coined by the Combahee River Collective in 1977 and was originally conceived of as a way for marginalized groups—Black women in particular—to band together and collectively engage with politics (Táíwò, 2022). In its earliest conceptions, the term reflected both economic and cultural equality as well as acknowledging how battles for identity are structurally intertwined with battles against capitalism (Moran, 2014). In considering the recent surge of interest in identity politics outside of economic issues, Wrenn (2014) posits that individuals under neoliberalism have sought to develop personal self-worth and a sense of agency outside of the crippling demands of neoliberalism. The problem here, she argues, is that neoliberal economic policies remain firmly in place as the state positions identity politics socially, rather than economically. Likewise, Fraser (2009) connects identity politics to claims for social justice rooted in the politics of recognition, or the creation of a difference-friendly world that does not require assimilation within a dominant cultural order. Fraser (2009) argues that there is a tendency to assume the goals of recognition and redistribution to be incompatible. In a neoliberal society, the politics of recognition is allowable if it does not require the economics of neoliberalism to change. This results in symbolic, empty gestures that aim to recognize distinctiveness without generating any meaningful change (Fraser, 2009). Even when identity groups have anti-capitalist goals, the extension of neoliberal logics into all aspects of life creates conditions in which it is nearly impossible to mobilize against capitalism as a system (Moran, 2014).

Three related theories address how elite members of society can take control of identity politics, render them apolitical, and redirect them towards economic ends. First, Táíwò (2022) uses the term 'elite capture' to describe how social systems with unequal distributions of power facilitate conditions in which political movements can be taken over by the well-positioned and well-resourced to serve the interests of the powerful over the interests of the marginalized. Táíwò (2022) includes the contemporary example of cities commissioning Black Lives Matter murals while critical race theory is being banned in schools, and non-white citizens continue to be targets of police brutality at alarming rates. Here, elites may use identity politics to appear progressive without taking meaningful action to redress the injustices that affect marginalized groups.

Second, Leong's (2021) term 'identity capitalism' similarly recognizes how elites use the identities of others to protect themselves against perceived threats to their control and power, and to generate economic, social, and cultural capital. Those closest to the normative ingroup, who have the attributes of being white, straight, male, able-bodied, and middle-/upper-class, have the best chance of being or becoming economic elites. Such individuals demonstrate that they are not bigoted by using the identity of others to their advantage. In this regard, identity capitalism gives the appearance of progress by associating normative ingroup members with the values of diversity without addressing structural power (Leong, 2021). Examples of identity capitalism include workplaces hiring more women but failing to address a sexist work culture, and the placement of diverse individuals into powerful positions only to use those individuals as evidence that systemic discrimination no longer exists (Leong, 2021).

Third, Seamster and Charron-Chénier (2017) describe 'predatory inclusion' as "a process whereby members of a marginalized group are provided with access to a good, service or opportunity from which they have historically been excluded but under conditions that jeopardize the benefits of access" (199-200). Using the example of differences in educational debt accumulation between white and Black college students, they show how wealth inequality is a product of both historical and contemporary practices, systematically designed to favor privileged groups and further disenfranchise marginalized ones, even when access appears to be equal. Predatory inclusion aligns with Leong's (2021) conception of 'identity entrepreneurs'—members of an outgroup who commodify their identity to get ahead. Leong (2021) highlights a range of examples—from Sarah Palin cynically capitalizing on her classically feminine persona in the 2008 election, to figures such as Beyonce and Colin Kaepernick taking advantage of their status to uplift Black communities. Ultimately though, even at its best, identity entrepreneurship implores outgroup members to perform identity in a specific way that aligns with capitalist interests. This limits the range of expression available to marginalized individuals and encourages infighting that distracts from larger issues. Thus, elites of all backgrounds can embrace identity politics without sacrificing economic privileges, while predatory inclusion and identity entrepreneurship actually create more harmful conditions for marginalized groups.

Warner (2017) adeptly brings these theories into focus in the media context through the concept of 'plastic representation'—the artificial representation of diversity on screen. The tendency to reduce representation to a positive/negative binary, where any appearance of diversity is automatically considered to be progressive, creates a situation in which "the degree of diversity became synonymous with the quantity of difference rather than with the dimensionality of those performances" (33). In focusing on quantity over quality, plastic representation allows for the circulation of a hollow version of diversity that ultimately conforms to the prevailing cultural order (Warner, 2017). One manifestation of this is colorblind casting, in which many diverse faces appear on screen, but the differences between those diverse faces are obscured and erased, and their political backgrounds ignored such that any character becomes interchangeable with another (Petermon, 2018). Even when characters are written specifically to represent a marginalized group, plastic representation continues to play a role. Becker's (2006) analysis of gay representation on television revealed that, even as it grew significantly in the 1990s, such characters mainly existed in straight worlds that ignored civil rights issues and framed rarely represented instances of homophobia as an interpersonal issue, rather than a systemic one. Squires (2014) likewise argued that the growth of nonwhite representation on screen has foregrounded non-white individuals who live discrimination-free lives. Hassler-Forest (2018) argues that such cursory engagement with diversity produces contradictory ideological positions that ultimately amount to very little political impact. Plastic representation thus aligns neatly with the theories described above by increasing the quantity of diversity on screen while failing to address the quality of those diverse representations. This allows corporate elites in the television industry to associate themselves with diversity without meaningfully engaging with the concept as a political project.

