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PLATFORMED SEX LIVES

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The Internet has for decades been imagined as a safe space for sexual exploration and for negotiating various sexual norms (Tiidenberg & Cruz 2015). But with current crackdowns on sexual content on social media platforms, online venues for sexual expression are growing increasingly limited. To turn social media platforms into decorous zones void of sexuality speaks to advertising concerns based on ideas of sexual content as inappropriate and lacking in value (Paasonen et al. 2019). This “deplatforming of sex” (Molldrem, 2019) also results in a categorical dismissal of LGBT, queer, and kink communities who rely on digital networks for sexual self-expression, community, and belonging. Given the negative impact on sexual expression on an international scale, we find it crucial to ask how sexual rights – including the rights to bodily integrity and pleasurable sexual experiences free from discrimination – can be reconciled with a social media economy ruled by conservative, U.S.-specific notions of appropriate content, as well as what other avenues may remain available.

This panel builds on a recently funded research project on the geopolitics of digital sexual cultures in Estonia, Sweden, and Finland (2020-2022) investigating three local online platforms devoted to communities around nudity and kink: Iha.ee (ES, est. 2007), Darkside (SWE, est. 2003) and Alastonsuomi.com (FI, est. 2007). By investigating what could be called “digital sexual geopolitics” across Nordic and Baltic contexts, the project contributes to a conceptual re-centering of sexuality beyond Anglocentric perspectives in studies of social media.

Our case studies are, in a sense, “edge cases” which partly move within sexual margins

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and make space for alternate ways of understanding platform sociability. Contra to the de-platforming of sex, our case-studies foreground sex as the dynamics that bind users to the sites and fuel diverse engagements between them. In doing so, the three sites we examine explicitly shape ways of doing sex and outlining sexual selves, leading to the question of how sex lives become platformed. The papers in this panel – on Estonian and Finnish platforms devoted to communities around nudity and sex, and a Swedish web-based kink community – are work in progress. They provide the first building blocks in our platform analysis and are inspired by the walkthrough method (Light et al. 2018) and the notion of platforms as microsystems (van Dijck 2013). For these presentations, we focus on:

1. The conceptualization of gender and sexuality as evident in platform mandated categorization in voluntary and mandatory profile information, options within the dropdown menus, search and filtering, etc.
2. Articulation of acceptable sexual practices and behavior in sexual spaces as evident in platform governance texts (rules, ToS, guidance on images or usernames, etc.)
3. Presumptions about the publicness, explicitness and privacy of sexual expression as evident in the platform's choices regarding the hierarchies of access and visibility (what is shown to all, what only to logged in users, what to paying customers), interface and design choices, privacy settings etc.

The three walkthroughs illuminate how these sites guide their users through expressions of sexual preferences, identities and interests; how use is intended and users imagined; and how sexual norms and imaginaries structure these platforms as techno-sexual interfaces interlinking bodies, devices, and desires. This opens up three important discussions, which we feel the AoIR community would both benefit from and enrich: (1) how digital platforms shape and constrain sexual expression at a political moment when the sexual dimensions of life are increasingly de-platformed and pushed out of public view; (2) how these local platforms, as notable arenas for constructing sexual meanings in these three countries, contribute to sexual cultures within the region; and (3) how our examples, when understood as social media platforms, can help to push understandings of what social media are, how they operate, and what kind of sociability they allow for. In outlining the affordances of Iha.ee, Darkside, and Alaston Suomi, our panel opens up a discussion of how sex matters in social media, how it is valued and communicated.

SWEDISH WEB KINK BETWEEN DARK DESIRES AND BRIGHT OUTNESS

Sweden has been a sexually liberal nation in the popular imagination ever since Ingmar Bergman's (1953) "The Summer with Monika" helped propel the notion of Swedish sin. And yet, Swedish sin may be everything but sinful, but rather steeped in ideas of good, healthy sex (Kulick 2005). Sadoomasochism was de-pathologized in Sweden in 2009 but is far from de-stigmatized.

