CLOUD CULTURE: FLUID MEMORIES ON PLATFORM ENCLOSURES

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A few hours after the digital-only release of his highly anticipated 2016 "Life of Pablo" music album, Kanye West took to Twitter in order to articulate his displeasure with one of its tracks. 'Ima fix wolves' was the promise, delivered when – four months later – the eponymous track was changed post-release. For most users of music platforms, this is now the only existing version of the song, "updated" from the original, which is subsumed into the latest. What does it tell us about the stability of cultural products on digital platforms?

Of course, cultural products were never carved in stone. Multiple examples exist of books, shows, music and films changing either before (focus group screeners), during (pilot episodes), or after (director's cut) release. Moreover, the internet has allowed unprecedented level of granular control over specific aspects of media objects, web pages being the prime example. Geofencing, programmatic advertising and personalisation may result in different people seeing a different version of the same page. The longs it exists, the more this effect grows, with caching and hard-copies creating ever more version of a the same page. Yet, unlike films or music, we have come to expect that of the web, and developed archiving strategies as users and researchers to mitigate for this effect. For example, like the Twitter bot @EditingTheGrayLady deploys automatic comparison to continuously check for changes in the New York Times site main headline. Moreover, the web remains a (relatively) open platform where changes can be traced, and older copies retrieved. This runs contrary to the logic of content found on major platforms, aimed to be perused and experienced only on their own terms (Helmond 2015; Plantin 2018). With a growing push from digital platforms to a cloud-based subscription model, users become reliant on accessing their "bought" or "rented" cultural products on a remote server – through the cloud.

This paper brings together emerging work on the platformisation of cultural production (Nieborg and Poell 2018; Duffy, Poell, and Nieborg 2019) with (critical) approaches to digital archiving (Berry 2016; Brügger 2018; Ben-David 2019) and algorithmic curation (Noble 2018; Amoore 2020) to explore a proposed emerging 'cloud culture'. The term encompasses (1) the technological capacity to modify cultural commodities after they

have reached (and perhaps experience by) users; (2) the erosion of digital ownership, emblematic of similar trends in companies limiting one's ability to modify – or even repair – their owned hardware and software; and (3) the data-driven race for content optimisation, where platform owners use consumer surveillance to deliver their products for maximum engagement (Helles and Flyverbom 2019). These three components of the term are further explored in relation to the ontological and epistemological repercussions of a continually updating cultural commodities, across four key domains.

An analytical framework for fluid cultural objects

First, cloud culture highlights *modification rather than deletion*. Previously, digital artefacts were removed or revoked from digital services, with a now canonical (and very ironic) example of Amazon deleting Orwell's *1984* from Kindle devices of users who purchased it. However, the example of *Wolves* highlights the possibility of altering the object instead. With music, film and television streaming on the rise, this can potentially be implemented on a granular level for different offerings.

Second, it emphasises the *limitation of user agency*, and the shift of platform power toward large-scale cultural revisions. Particularly, it asks how both creators and consumers are affected by such 'strategies, routines, experiences, and expressions of creativity, labor, and citizenship that shape cultural production through platforms.' (Duffy, Poell, and Nieborg 2019, 2). Specifically, it posits the danger of the surreptitious edit – one far less visible than an outright deletion.

Third, it alerts over the seeming *non-recoverability* of replaced and rewritten digital objects. The weakening of physical media and the move to platform enclosures makes it so that original versions of *Wolves* or the 2019 *Cats* film (before retouching the digital fur of its protagonists) are increasingly more difficult to obtain. Attempts to host and/ or distribute legacy version might in turn encounter copy-right strikes and other legal terms of enforcement, as the endlessly modified cultural object dilute the possibility for distinct versions that might be recovered or protected by fair use or archiving prerogatives.

Fourth and ultimately, this might have severe repercussions on *cultural inquiry and historical revisionism* both for media researchers and – more importantly – the public at large. At the heigh of a seemingly "post-truth" era, where technology and media companies are drawn as key actors in an epistemic disagreement over the very nature of reality, this is a worrisome trend. One example is the Disney company's reported consideration of removing the crows from the 2020 streaming version of its 1941 *Dumbo* film. While it might come from a justified stance of not exposing modern viewers to reprehensible historical depictions, it nonetheless raises moral quandaries about shared (dark) cultural heritage, its usefulness for educating about the past, and who gets to be the arbiter of such changes.

The paper concludes with recommendations for developing further tactics for tackling cloud culture as internet researchers. A key inspiration is from emerging scholarship on the political-economy of contemporary videogames, that highlights how profit motives are integrated at the design level of the game. Previously prominent in multi-player, contemporary single player games as well become a platform for ongoing value

extraction, features added and removed regardless of players' desires. Through examining the game design, modifications, its ludic economies, and player pushback, we can begin to imagine future work with ever fluid and malleable cultural commodities.

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