PANEL RATIONALE FOR "PLATFORM SPECIFICITIES: THE PLATFORM BOOKS PANEL"

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Social media platforms shape our lives on micro, meso and macro levels. They have transformed our everyday practices as individuals, or social practices as small and large

groups, and have multiple, entangled impacts on rituals of democracy and cultural (re)production, organization of labor and industry.

Studying platforms is a multidisciplinary project. Platform studies, STS, and cultural studies approaches center slightly different aspects of platforms to make sense of their affordances, relations between technology, people, political economy and culture. Approaches to operationalizing platform research vary widely too. Sometimes scholars use the lens of a particular practice and explore trolling, fame, or selfies. Alternatively, scholars focus on particular groups of people: influencers, musicians, gamers, but most often young people or children. Finally, sometimes, scholars choose to explore a specific platform as a complex system, paying attention to its histories, functions, users and their practices as well as the power relations it is embroiled in and its broader socio-political or cultural impact. This is what we do. This panel brings together five papers, each by authors of recently published or forthcoming platform books - "*TikTok: Creativity and Culture in Short Video" (forthcoming)*, "*Super-Sticky WeChat and Chinese Society" (2018)*, *"Tumblr" (2021)*, *"Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures"* (2020), "*Facebook" (2021)*.

Together, the papers offer an analysis of five social media platforms (TikTok, WeChat, Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook). Because of the book-length analyses preceding the panel, we are able to distill what is distinct and recognizable about these platforms – what we call 'platform specificities' and demonstrate how these specificites are shaping not only the experiences of the users of those platforms, but also the social media ecosystem more broadly, with all of its socio-political implications and future trajectories. Thus, the panel contributes to the ongoing discussion regarding platform power, social media and ways of making sense of social media, painting in board strokes plausible future developments to keep an eye on.

Paper one is based on a book on TikTok and argues that the platform facilitates "circumscribed creativity," nudging users to create certain types of content based on trending formats or templates. Circumscribed creativity is a platform specificity that leverages the central role audio and variety creative remix features on TikTok. These features are increasingly germane to the genre of short videos, which the paper argues is an evolutionary step in platformed digital content. Paper two is based on a book on WeChat, which argues that the "super-stickiness" is a specificity of WeChat the super-app. In both cases the platform specificities begin in China, but extend far beyond the Asian market thereafter, representing the growing power of non-Silicon Valley platforms in shaping the social media ecosystem.

Paper three is based on a forthcoming book on tumblr, arguing that the platform's rare, almost cultish position as a shaper of the 2010s internet cultures owes to its particular "silosociality", which made tumblr feel insular and 'special' to its varied constituencies, while also contributing to it being more difficult to study and corporately monetize. Paper four is based on a recently published book on Instagram, and elevates "templatability" as the platform specificity. It comprises recognizable and replicable visual stylings and practices. While both silosociality and templatability are platform specificities that allow users positive experiences or success, they can also be exploited for harmful purposes or become experienced as toxic. Understanding these specificities demonstrates the

pervasive cultures of these platforms in the wider social media landscape, and offers alternatives in terms of how to contextualise and study platforms in a comparative manner.

Finally, paper five is based on a forthcoming book on Facebook, and explores the notion of platform specificities by showing how Facebook, as a result of its dominance and expansion into various parts of the web, has eclipsed its own specificity and become a "hyperobject" of sorts. Thus, instead of arguing for a Facebook specificity, it is important to critically analyze the possible consequences of different specificities being elevated by various interest groups.

Together, our analyses of the platforms explore the entanglement of corporate interests, built structures, cultural imaginaries, agential users, shared identities, communities and practices, mapping and critiquing the social media ecosystem systematically and from a variety of perspectives. Analysing specificities across the five volumes is also a first step of comparative platform studies toward the understanding of platform generalities.

PAPER 1, TIKTOK: CREATIVITY AND CULTURE IN SHORT VIDEO

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Since its acquisition and rebranding in 2018, TikTok has become one of the fastest growing digital media platforms in the world. TikTok is the first Chinese-developed digital media platform to find mainstream international success and is carving its own niche in the global short video industry. Our forthcoming book "*TikTok: Creativity and Culture in Short Video" (2021)* systematically interrogates TikTok and the genre of short video. We examine the scrutiny facing this transnational platform, and the creators who are driving the platform's success.