Darkside (est. 2003) is the largest Swedish BDSM network with some 250.000 members, housing everything from social and sexual networking, including members' profile pages with a wide range of sexual preferences and kinks, diaries, image galleries, and libraries of written erotica, along with discussion groups and chats, event information, editorial material, and advertising. Darkside traffics in non-normative sexualities by providing, as the site states "love and community in BDSM, kink, sex positivity, fetishism, expressions and lifestyles beyond the prison of normativity" firmly set within an ethos of risk-aware consensual kink. The question of consent within an ethnographic study of a web-based kink community not only regulates sexual practices and forms of engagement, but also permeates research ethics and data management. As consent within the bounds of GDPR with regards to sensitive and intimate matters become something that "everyone" needs to practice, BDSM communities provide important sources of knowledge of consent as something situational, provisional, negotiable, ongoing, and collaborative.

Against a rich black background topped with latex art, the user interface of Darkside has been in so called "dark mode" since 2006. It predominantly uses dark surfaces with accents and functions in bright red. Dark modes, or dark themes, are only now seeping into mainstream user interfaces, to reduce the light emitted by screens, to help reduce eye strain, and to facilitating screen use in dark environments. As leather and latex are common fetish focal points, the color choice extends and enhances kink aesthetics. The color black is emblematic of BDSM, symbolizing a darker, hidden, perhaps secret side of sexuality and desire. According to classic handkerchief codes used in gay male sexual publics, black indeed signals sadomasochism. On Darkside (as well as on for example hookup apps), such signaling is instead embedded in the members' profile pages in great detail.

You need to be at least 18 years old to enter. Membership is free, but there is a VIP option which significantly expands your storage space for messages and pictures, along with unlimited searches and sharper matching tools with other members. According to the community rules, politeness and respect for others and what others might be looking for is key. Pro-dominance, cam shows, and sex work is forbidden, and so is racism and homophobia. Something like misogyny is not being mentioned, even if gender is also considered as grounds of discrimination in Sweden. To play with domination and power may be difficult to reconcile with Swedish ideas of gender equality and (certain kinds of) feminism, but this does of course not automatically translate into play spaces where misogyny is accepted. The omission of misogyny may not indicate a free pass, but the silence is nonetheless interesting.

While the site is deeply invested in a variety of sexual norm-breaking, this community is not devoid of its own set of norms, rules, and regulations. According to site statistics from 2017, the site is male dominated (67%), as well as dominated by straight forms of sexual self-identification (63%). When it comes to gender identification and gendered sexual preferences, the choices are many and, to an extent, nuanced. Departing from male and female, it goes into a wide array of trans and nonbinary gender identities. Such multitude of options makes for movement within and between categories of gender in ways not limited by binary thinking and feeling.

Then again, sometimes gender binaries matter as erotic contrasts in ways not recognized by the platform. For example, it is impossible to identify with or mark preferences for female masculinity, or butch. And conversely, there is an eradication of queer femininity, of sissies and femmes, or even just of the girly girl more generally, of what we could call female femininity. Female femininity, or femme in its queer form, is not a tautology, but a demarcation of identities and/or directionality of desire. Yet, in this kink community femininity appears to be collapsed into the denominator female, as if a distinction between the two is not a variable of value. The common cultural devaluation of femininity (Serano, 2007) here thus extends into and becomes enhanced by design.

Darkside is a space for imagination and experimentation, sociality and self-discovery, flirtations and arousal, friendships and play dates. "As long as you're a friend of our culture, you're warmly welcome." The core values of the community, as explicitly expressed on the site, have to do with affirmation and mutual respect of a multiplicity of sexual expression and sexual practices, but also a striving for a world in which this sexual abundance has a self-evident place in society. Darkside thus sides with BDSM-activists working for acceptance and de-stigmatization, aiming to let the light into the secret of the "dark side" of desire.

Publicness and privacy are negotiated in a number of ways, some of which are interestingly contradictory. On the one hand, a discretely placed link at the very bottom of the opening screen offers a safe-for-work mode which makes pictures fade somewhat and which replaces the site name "Darkside" with "Bromöllas knypplöforening" (The Bromölla association of bobbin lace making) in bright pink, complemented by a cute kitten. While the humorous contrast between a kink community and a lace making society is not lost, this supposedly discreet layout is rather transparent and still reveals more than it hides. Hence, rather than being about secrecy or discretion, the subtle fade works as an alluring invite to this underworld, as a form of web design titillation.