The result of plastic representation then, is the circulation of "normatively white characters who happen to be of color" (Warner, 2017: 36). This observation speaks to the idea that diverse representation on screen is generally oriented towards a dominant normative center, meaning that meaningful aspects of diverse identity are downplayed. Leong's (2021) concept of identity entrepreneurship is particularly relevant here as outgroup members are offered pathways to legitimacy, but only by adhering to the terms set by the ingroup. Molina-Guzmán (2018) recognizes this pattern in Latinx representation, as such characters are frequently depicted in one-dimensional, stereotypical ways. They are cast as racially ambiguous, which implies that all Latinx people are more or less the same; and they are more likely to be women, who are perceived as less threatening as their sexuality can be contained within femininity. Quinn-Puerta's (2019) assessment of *Jane the Virgin* (CW, 2014-2019) concurs with these points, as she argues that the show employs a top-down approach to Latinx identity construction by unifying all Latinx people through cultural markers such as the Spanish language, soccer, and issues of immigration reform, which can have a homogenizing effect. Quinn-Puerta (2019) is critical of how the three lead characters in *Jane the Virgin* are depicted as being from Venezuela, even though the three lead actresses are all of Puerto Rican descent. This lack of distinction, Quinn-Puerta (2019) writes, "is toned down to fit with the classic narrative of the U.S. as a melting pot" (174), ignoring political difference in favor of racial harmony. In a similar strategy, queer representation on screen is frequently offset by emphasizing other, more mainstream factors of identity. Becker (2006) and Martin (2021) both note how queer characters on television tend to be white, male, and middle/upper-class, a pattern that discussions of 'the gay 1990s' tend to ignore. Henderson (2013) recognizes how class is used as a legitimating facet of identity for queer people on screen, noting that, "comportment, family, and modes of acquisition are the class markers of queer worth, pulling characters and scenarios toward a normative middle, but not without deploying an array of other class meanings and values" (34). The idea that queer people might also identify as working-class is thus diminished as queer characters pursue traditional markers of class ascension. Leong (2021) considers the four queer male leads of *Queer Eye* (Netflix, 2018–) in relation to these tendencies, describing them as identity entrepreneurs who add nuance to queer identity, but in ways that satisfy ingroup values. This in turn comports with the imperatives of those who control the show's production and distribution. To reiterate, the limited pathways of legitimacy offered to marginalized individuals produce narrow and conservative conceptions of diversity on screen.

Following the patterns of prestige television outlined earlier, the profitability of diversity has been zealously pursued by streaming services. Netflix, for example, has heavily invested in publicizing work with diverse creators and actors, and in funding diversity initiatives internally and externally. Netflix also self-identifies as a progressive brand on social media outlets (Havas and Horeck, 2021; Higson, 2021; Shattuc, 2020). While such initiatives have not been devoid of meaningful results (Havas and Horeck, 2021), the neoliberal imperative of profit warrants skepticism, and Netflix's activity internationally shows how the business of diversity operates. They have invested in localizing their content for countries around the world through work with translators (Shattuc, 2020), but only a small percentage of its content outside of the US is locally originated (Higson, 2021). Shattuc (2020) expresses concern that Netflix's global strategy is the epitome of American imperialism, generating a monoculture through storytelling and pushing out small local producers who cannot compete with its infrastructure. Higson (2021) and Harvey (2020) concur, noting how both Hollywood and Netflix have frequently engaged with the strategy of producing content that will appeal to global audiences while flattening cultural difference in the process. Therefore, Netflix's international strategy tends towards the logic of plastic representation, as profitability and wide appeal are prioritized at the expense of serving local cultures. Although pursuing diversity through prestige content by streaming services may be a relatively new feature of the television business, it also reflects longstanding strategies of profit accumulation evident since the earliest days of cable.

As diversity on screen expands, albeit primarily in the hollow forms outlined here, social inequalities in the real world persist along identity lines (Molina-Guzmán, 2018; Petermon, 2018; Squires, 2014). Returning to Seamster and Charron-Chénier's (2017) idea of predatory inclusion, it is necessary to consider how diverse representation on screen obfuscates the actual withholding of social and state support for marginalized groups. Neoliberal diversity implies that collective identity factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and class are not relevant in determining life outcomes despite considerable evidence to the contrary (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Martin, 2021; Molina-Guzmán, 2018; Petermon, 2018; Rottenberg, 2018; Squires, 2014). Neoliberal ideology works to restructure our sense of identity so that individuals see themselves as individual economic beings first, and social beings second (Wrenn, 2014). Such individuals are implored to become entrepreneurs of the self, with social identity repurposed as just another way to maximize one's economic contributions (Ventura, 2012). Importantly, in this construction, social identity does not address unequal economic outcomes because all individuals are supposedly equal in the eyes of the marketplace and each individual is responsible for their own success or failure (Harvey, 2005; Ventura, 2012).