There are multiple reasons why TikTok is one of the most studied platforms at the moment. It is one of the first digital media platforms dominated by Gen Z and it has become a buzzword following its soaring popularity in 2019, coupled with its surge in international active users during the global COVID-19 pandemic. In early 2021, TikTok had 689 million monthly active users outside China (Kemp, 2021) and it was the most downloaded mobile app during 2020 (Blacker, 2021). As the platform grows in popularity, communities are steadily discovering the plethora of subcultural groups, the potential for educational content, and also activism (Stevens, 2020). While in its early days it was considered to be 'just for kids', the platform is growing its significance as a mainstream social media platform, shaping debates and cultures across the world and transforming the dynamics of the broader creative industries.

However, TikTok is also a platform surrounded by controversies and uncertainties. TikTok is discussed on a daily basis in mainstream media and misunderstandings are abound regarding the platform itself and the youth cultures it purports to represent. Citing such "immoral and objectionable content", Pakistan has banned the platform more than once (Singh, 2021). Further, as a "non-Silicon Valley platform" from a Chinese developer, its rise in the West has been perceived as a symbol of China's soft-power (Liu, 2019). Such 'Chineseness' has become an obstacle in TikTok's development in global markets. For instance, India banned the platform due to security concerns following skirmishes with China (Mukhopadhyay, 2020). In the US, a national security investigation into TikTok was launched in 2020 (Roumeliotis et al., 2019) and the Trump administration made serious (but failed) attempts to force TikTok out of the US market (Elegant, 2021).

Our main arguments

We advance three broad streams of argument. First, we argue that short video is an *evolutionary* step in platformed digital content. By focusing on the platform, creators,

markets and governance, we will systematically differentiate TikTok from other digital media platforms, such as Vine or YouTube to which TikTok is often compared. We argue that TikTok was initially catalogued as a 'Gen Z' platform, but its cultural significance demonstrably extends beyond Gen Z. As we present throughout this book, TikTok is having a pronounced impact on media industries and platform economies around the world including (but not limited to): music industries, advertising industries, digital influencer industries, online content creation industries, educational media economies, and political media economies. In doing so, TikTok is shifting paradigms of produsage, vernacular creativity, and digital creative labour. We argue that TikTok is pushing digital content industries in new directions by internationalising a 'short video industry' that has been prominent in China for several years.

Second, we argue that TikTok centralises the importance of audio in everyday digital cultures. Previous research has highlighted the efficacy of textual, visual and video content, on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, for creating spreadable 'viral' memetic content. Kaye, Rodriguez, Wikstrom and Langton (2020) suggest that TikTok foregrounds audio as an additional dimension for creating spreadable memetic content through features such as 'Use This Sound'. TikTok's platform affordances empowers creators to make 'aural memes' that can be easily reused by other creators. Aural memes raise novel issues regarding authorship and attribution on TikTok that are likely to be reproduced in future competing short video platforms.

Third, we argue that TikTok *circumscribes creativity* on users through its platform features and cultures. Circumscribed creativity is a platform specificity of TikTok that builds on existing logics of templatability (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2019) by adding a 'call to action' from other users, or a 'nudge' to create from the platform itself. TikTokers can directly circumscribe creativity by asking viewers to create content based on a template they are trying to promote, such as by inviting others to participate in dance challenges. The TikTok platform also passively circumscribes creativity by suggesting ways to interact with existing content through features such as the main viewing interface, the algorithmically driven For You Page (FYP), as well as actively, such as features like 'duet' which allows users to create a new video side-by-side the one they were just watching, 'stitch' which allows users to clip a portion of a previous video and add new content. These features may implicitly guide TikTokers towards certain kinds of creativity but can also work in concert with explicit calls to action from other TikTokers who invite audiences to "duet this video" or "use this sound".