On the other hand, platform governance documents enhance a sense of openness and outness. The more personal information you provide, the better the functionality of the site in terms of matching tools and recommendations. You are even incited to enter website addresses and handles on other social media services, as "you [then] will become more available to other members." As a member of Darkside, you are thus urged to be open with real names and identities, including encouragement to show your face in your profile picture.

This exploration of Darkside helps to make visible and visceral how norms guiding gender and sexuality, privacy and publicness are interlaced with platform affordances; how a web-based kink community may have an investment in maintaining a tension between sexual secrecy and a striving for acceptance in the intersection of design aesthetics, platform governance, and the feel of the community. You are invited to the "dark side" of desire, and yet prompted to reveal your face and your name. While perhaps paradoxically extending the social logics of platforms like Facebook, Darkside also decidedly foregrounds sexual desire as that which fuels sociality and drives the platform. This demands a rethinking of the value of sex in networked sociability.

CONTRADICTIONS OF DESIRE IN ESTONIA

Estonian sexual culture is full of contradictions stemming from the country's history of varying foreign rule. While 'traditional' peasant sexuality of the 18th century is described as relaxed about nudity and even virginity (Metsvahi 2016), the first Republic (est. 1920) brought a bourgeoisisation of gender and sexual norms. These were interrupted by Soviet faux-equality, but a 'demographic crisis' of the 1970s – presumed to result from early Soviet ideas of women's emancipation – restarted the promotion of traditional norms (Rivkin-Fish 1999). Significant heteronormativity, popularity of anti-feminist sentiments, but also widespread infidelity (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula 2003) and a continuation of the laissez-faire approach to mixed-gender public nudity (sauna culture) have been noted after the restoration of independence.

This presentation analyzes Iha.ee (Desire.ee) – an Estonian image sharing and -rating social media site (est. 2007). I focus on how the platform shapes, constrains and expresses norms of privacy, explicitness, gender, sexual orientation and appropriate sexual behavior.

Publicness, privacy and explicitness

What one sees on the site depends less on whether one is logged in and more on the tier of one's membership. While all galleries are public, the more explicit images (female nipples, all genitals, sex acts) are covered with a graphic, and can be viewed when one pays for a VIP membership (€2.50 - € 44.55 depending on period). Galleries are organized by hierarchies of popularity resulting from rating by logged in users, who must have published at least one image themselves. This precludes lurkers from rating and shadow-accounts from up- and downvoting content, indicating a preoccupation with norms of fairness over those of privacy. Uploaded images range from face portraits to explicit images of sex, however, explicit images usually do not show faces.

These visibility affordances gesture at a co-existence of practices, motivations, user-groups and intended audiences. Iha.ee is used for hooking up, networking, interacting, advertising, but mostly for sharing images as part of the abovementioned practices or just for the sake of it. Hence, users' self-expression varies widely, and can be conceptualized on at least three platform afforded axes of visibility – (a) axis of privacy / publicness, (b) closetedness / outness and (c) modesty / explicitness. For example, an image of a naked butt, not censored by the platform and visible to all without logging in, but shared with limited personal information and no face would be public, closeted and explicit.

Categories of gender and sexuality

Iha.ee's imaginaries of gender and sexuality are concurrently narrow and crudely heteronormative, yet messy to the point of fluidity or category subversion. Users are equated to their gender and age throughout the site through various design choices like color coding of usernames, Mars and Venus gender symbols, age in parentheses. "Man," "woman" and "couple," are the only gender options. Users can fill out an

elaborate profile consisting of 6 themes (contacts, appearances, sexuality, meeting, work and leisure, and hobbies) with multiple questions and drop-down answer options. Most relevant for the discussion at hand are the 'orientation' and 'turn-ons' drop-down options in the 'sexuality' profile section. One can only be 'heterosexual,' 'gay,' 'bi,' or 'lesbian,' and while kink is not expressly mentioned anywhere, a partial engagement with it is available via the disorienting choices in the list of turn-ons. One can be turned on by 'sex videos, leather, latex, body paint, oils, creams, no hair, hair, sexy clothes, footwear, metal objects, SM, tattoos, group sex, striptease, uniforms," and confusingly "starfish¹." This communicates a very particular, very partial vision of sex, pleasure and arousal, which can somewhat be expanded in a "free hand" section inviting people to define what they think makes sex 'high quality.'