If predatory inclusion occurs as marginalized groups are welcomed into the marketplace without acknowledging how the marketplace is structured to reproduce marginalization, then the television industry contributes to this process by (falsely) promoting itself as a space where identity is no longer a structural barrier to participation. As previously noted, the television industry is controlled by a small number of wealthy elites. Although some gains in representation have been made behind the camera (Ramón, 2022), upper-class white males continue to hold most of the decision-making power (Byerly, 2019; Molina-Guzmán, 2018). To distract attention from this reality, marginalized individuals appear as token proof that anyone can succeed in the television industry with hard work (Petermon, 2018). Petermon (2018) considers how prolific television producer Shonda Rhimes has been used by the industry to this end. As a neoliberal token who legitimated ABC's status as a network that produces diverse content, she is well-known for her commitment to colorblind casting and other superficial diversity tactics. Rhimes's productions have become increasingly strident in recent years, but she had to embrace colorblind ideology early in her career to gain enough industry power to produce political content. Rhimes is therefore another example of an identity entrepreneur (Leong, 2021), an outgroup member who had to earn legitimacy by conforming to ingroup demands. Rhimes also continues to be a rare example of a woman of color having a position of significant power in the television industry.

More broadly, normalizing the appearance of diverse faces on screen, particularly through prestige television, lends support to the assumption that social identity is not a relevant indicator of inequality. As Banet-Weiser (2018) writes in the context of commodified feminism, it is "as if *seeing* or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures" (5). Indeed, consumers in a neoliberal society are incentivized to ignore the political dimensions of identity politics, and so seeing diverse representation on screen becomes an attractive substitute for meaningful political engagement. On-screen representation is a powerful force driving the neoliberalization of identity politics because it provides highly visible 'evidence' that identity is no longer an obstacle—the prestige television business willingly accommodates all identities into its economic model. This is not to say that representation is wholly lacking in value, but as Fraser (2009) argues, "justice today requires *both* redistribution *and* recognition." There must be deliberation upon both of these goals along intersectional identity lines, instead of simply prioritizing the recognition of cultural differences in public spaces.

Constructing the neoliberal television audience

Of course, audiences are not merely passive recipients (Hall, 2001), and it is unreasonable to assume that all television viewers accept plastic representation as unequivocally valuable and meaningful. As an industry upheld by viewership, television business elites are faced with the problem of satisfying diverse audiences with varying relationships to neoliberal ideology. And yet with so much concentrated power, industry elites are ultimately free to construct their imagined normative audience: homogenous, individuated, and comfortably off. This justifies the production of broad, depoliticized content with often tenuous ties to markers of prestige.

Accurate access to viewership has historically been elusive in the television industry, as ratings systems such as Nielsen approximate broadcast and cable audiences based on a representative sample (Meehan, 2020). In this regard, Meehan (2020) argues that ratings production has always been shaped by the needs of advertisers: “The truism that ratings are scientific measurements is simply false: ratings are products manufactured by a monopolist within constraints of cost and demand” (358). Becker (2006) coined the term ‘slumpy’—socially liberal, urban-minded professionals—to describe the highly-sought after ideal-typical broadcast and cable audiences of the 1990s. Becker (2006) notes that ‘edgy’ and adult programming was specifically designed for such audiences. Using the consumption of multiculturalism as a marker of cultural identity, the ‘slumpy’ viewer was able to advance diversity as a social cause while also supporting neoliberal economic policies that emphasize meritocracy over structural inequality (Becker, 2006). Returning to the cultural hierarchy that accompanies prestige television, Vaage (2016) has argued that such programming was designed to catch and sustain the attention of affluent, highly educated audiences who were constructed as superior to those who enjoyed ‘regular’ television. Prestige television audiences are encouraged to see themselves as high-status tastemakers with the ability to legitimize certain television shows as worthy of artistic consideration (Rawlins, 2023; Samuels, 2023). This reifies the social desirability designated for these shows by advertisers. ‘Slumpy’ viewers—and their correlates, prestige television viewers—are thus ideal neoliberal consumers content to engage with plastic representations of diversity.

Marginalized groups have, especially in the past, been excluded from conceptions of a valuable television audience. Martin’s (2021) analysis of queer Black representation provides a compelling example of this. He discusses the precarious nature of Black programming on television, which has been dictated by fluctuating perceptions of Black audience value. These audiences, assumed to be homogenous and homophobic, were expected to consume any instance of non-mainstream Black representation regardless of quality (Martin, 2021). Martin (2021) notes how Black creators in the industry are disciplined to conform or risk not working again. This reinforces a loop in which Black audiences are compelled to consume hollow representations of identity in order to validate the value of Black programming, but in doing so they also reinforce the production of hollow representations.