Merging these three streams, we argue that the emergent international short video industry requires a reformulated theoretical lens for analysis. Triangulating theories of *platformization* of cultural production (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), *vernacular creativities* (Burgess, 2006), and *critical media industries studies* (Herbert, Lotz, & Punathembekar, 2020) we provide a theoretical lens to interrogate and problematize the emerging short-video industry, short video cultures and the complex, transnational short video political economy.

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WECHAT: SUPER APP AND ITS SUPER-STICKINESS

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Introduction

Tech companies dream of creating an "all-in-one" platform that users never need to leave, that keeps them glued forever, an app that is "super-sticky". This dream was turned into reality with WeChat, which has 1 billion active monthly users, most of whom are in China. However, WeChat is not an isolated success. It has inspired new attempts to create all-in-one "super-apps" throughout Southeast Asia (e.g. Grab, Go-Jek). Meanwhile, according to Marc Steinberg (2019), WeChat belongs to the same cohort of East Asian platforms (e.g., LINE, KakaoTalk) that started about one decade ago, first as chat apps, then expanding into other businesses to become "super-apps" or "platform of platforms". The root of this business model can be traced back to i-mode, the world's first mobile Internet service that became commercially viable two decades ago.

This paper is based on our book "*Super-Sticky WeChat and Chinese Society*" (2018) and the post-publication analyses of stickiness and super-apps. In the book, we ask: What exactly is super-stickiness? Why has it spread regionally from East to Southeast Asia? How does it work for designers and regulators, citizens and consumers? What are its social implications, for progressive change, cultural stasis, even regress? Let us examine the underlying infrastructure, state-industry relationship, design logics, inter-platform competition, and the socio-techno in-betweenness of WeChat the "super-app".

"Hand of the Buddha"

Buddhist legend has it that the almighty Buddha holds the entire universe in his infinite palm. It is therefore impossible to escape from his hand. Mr. Keiichi Enoki, managing director of NTT Docomo's i-mode, was famously quoted to use this metaphor and refer to i-mode as the "hand of Buddha" (ibid, p. 150). The super-app here is an all-inclusive eco-system of applications, contents, and services. Ordinary apps cannot escape from it. Neither can ordinary users, because both are captured and glued down by the dense networks of exchanges and transactions within the super-app.

In this study, we examine several functionalities of WeChat such as "Moments" (similar to Facebook updates), "Official Accounts" (similar to Facebook public accounts), "WeChat Pay" (similar to PayPal), and "mini-program" (similar to Google Play Store). Users can rely on the single app of WeChat for all the things they need to do, including paying taxes and booking a doctor's appointment. "Each chosen functionality represents a step further toward integrating more services and functionalities into WeChat, and in collective terms, they reveal the cumulative construction of the app to become social, informational, transactional and now infrastructural. WeChat's transformation is linked to its adaptability to diverse aspects of Chinese social, economic, and cultural worlds and its ability to glue them together" (Chen, Mao & Qiu, 2018 p. 40).

For i-mode, the real hand of the Buddha is NTT, Japan's largest telecom operator that would profit from data traffic generated through i-mode. However, WeChat is in the palm of Tencent, China's largest privately-owned IT company providing social media, gaming, video, and AI services. Tencent is not owned by a telecom company. Instead, it works closely with the Chinese government, providing seamless real-time data for the state surveillance machinery.

Super-Stickiness as In-Between Interactions

Stickiness is a peculiar physical state of half-solid, half-elastic substances turning into adhesives that create molecular bonds between the surfaces. From a designer's viewpoint, this requires the app to foster constant interactions between the user and the interface, between what the user expects and what s/he gets from the interactive experience, over and again. A "sticky" design must be able to "hook" users (Eyal, 2014). If the interactions "dry up" and lose their elasticity, the adhesives would become less sticky. If they turn into complete liquids, the user experience would become shapeless, seeping through the Buddha's fingers, so to speak. The key is therefore to keep the in-betweenness a constant feature of interface design, balancing out predictability and serendipity.