The search function allows filtering users by the previously mentioned gender and orientation categories, but also by other profile elements (age, location, body type, hair color, sexual orientation, interest, purpose of meeting, education, income etc). The categorization of users into aged, embodied, geographically and socioeconomically located men, women, and couples, who are either hetero gay, bi or lesbian is reminiscent of the personals sections in newspapers and dating sites of the 90s and early 2000s, completely ignoring the diversification some of these categories have undergone in some public discourse.

However, messiness of lived experience is vernacularly practiced and not constrained by the platform. When one enters the Top Galleries for men or women, all users who have self-selected one of those genders, no matter whether gay, bi, lesbian, heterosexual, trans*, genderqueer or cross-dressing will appear. This forces some users to mislabel themselves, but visually subverts the heteronormativity of the profile categories. While the first few pages of the Top Women gallery seem normatively feminine, the Top Men gallery shows a range of masculinities as well as some femininity. At the point of writing this, an image posted by a person, who has categorized themselves as a male lesbian with a feminine body interested in meeting everyone (both genders, both hetero- and homosexual couples) has been voted third in the Top Men category.

Rules of acceptable practices and behaviors

While Terms of Service and Privacy Policy of the site are boilerplate, more specific rules and expectations are sprinkled throughout, usually at points of participation (i.e. image upload, ad posting). These tend to collapse expectations regarding self-expression and technical aspects of participation. Thus, when uploading images and videos, the preferred file type, size and quality are listed, but also that it is forbidden to upload visuals with children or watermarks on them, too many similar visuals and images which go against "best practice and moral norms" – neither are explained. The visuals have to be of the uploader, and if there are other people on the image the uploader is told to solicit their consent. Moderation happens before publishing, and somewhat surprisingly a gallery of the images that did not pass muster is also available for everyone's perusal.

¹ this seems to indicate being aroused by women, whose participation in sex consists of lying in bed on their backs, arms and legs akimbo

Finally, the site chatroom has an extended list of rules including “basic politeness and ethics,” which again, is not explained. In a medley of administrative, legal, normative and practical advice, users are reminded of freedom of speech, but “vulgar cursing, endless repetitions, ALL CAPS LOCK, too many colors, begging for attention, endless complaints about being bored, constantly entering and leaving the chat, insisting on private chat after being refused, purposefully insulting others, name-calling, copying usernames, advertising, and everything illegal, in particular propagating racism and drugs” is forbidden.

This contradictory set of platform features, rules and affordances seems to result from practical bricolage and carry a certain (post)-Soviet DIY attitude. They are an amalgamation of features and rhetoric designed to concurrently meet varying needs of varying groups, regulate behaviors that have cropped up as problematic over time, while offering platform developers legal protection and plausible deniability in moral matters.

NAKED NETWORKED SOCIABILITY

Alastonsuomi.com (i.e. “Naked Finland”) is an online image gallery and social networking site launched in 2007. Initially advertised as “IRC Gallery for adults”, Alaston Suomi borrowed some of its format from IRC-galleria (est. 2000) that dominated the Finnish social media landscape pre-Facebook. The overall rationale of Alaston Suomi is simple: users can establish an account by submitting a photo showing their face or naked body, or both; to rate and comment on contributions from other users; to participate in “clubs”; write blogs; chat; and publish photos, animated GIFs and videos. Some use the site primarily for hooking up, others for the pleasure of their bodies being seen, and possibly complimented, and yet others for mixed reasons ranging from the titillations of watching to selling sex.

Terms of service are brief and in accordance with legal constraints: users must be over 18, they must be present in the images they publish, all people in the photos need to consent to them being published, there can be no animals in them, and the posts must not include or encourage violence or racism. “Images that are copied from the web, of poor quality or inappropriate are rejected without warning!”, the site warns. The inappropriate, in this context, does not refer to the sexually explicit but to more ambivalent, ephemeral boundaries of “good taste”: “analwhore666 or bigcock1337 kinds of usernames are generally rejected”. These articulations of acceptability aim to set the overall tone for user sociability that is, on the one hand, visually and textually very much in your face, yet loosely controlled, with techniques of reporting and blocking in place.