Shankar (2020) argues that there has been a recent shift in media marketing strategies—away from segmenting audiences into identity groups and towards diversity initiatives that aim to construct a singular, multicultural audience–which appears progressive but actually reinstates the white gaze. Audiences are expected to orient themselves around a white center of multicultural harmony, which eschews any signs of difference or conflict between groups (Dávila, 2008; Molina-Guzmán, 2018; Squires, 2014). Marginalized audience groups are therefore reimagined and reconstructed in terms of their economic potential. For example, Becker (2006) notes how queer people have been constructed as an attractive audience through marketing strategies that position them as wealthy, hip, and having money to spend (in the absence of children). Similarly, Dávila (2008) argues that Latinx audiences are increasingly recognized as valuable the more they assimilate into white culture and become less threatening. As the primary goal of media producers is to prioritize the comforts and tastes of comfortably off audiences, stories about marginalized groups are often told from ingroup perspectives. Becker’s (2006) concept of ‘straight panic’ is indicative of this trend. The common narrative trope on television is to tell supposedly queer stories that are actually about heterosexual characters' growing anxieties about sexual identity. Molina-Guzmán (2018) gives a more ambivalent example of hipster racism, which involves the ironic use of discriminatory language and humor. In particular, Molina-Guzmán (2018) notes that single-camera television comedies without laugh tracks—a key development of comedic prestige television (Newman and Levine, 2011)—do not always indicate who is supposed to be laughed at when identity-based humor is employed. This can have the unintended effect of reinforcing stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes while creating a space for audiences to laugh at identity issues yet still feel progressive. Molina-Guzmán (2018) cites the example of the character Gloria on *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-2020), who aligns with hypersexual Latina stereotypes that are used for comedic purposes in an otherwise conflict-free upper-class environment. However, she also recognizes how Latinx viewers may find oppositional readings and appreciate Gloria's distinct perspective.

Streaming television services have perhaps the greatest potential to disrupt this traditional practice of audience construction because, unlike broadcast and cable television, they have direct access to data about their consumers (Arnold, 2017). Instead of focusing on generalized demographic groups, it is more common for streaming services to segment audiences into more targeted groups based on 'taste communities' (Shattuc, 2020), and to emphasize the individualized experience that their service offers (Higson, 2021; Tryon, 2015). Instead of constructing profitable imagined audiences, streaming services can shape their existing audiences in a way that maximizes profitability. This is certainly not a new phenomenon; Newman and Levine (2011) have pointed out how the cultivation of audience loyalty and fandom through prestige television is an economic strategy that allows television producers to promote consumer behaviour through sales of DVDs and other merchandise. But the viewing practices of streaming audiences have expanded the repertoire of strategies available. In one notable instance, Netflix has worked to create an association between binge-viewing and prestige television by portraying streaming audiences as active participants in the viewing process. Mittell (2015) argues that high audience engagement has become a key component of prestige television, as complex and disorienting narratives are produced with the expectation that audiences will enjoy combining pieces of the story over time while speculating about future outcomes. Netflix series such as the rebooted *Arrested Development* (FOX, 2003–2006; Netflix, 2013–2019) and *Love* (Netflix, 2016–2018) are just two examples of shows that have purposefully played with time, narrative cliffhangers, and unconventional story structure to appeal specifically to binge-viewing audiences (Hemingway, 2021). Steiner's (2021) analysis of Netflix's marketing campaign illustrates how they have put considerable effort into rejecting couch potato stereotypes and moral panic about binge-viewing by satirizing these concepts. Netflix in turn "construct[s] binge-viewers (and their company) as savvy, agentic and self-aware" (89). Some television viewers had previously engaged with binge-viewing through DVD box sets; but once streaming was available and became popular, Netflix reshaped 'rogue' viewing practices into more desirable forms (Jenner, 2021).

In theory, direct access to user data allows streaming companies to cater directly to audience tastes and build accurate personalized recommendations (Arnold, 2017). Some have predicted that this industry shift would facilitate the 'long tail phenomenon,' in which the unlimited space of the internet would allow for a plurality of niche options that would eventually overtake the consumption of popular content (Napoli, 2016). Napoli (2016) points out how, in contrast to these predictions, Netflix has significantly shrunk its library over time as it began focusing most of its spending efforts on producing and distributing high budget original content, a pattern that other streaming services have followed (see Petruska, 2023). While streaming services tend to speak of algorithms and data mining as liberatory for individual viewers, critics argue that they create filter bubbles and echo chambers by pushing consumers to watch content they already like (Higson, 2021; Napoli, 2016). Napoli (2016) thus explains that predictions of the long tail phenomenon did not come to fruition, as diverse offerings of content conflict with neoliberal business goals:

> From this standpoint, the strategic necessity of serving the long tail declines as information about audiences' preferences increases over time. So, for instance, Netflix's vast knowledge of its subscribers' viewing preferences and behaviours should help the company in being more selective in deciding which content options to obtain or retain. (350)

Arnold (2017) points out that audiences could once only be pursued, but now can be governed. The idea that algorithms and data mining can liberate individuals mirrors neoliberal rhetoric that promises individual freedom through the marketplace (Harvey, 2005; Ventura, 2012), but accumulating knowledge about individual viewers instead reduces them to pieces of data that can be analyzed (Arnold, 2017). Identity factors once attributed to imagined audiences now appear in the streaming environment as descriptors of content. Thus, labels like 'strong female lead' offer reductive assumptions of who watches certain content and why (Arnold, 2017). Arnold (2017) concludes that in the streaming business, human agency is an encumbrance. Accordingly, even industry shifts that have the potential to meaningfully disrupt the traditional television business are inevitably repackaged to fit neoliberal goals and strip identity of its political meaning. Prestige television is designed to bring in desirable audiences to enhance profitability, but these audiences are imagined constructions, rather than real audiences that have more complicated relationships to representations of identity on screen.