But it is not just interface design. The same applies to system-level in-betweenness by which we mean more than technology systems but also social, cultural, and political systems as well. At one level, WeChat the super-app works with the communist party-state to not only keep track of online opinions but also actively mold them into shape, according to instructions from Beijing, now with the aid of AI-powered tools. But at another level, WeChat remains much more pluralistic and more tolerant than Chinese legacy media although it cannot trespass beyond the censorship lines, either. WeChat, in this sense, "glues" the party-state to the online communities. While it's true that in some cases the party-state can use WeChat to prevent centrifugal tendencies, in other cases it is likely that the party-state would be tied down, even dragged down, by the super-stickiness of this super-app.

In recent years, Beijing has used anti-trust and other regulatory measures to target China's private IT companies, such as Alibaba. So far, Tencent has not been similarly targeted but WeChat still faces competition, especially now that China's app market has become so consolidated. Intercapitalist clashes have become inevitable and increasingly acute among Alibaba, Tencent, and ByteDance. The competition has turned more cut-throat since the beginning of COVID-19. For instance, in a move to block the growth of DingTalk, Alibaba's fast-growing chat app, WeChat disabled DingTalk-based health codes (i.e. "green codes") through its internal QR code scanner, causing public health havoc in 24 Chinese provinces in February 2020. This triggered intervention by the authorities, especially in the country's wealthier regions. And WeChat had to back down to provide system interoperability (Hu, 2021). As such, the in-betweenness of the super-app should be seen as a site of struggle, much more than a simplistic characterization, be it utopian or dystopian.

Conclusion

Super-stickiness is a specificity of WeChat the super-app, when it comes to the state-company relationship, infrastructural role, and inter-platform competition that are at play underneath the super-app. But in terms of its regional diffusion and its design logics driving toward permanent adhesiveness – as highlighted in its corporate slogan "WeChat is lifestyle" – the ramifications are way beyond China, even Asia.

Behold WeChat's super-stickiness and its socio-technical in-betweenness. More than specific qualities, they are of general importance for platforms around the world, when the world is at a crossroad of in-betweenness itself.

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TUMBLR: SILOSOCIALITY

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Launched in 2007, the blogging site tumblr has been credited with launching social movements, fandoms, trends, memes and identities. It has profoundly shaped 21st century internet cultures, yet has often been cast aside and understudied as "too subcultural" or "too weird." This paper is based on our forthcoming book *"Tumblr"* (2021). Based on decade-long ethnographic fieldwork in diverse tumblr cultures, we analyze what users imagine they can do on tumblr (affordances), what tumblr-specific styles and genres of communication emerge (platform vernacular), and how users evaluate each other's behavior (platform sensibility). We argue that together, these produce tumblr's unique sociality, which we characterize as '*silosociality*'.

Silosociality explains why scraping tumblr data cannot wholly make sense of tumblr, and why for years the platform was understudied and difficult for Tumblr Inc. to monetize. The concept explains why curating tumblr became a legitimate genre and source of popularity (e.g. Buzzfeed listicle articles); this legacy remains important in shaping 2010s digital cultures, even though users and commentators have proclaimed the platform as "dead" (Tiienberg, Hendry, Abidin 2021). Silosociality functions like an affective, discursive, intuitive gate (Cho 2015); while most tumblr blogs are publicly accessible, there is no blueprint for how to find and experience things. The concept of silosociality helps critically re-think social media, interrogate how it is structured, what kinds of sociality are encouraged, and what (unintended) consequences may arise.

Affordances

Platform affordances are the perceived possibilities of action that variably request, demand, allow, encourage, discourage or refuse specific actions (Davis & Chouinard 2017), and help demonstrate how user practices and platform structures interrelate. While most platforms seem to have the same high-level affordances (Bucher & Helmond 2017), we suggest that tumblr as a social space is characterized by the following set of affordance ranges:

- *High pseudonymity*, it is easy to remain pseudonymous and most users do;
- *High scalability,* high potential for content to spread and reach various audiences when reblogged;
- *Low searchability,* things are difficult to find for the uninitiated because of long conversational tags, poor search features, no formal grouping structures;
- *High multimodality,* content and conversations are primarily in mixed form of texts, images, videos, GIFs, memes, links, tags, and copyright is poorly enforced;

- *High interactivity,* users interact with each others' ideas and content, and pseudonymity encourages interaction between strangers;
- *Low reactivity,* knee-jerk reactions and sentiment signposting cannot be easily registered since reaction buttons and metric counters are collapsed and public comments are refused;
- *High non-linear temporality,* some posts recirculate forever while others are soon forgotten, feeds are full of ephemera, yet many blogs function as archives.