Participation on the site requires free registration that needs to be approved by the admin. Full participation, including private messaging, requires VIP membership that can be gained through credits that can be purchased or donated by other users as signs of appreciation (one-month VIP membership costs a few euros; the price of credits depends on their volume of purchase). Personal profiles and albums are, however, partly open for unregistered users to browse, resulting in explicit publicness. The front page of the site includes a random selection of visual content, and menus for new, best,

archived and the most popular images, the top 25 images of the week, as well as submissions from new users and those celebrating their birthdays are all openly available. Top ranked posts are overwhelmingly made by women; most recent content flowing in tends to be rich in dick pics. In a small “shoutbox”, images appear with messages from users: at the time of this writing, these mainly involved shots of male genitalia with invitations to hook up.

Within the content submitted, people pose at home, on holiday, in nature, in summer cottages, in cars and bathrooms of different kinds. Some users, especially those whose submissions tend to gain higher rankings, build on a more streamlined, Instagram-inspired aesthetic whereas many others simply document their erection or ejaculation in close-up. The quotidian, rather public and often playful sexual displays on Alaston Suomi offer something of a counterpoint to the nudity-free self-presentations and exchanges allowed on Facebook, Instagram or Tumblr. Within the increasingly anti-sexual ecosystem of social media, Alaston Suomi is an ill-fitting microsystem that assembles sociability explicitly through nudity and sex, encouraging people to show more skin (cf. van Dijck 2013, 25). Its pro-sex platform logic then affords considerations of commercial social media ethics irreducible to the content policies of U.S.-based social media companies that conflate sex with risk, offence and harm, foregrounding the centrality and importance of sexual communication instead.

With over 101,000 registered users and over two million monthly visits (in a country of some 5,6 million people), Alaston Suomi supports a range of sexual exploration and interaction rubbing against considerations of sexual normalcy and “good sex” of the kind that Finnish discourses of sexual health largely revolve around. Registered users come in a broad age-range, within a spectrum of gender-identifications, and with diverse sexual likes, identifications, and kinks. This heterogeneity implies a default lack of normativity or boundary-building around sexual preferences, allowing for considerations of something like a national sexual counter-public within the confines of a commercial platform.

Like any platform, this one governs possible ways of relating and doing sexuality. A walkthrough soon demonstrates that there are only two gender options to choose from: it is impossible to register without picking one or the other and “entering the wrong gender will lead to your account being suspended immediately”. The usernames of those opting for the female gender are spelled in red, those within the male category are in blue. People with nonbinary identifications need to opt for either one or the other, with the administrative threat of suspension if this be deemed the wrong one. Within this framing, users can choose to see submissions from all, those from men only, women only, men and couples, or women and couples, yet there is no menu option for marking sexual preference as such. In this binary yet horizontal space, sexual orientations or nonconforming gender identifications remain unmarked on the level of platform structure even as they are articulated in the content that users submit – as in usernames marked with “tv” or “cd” to imply cross-dressing, or in men inviting male attention to their bodies.

When browsing the image galleries, users can further narrow down their options through thirteen categories within a drop-down menu: tits, asses, bodies, faces, multiple persons, tattoos, shoes, vagina, penis, intercourse, fetish, artpics and piercings. When

compared to the elaborate content categories on porn aggregate sites and kink networking sites such as Darkside or FetLife, these options come across as rather paltry – overtly general and sort of random – in falling short of outlining the specificities of people may be into, or search for. Even though registered users can use a search function, there are no tags in use. The chosen content classifiers result in a logic and rhythm of use reminiscent of online porn use before aggregator sites grew hegemonic: looking for content within the category of “fetish”, for example, means browsing through image gallery page after another in search for something to specifically catch one’s attention. Zabet Patterson (2004, 109) described this dynamic as one involving the promise of immediate gratification through the abundance of available content and the simultaneous frustration involved in finding interesting content – for example, a specific pose within the circa 999,000 images uploaded on Alaston Suomi.

A study of Alaston Suomi helps in mapping out different temporalities in engaging with sexually explicit content; forms of sexual sociability enabled by terms of use and platform structure; and the overall value placed on nudity and sex in what brings people together and keeps platforms in operation. The site’s default publicness further suggests of a logic of safety based on potential vulnerability: in order to be a member, one needs to submit one’s own body to the visual scrutiny of others, making membership both pseudonymous and highly embodied.

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