Case study: Max

I now examine the television streaming service Max as emblematic of the themes just discussed. As a streaming service that has operated under the corporate umbrella of three different parent companies in a brief span of time, Max is best understood as a product of neoliberal business practices that position television streaming within wider corporate goals. Its original content programming strategy, meanwhile, illustrates the limits of a business model predicated on the neoliberalization of identity politics. Since launching Max, CEO David Zaslav has reduced costs and pursued projects that superficially engage with elements of prestige television. While these decisions have caused public backlash, it is unclear whether Zaslav and the company will have to face meaningful consequences, or whether these decisions will be ultimately accepted by the public.

Although the streaming service 'Max' was officially launched in May 2023, from 2020 it existed as 'HBO Max' under the corporate umbrella of media conglomerate Time Warner (Spangler, 2023). According to Steirer (2023), the business model of HBO Max under Time Warner prioritized creative freedom and single high pay deals in line with the strategy of HBO and streaming services. When AT&T bought Time Warner in 2018, the new conglomerate restructured HBO Max to prioritize brand synergy. This diluted the brand recognition of HBO, as more content was produced with fewer funds (Steirer, 2023). In 2022, AT&T sold Time Warner to Discovery Inc. to form the merged company Warner Bros. Discovery. Soon after, the streaming service was renamed 'Max,' further separating it from the prestige of the HBO brand (as content from the

Discovery library was added to the new service) (Spangler, 2023). Max is therefore a product of neoliberal economics, as corporate consolidation positioned Max not as a surrogate of the HBO brand but as a contributor to a corporation's broader profit ecosystem.

One of the first high-profile releases on the platform following the name change was music drama series *The Idol* (HBO/MAX, 2023), which premiered on HBO and Max on 4 June 2020. Substantial anticipation for the series was reinforced by emphasizing its prestige elements, including gritty themes about toxicity in the music industry and modern stardom. Also important was the series' association with two auteurs: musician Abel Tesfaye, known as The Weeknd, and Sam Levinson, creator of the hit prestige television show *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019–) (Geraets, 2023). *The Idol* had a budget of $75 million, which included expensive reshoots after a major personnel change mid-production (Haile, 2023). But the show was ultimately cancelled after being critically panned, scoring a 19% rating on Rotten Tomatoes. Viewers were inspired to mock the show on social media by critiquing Tesfaye's acting and Levinson's writing, among other elements (Haile, 2023). *The Idol* exemplifies how the strategy of hollowing out prestige television and focusing on its individual attributes, rather than its stylistic integrity, can backfire for television producers with significant economic consequences (Cardwell, 2007). Geraets (2023) considered *The Idol* as a form of prestige television in which being edgy replaced quality. Haile (2023) described the show as "the prestigious television it strived and failed to masquerade as" (para. 1). *The Idol* billed itself as a satire, but critics have likened it to torture porn, a male fantasy and/or romanticization of a time in the music industry when people were not discussing issues of toxic masculinity and rape culture (Goldberg, 2023; Haile, 2023). This range of critical commentary speaks not only to the hollowing out of prestige, but more specifically to the neoliberalization of identity politics. Centered on a white female pop star surrounded by physically diverse identities, *The Idol* failed to generate meaningful social critique that should have been readily accessible in a television show about a notoriously discriminatory industry (Goldberg, 2023; Haile, 2023).

The Idol illustrates Max's struggle to effectively launch new programming. Nielsen's 2023 report found that streaming grew from the previous year but was primarily driven by library content, rather than originals. Max made the top ten list for library content twice—with *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-2019) in the fourth spot, and *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004) in eighth—but did not rank at all in the top ten list for original content (Nielsen, 2024). These findings underscore a changing television streaming landscape, as well as Max's precarious position within it. Lending further credence to the idea that Max is not doing well, reports surfaced in December 2023 that Warner Bros. Discovery was considering a merger with Paramount Global (Fischer, 2023). In short, Max struggled with the paradox of cutting costs and innovating simultaneously.

Max's most substantial cost-cutting efforts, as referenced earlier, began when Max made headlines for shelving the completed film *Batgirl*. Since then, over 60 titles have been removed, including a number of original series produced for HBO or HBO Max. Other streaming services have followed suit to reap the benefits of tax write-offs related to residuals and licensing fees (Salazar and Vilas-Boas, 2022; Vlessing, 2023; Whitten and Rizzo, 2023). But Max's CEO David Zaslav has continually attracted negative publicity for starting the trend, from getting booed during his commencement address at Boston University, to being mocked online for the glitchy launch of the Max app. He has been broadly characterized as a money-obsessed villain who does not care about content or struggling members of the television industry (Adamczyk and Samuel, 2023). Recalling Napoli's (2016) assessment of the failed long tail phenomenon, television business elites, especially those at Max, appear to be recommitting more firmly to a television landscape where only the most profitable content survives. It is claimed that such an approach is necessary to serve the needs of the marketplace while pulling in record profits, a disconnect illuminated by striking members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and SAG-AFTRA from across the film-television industry (Wilkinson, 2023). This means that television viewers can no longer feel confident that their favorite titles, even widely popular ones, will remain available for viewing.