Vernacular

Each social media platform has a combination of communication practices, conventions and registers of meaning and affect, which emerge from platform affordances and their everyday enactment (Gibbs et al. 2014, 257). Our analyses suggest that tumblr's recognizable platform vernacular comprises of conventions and registers that are: *curatorial,* content is selected, interpreted, and shared to self-express by proxy, speak back to power, form communities and leads to particular flows of aesthetics and affects; based on *affective investments* and *personal testimonials*; *multimodal* and *multiply literate,* where 'getting' tumblr content requires combinatory literacies; and finally, driven by *interest and affinity,* which shape people's experience of tumblr as 'their tumblr' and breeds a sense of community.

Sensibility

tumblr as a social space is shaped by a shared sensibility (eg *shared norms*, *ethics*, and *small-p politics*), which on tumblr is characterized by an *orientation towards social justice* and a related commitment to maintaining tumblr as a *safe space*. This sensibility speaks through the elements we listed as making up tumblr 'vernacular', taking form in platform specific practices like curatorial activism, but also mutating into toxic practices of call-outs or dogpiling.

Affordances + Vernacular + Sensibility = Silosociality

Tumblr's affordances, vernacular and sensibility suggest that tumblr as a social space is experienced in and may be understood through *silos. Silos are users' experiential tumblrs, and silosociality is about feelings of connection rather than metric-driven connection.*

Silos on tumblr a*re felt and imagined tumblrs* (e.g. fandom tumblr, queer tumblr, NSFW tumblr, mental health tumblr) that are experienced as somewhat sequestered from each other. They are characterized by a *cohesive reblogging practice*, often publicly referencing relationships to other users and presuming a shared local vernacular. Moving between silos requires *effort and insider knowledge*, making tumblr often disorienting to newcomers. Yet, while silos feel separate, posts connect across silos. This means that silosociality is about *separate contexts*, not content or users. Posts are reblogged, shared, and remixed across tumblr. One blogger may belong to multiple silos – usually with different blogs.

Silosocial implications

Silos can lead to an ambivalent 'love/hate' relationship with tumblr. tumblr's pseudonymity, multifaceted self-presentation, and its vernacular of personal testimonials and affective engagement create a sense of safety, escape, and intense affinity and affect. This intensity – especially that interest-based silos allow people to converge around topics that are validated and celebrated on tumblr, but often unwelcome elsewhere – makes silos worth protecting and compels normative 'right ways' of being, call-outs, and virtue-signalling to maintain that experience.

Conceptually, silosociality has similarities to online communities (Baym 2015, Tiidenberg and van der Nagel 2020), networked publics (boyd 2010), affinity spaces (Gee 2004), back places (Goffman 1981), and social worlds and arenas (Strauss 1978), but does not neatly map onto any of these. Silos can and sometimes do include communities, but for us, are broader and looser than communities. They may be examples of networked publics (especially intimate or networked counterpublics), but networked publics are more transient than silos, more often rely on technological boundaries (a forum, a hashtag), and have fewer shared imaginaries.

Silosocial media emulates the more manageable, partially self-regulating and self-moderating early internet communities. Context collapse is less likely; tumblr is a more safe-feeling, creative-seeming, and justice-oriented social space. Slipping into tumblr silos can be a pleasure, a relief, a "life saver". Even if many tumblr users have moved on, silo-like places to escape the world and more demanding corners of the internet remain invaluable. Dominant platforms that rarely afford group-sociality and enforce inescapable real-name connectivity and pervasive surveillance do not afford silosociality. But perhaps silosociality is a potential future for media industries faced with increasingly critical and surveillance-fatigued constituencies, where only digital detox or disconnection offers reprieve.