Although 2023 was a tumultuous year for television and especially for Max, it is unclear how, or whether, the company will be subject to consequences for prioritizing profit over content and viewers. For the past three years, entertainment outlet *Vulture* has published a ranking of streaming services based on how much they're spending on content, how fast they are growing, and what industry insiders say about them. For the past two, Max has been given the top spot. Insiders quoted in the 2023 edition noted that even with all of the negative press around content cancellations and removals, Max continues to produce the most in-demand content, even if that mostly comes from the HBO side of the brand (Adalian, 2023).

Conclusion: television in conflict

As long as neoliberal ideology dominates American culture, the television industry will be shaped by economic policies that maintain wealth inequality and facilitate processes of elite capture, identity capitalism, and predatory inclusion. The goal of maximizing content profitability has led to conditions in which television industry elites are able to appear progressive and in service to television viewers while prioritizing the accumulation of wealth. This results in the production of prestige television content that is lacking in representational depth and meaningful critique. While the neoliberal sensibility dictating television production has operated mostly unchecked for decades, recent industry developments, as apparent in the case of Max, highlight how the need to produce high quality content and the need to produce maximum profits can come into conflict. There is certainly reason for discontent among television viewers, who now face an uncertain streaming market and a realization of the economic inequality in entertainment industries illuminated by WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes. Two questions remain. Will audiences continue to factor these cost-cutting measures into shifting expectations of the television industry? Will the very notion of prestige fall away from television as the medium moves further away from the high art status it once strived towards?

Author Bio

Corinne Weinstein earned her PhD in Communication, Information, and Media from Rutgers University. Her work investigates how representations on television reinforce and challenge dominant ideologies of identity, culture, and neoliberalism.

References

Adalian J (2023) Who's winning the streaming wars in 2023? *Vulture*, 6 June.https://www.vulture.com/article/streaming-power-ranking-2023.html

Adamczyk A and Samuel M (2023). Studio boss David Zaslav's tactics have made him a villain in Hollywood. But will he be the turnaround CEO that Warner Bros. Discovery needs? *Fortune*, 13 October. https://fortune.com/2023/10/13/david-zaslav-warner-bros-discovery-cnn-hbo-sag-wga-wall-street/

Adams S (2023) Peak TV is over. Welcome to trough TV. *Slate*, 5 March. https://slate.com/culture/2023/03/peak-tv-over-golden-age-hbo-streaming.html

Arnold S (2017) Netflix and the myth of choice/participation/autonomy. In: McDonald K and Smith-Rowsey D (eds) *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century*. Bloomsbury, pp. 49-62.

Banet-Weiser S (2018) *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Duke University Press.

Barnes B (2023) Disney says it will take full control of Hulu. *The New York Times*, 1 November. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/01/business/media/disney-hulu-purchase.html

Barth JT (2023) Specters of Serling: authorship, television history, and inherited prestige in The Twilight Zone (2019-2020). In: Friedman S and Keeler A (eds) *Prestige Television: Cultural and Artistic Value in Twenty-First-Century America*. Rutgers University Press, pp. 189-206.

Becker R (2006) *Gay TV and Straight America*. Rutgers University Press.

Bignell J (2007) Seeing and knowing: reflexivity and quality. In: McCabe J and Akass K (eds) *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*. I. B. Tauris, pp. 158-170.

Bloom P (2017) *The Ethics of Neoliberalism: The Business of Making Capitalism Moral*. Routledge.

Bottomley AJ (2023) Prestige comedy: contemporary sitcom narrative and complexity in 'How I Met Your Mother'. In: Friedman S and Keeler A (eds) *Prestige Television: Cultural and Artistic Value in Twenty-First-Century America*. Rutgers University Press, pp 131-151.

Byerly CM (2019) Neoliberalism and women's right to communicate: the politics of ownership and voice in media. In: Meyers M (ed) *Neoliberalism and the Media*. Routledge, pp. 60-73.

Callison W and Manfredi Z (2020) Introduction. In: Callison W and Manfredi Z (eds) *Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Rule and Political Rupture*. Fordham University Press, pp. 1-38.

Cardwell S (2007) Is quality television any good? generic distinctions, evaluations and the troubling matter of critical judgment. In: McCabe J and Akass K (eds) *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*. I. B. Tauris, pp. 19-34.

Carr MK (2024) It may not feel like it, but there are fewer shows now. *The A.V. Club*, 19 January. https://www.avclub.com/peak-tv-fewer-shows-2023-reports-1851179811

Coon DR (2023) Spies like us: genre mixing, brand building, and Reagan's 1980s in 'The Americans'. In: Friedman S and Keeler A (eds) *Prestige Television: Cultural and Artistic Value in Twenty-First-Century America*. Rutgers University Press, pp. 21-37.

Dávila A (2008) *Latino Spin: Public Image and the Whitewashing of Race*. New York University Press.

Fischer S (2023) Scoop: Warner Bros. Discovery in talks to merge with Paramount Global. *Axios* 20 December. https://www.axios.com/2023/12/20/warner-bros-paramount-merger-discovery-streaming

Fraser N (2009) Social justice in the age of identity politics: redistribution, recognition, and participation. In: Henderson G and Waterstone M (eds) *Geographic Thought: A Praxis Perspective*. Routledge, pp 72-89.

Friedman S and Keeler A (2023) Introduction. In: Friedman S and Keeler A (eds) *Prestige Television: Cultural and Artistic Value in Twenty-First-Century America*. Rutgers University Press, pp 1-19.

Geraets N (2023) Controversy for controversy's sake? 'The Idol' ends by dividing audiences. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 July. https://www.smh.com.au/culture/tv-and-radio/hbo-s-controversial-the-idol-has-wrapped-up-so-what-did-we-learn-20230703-p5dl9j.html

Goldberg M (2023) 'The Idol' and our backlash times. *The New York Times*, 5 June. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/05/opinion/the-idol-hbo-show-backlash.html

Haile N (2023) Why 'The Idol' being canceled is causing so much joy: Sam Levinson and The Weeknd's big blunder. *Salon*. 29 August. https://www.salon.com/2023/08/29/he-idol-canceled-yay/

Hall S (2001) Encoding/decoding. In: Durham MG and Kellner DM (eds) *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks.* Blackwell Publishing, pp. 163-173.
Harvey D (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.
Harvey S (2020) Broadcasting in the age of Netflix: when the market is master. In Wasko J and Meehan ER (eds) *A Companion to Television*. John Wiley & Sons, pp. 107-128.
Hassler-Forest D (2018) ‘Life isn’t some cartoon musical’: neoliberal identity politics in ‘Zootopia’ and ‘Orange is the New Black’. *Journal of Popular Culture* 51(2): 356-378.
Havas J and Horeck T (2021) Netflix feminism: Binge-watching rape culture in ‘Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt’ and ‘Unbelievable’. In Jenner M (ed) *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Studies*. Edinburgh University Press, pp. 309-337.
Hemingway T (2021) ‘Next episode in 5…’ – Binge-watching and narrative in streaming television comedy. In Jenner M (ed) *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Studies*. Edinburgh University Press, pp. 276-290.
Henderson L (2013) *Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production.* New York University Press.
Higson A (2021) Netflix – the curation of taste and the business of diversification. *Studia Humanistyczne AGH* 20(4): 7-25.
Hunting K and Gray J (2023) Disney+: imagining industrial intertextuality. In: Johnson D (ed) *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*. Routledge, pp. 367-376.
Jenner M (2021) Introduction. In: Jenner M (ed) *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Studies*. Edinburgh University Press, pp. 13-35.
Johnson D (2023a) Introduction. In Johnson D (ed) *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*. Routledge, pp. 3-22.
Johnson D (2023b) Paramount+: ‘peaking’ subscriber interest in legacy television franchises. In: Johnson D (ed) *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*. Routledge, pp. 409-421.
Keeler A (2023) Disrupting the pattern of prestige TV: ‘Fringe’. In S. Friedman & A. Keeler (Eds.), *Prestige television: Cultural and artistic value in twenty-first-century America.* Rutgers University Press, pp. 38-54.
Leong N (2021) *Identity Capitalists: The Powerful Insiders Who Exploit Diversity to Maintain Inequality.* Stanford University Press.
Lotz AD (2018) *We Now Disrupt this Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized it All.* The MIT Press.
Martin A (2021) *The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sitcom.* Indiana University Press.
Martin C (2023) Negotiating prestige on the CW: is ‘Roswell’, New Mexico ‘another show about teenagers getting f-cked up and having sex’ or a sophisticated exploration of racial and gender politics? In: Friedman S and Keeler A (eds) *Prestige Television: Cultural and Artistic Value in Twenty-First-Century America.* Rutgers University Press, pp. 74-93.
Meehan ER (2020) Watching television: a political economic approach. In: Wasko J and Meehan ER (eds) *A Companion to Television*. John Wiley & Sons, pp. 345-360.
Mittell J (2015) *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling.* New York University Press.
Molina-Guzmán I (2018) *Latinas and Latinos on TV: Colorblind Comedy in the Post-Racial Network Era.* University of Arizona Press.
Moran M (2014) *Identity and Capitalism.* Sage.
Napoli PM (2016) Requiem for the long tail: towards a political economy of content aggregation and fragmentation. *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 12(3): 341-356.
Newman MZ and Levine E (2011) *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status*. Routledge.

Nielsen (2024, January) *Streaming Unwrapped: Streaming Viewership Goes to the Library in 2023.* https://www.nielsen.com/insights/2024/streaming-unwrapped-streaming-viewership-goes-to-the-library-in-2023/
Perkins C (2015) Translating the television 'treatment' genre: 'Be'Tipul' and 'In Treatment'. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 29(5): 781-794.
Petermon J (2018) Race (lost and found) in 'Shondaland': the rise of multiculturalism in prime-time network television. In: Meyer MDE and Griffin RA (eds) *Adventures in ShondaLand: Identity Politics and the Power of Representation*. Rutgers University Press, pp. 101-119.
Petruska K (2023) Amazon Prime Video: scale, complexity, and television as widget. In: Johnson D (ed) *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*. Routledge, pp 235-246.
Quinn-Puerta JS (2019) 'I deserved to get knocked up': sex, class, and Latinidad in 'Jane the Virgin'. In: Meyers M (ed) *Neoliberalism and the Media*. Routledge, pp. 165-175.
Ramirez J (2023) Prestige adaptation by design: the commercial appeal of Latinx tropes in 'Queen of the South'. In: Friedman S and Keeler A (eds) *Prestige Television: Cultural and Artistic Value in Twenty-First-century America.* Rutgers University Press, pp. 95-112.
Ramón A, Tran M and Hunt D (2022) Hollywood diversity report: a new, post-pandemic normal? *UCLA Entertainment & Media Research Initiative.* https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/UCLA-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2022-Television-10-27-2022.pdf
Rawlins JO (2023) 'Tell them we are gone': imperial narratives, indigenous perspectives, and prestige in 'The Terror'. In: Friedman S and Keeler A (eds) *Prestige Television: Cultural and Artistic Value in Twenty-First-Century America.* Rutgers University Press, pp. 113-130.
Rottenberg C (2018) *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*. Oxford University Press.
Salazar S and Vilas-Boas E (2022) HBO Max is still taking stuff down without warning. *Vulture*, 14 December. https://www.vulture.com/article/hbo-max-removing-shows-movies-list.html
Salzinger L (2020) Sexing homo economicus: finding masculinity at work. In: Callison W and Manfredi Z (eds) *Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Rule and Political Rupture.* Fordham University Press, pp. 196-214.
Samuels R (2023) *Political Pathologies from The Sopranos to Succession: Prestige TV and the Contradictions of the 'Liberal' Class.* Routledge.
Sayeau A (2007) As seen on TV: women's rights and quality television. In: McCabe J and Akass K (eds) *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*. I. B. Tauris, pp. 52-61.
Seamster L and Charron-Chénier R (2017) Predatory inclusion and education debt: rethinking the racial wealth gap. *Social Currents* 4(3): 199-207.
Shankar S (2020) Nothing sells like whiteness: race, ontology and American advertising. *American Anthropologist* 122(1): 112-119.
Shattuc J (2020) Netflix, inc. and online television. In: Wasko J and Meehan ER (eds) *A Companion to Television*. John Wiley & Sons, pp. 145-164.
Smythe DW (2001) On the audience commodity and its work. In: Durham MG and Kellner D (eds) *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*. Blackwell, pp. 230-254).
Spangler T (2023) HBO Max to be renamed 'Max' with addition of Discovery+ content, launch date and pricing revealed. *Variety*, 12 April. https://variety.com/2023/digital/news/hbo-max-renamed-max-pricing-launch-date-1235532179/
Squires C (2014) *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century*. New York University Press.
Steiner E (2021) Commercial constructions of binge-viewers: a typology of the new and improved couch potato as seen on TV. In: Jenner M (ed) *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Studies*. Edinburgh University Press, pp. 87-107.
Steirer G (2023) HBO Max: media conglomerates and the organizational logic of streaming. In: Johnson D (ed) *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*. Routledge, pp. 399-408.

Táíwò OO (2022) *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (and Everything Else)*. Haymarket Books.

Tryon C (2015) TV got better: Netflix's original programming strategies and the on-demand television transition. *Media Industries* 2(2): 104-116.

Vaage MB (2016) *The Antihero in American Television.* Routledge.

Ventura P (2012) *Neoliberal Culture: Living with American Neoliberalism*. Routledge.

Vlessing E (2023) Disney+ not moving ahead with completed 'Spiderwick Chronicles' series adaptation. *The Hollywood Reporter*, 28 August. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/spiderwick-chronicles-series-scrapped-disney-plus-1235575925/

Warner K (2017) In the time of plastic representation. *Film Quarterly* 71(2): 32-37.

Wayne ML (2018) Netflix, Amazon, and branded television content in subscription video on-demand portals. *Media*, *Culture & Society* 40(5): 725-741.

Whitten S and Rizzo L (2023) Why are streaming services removing some of their own movies and shows? *NBC News*, 29 May. https://www.nbcnews.com/media/streaming-services-remove-tons-movies-shows-rcna86656

Wilkinson A (2023) Hollywood's historic double strike, explained. *Vox*, 13 July.
https://www.vox.com/culture/23696617/writers-strike-wga-2023-explained-residuals-streaming-ai

Wrenn M (2014) Identity, identity politics, and neoliberalism. *Panoeconomicus* 4: 503-515.