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INSTAGRAM: BEYOND TEMPLATABILITY

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Turning 10 years old in October 2020, the place of Instagram within the global digital platform economy has evolved dramatically from its origins as one of a number of iPhone-only, retro-aesthetic photo-sharing apps. In our recent book *"Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures"* (2020), we argued that the subsequent decade had seen Instagram instead become "more than an app, more than a platform… [but rather] an icon and avatar for understanding and mapping visual social media cultures". As part of this, though, the study of Instagram is also a means of tracing the dynamics of platform cultures and practices more broadly, especially given global turns towards – and reliance upon – digital spaces in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Writing before the pandemic, we suggested that the experience of the platform is both understood and challenged by a logic of 'templatability', privileging "visually memorable and memorisable visual stylings, settings and practices that can be replicated with relative ease" (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020). What has changed since then has had dramatic consequences for Instagram as a platform, as a community, and as an aesthetic shorthand. In this paper, we build upon and look beyond this notion of templatability within evolving uses and contexts of Instagram, in order to examine the varying experiences – and meanings – of Instagram, for its users, developers, and other stakeholders.

Re-examining the logic of templatability

In outlining Instagram's logic of templatability, we denoted the different platform elements collectively contributing to the ongoing perpetuation of similar styles and content: affordances, algorithms, aesthetics, affect, attention, audiences, agency, and activism (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020). Together, these elements simultaneously illustrate and limit the 'platform vernacular' (Gibbs et al., 2015) unique to Instagram: not only does templatability demonstrate what 'successful' content looks like on the platform, but it also reinforces the recurring prominence of such content over discovering new or different contributions.

On an algorithmically-organised platform like Instagram, understanding this logic is key to becoming visible, to garnering and maintaining an audience (Cotter, 2019). However, such concerns do not only apply to (human) influencers with audiences in the millions of users; templatability underlines the strategies and styles employed (or resisted) by Instagram accounts representing interests as diverse as museums (Budge & Burness,

2018), pets (Maddox, 2020), and fitness enthusiasts (Reade, 2020), among many others.

If templatability describes what content is privileged and promoted on Instagram, it also helps to understand the limits of how the platform works and how it is used. In particular, the changing contexts of 2020 and 2021 have meant an adaptation of existing practices in response to global and local developments. This has occurred alongside the continued development of new features on Instagram, from the TikTok-esque 'Reels' to the support and promotion of small businesses through in-app shopping and stickers. In early 2020, for example, when fitness spaces were required to close, trainers and instructors took to Instagram to provide live sessions and connect with their communities (Jacobsson Purewal, 2020). Live streaming on Instagram, meanwhile, provided new opportunities for musicians and DJs as well as allowing for outlets for documenting the mundanity of lockdown life (Harmon, 2020).

In such cases, these developments can be seen as giving people a means for adapting their paid work to a COVID context, remediated on Instagram; however, they also highlight the challenges for many in either learning how to effectively use platforms in a time of hardship, and in developing new skills and carrying out more labour without any guaranteed payoff (see Kneese & Palm, 2020). The pandemic context then complicates questions of who benefits from templatability, and of mechanisms for resisting and challenging it.

Weaponising templatability

Visual templates have taken on new significance in response to events of 2020, some of which are centred on developments in the US but with global repercussions. The protests and demonstrations after the May 2020 killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, for example, saw a wave of politically motivated content and activism on social media including Instagram. This represented varying degrees of meaning and suitability: while resources and guides supporting Black voices were promoted by Instagram itself (Instagram, 2020), the attempted display of racial justice activism of #BlackoutTuesday in June 2020 became an interminable series of black squares that swamped important activist channels like the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag (Kircher, 2020). The recurring visual of the black square then highlights the pitfalls of templatability: the same content repeated visually, attracting attention through new uploads and demonstrations of solidarity, but also making accessing other content more difficult.

Furthermore, understanding the logics underpinning how platforms operate has been critical to the spread of conspiracy theories, misinformation, and disinformation, concerns which took on increased importance in the contexts of both the pandemic and the US Presidential election in November 2020. As Instagram provided new ways of sharing information and promoted a recurring template of visually appealing guides and lists, these aesthetics were adopted to push false and problematic viewpoints that gain acceptance through their use of the affordances and audience of wellness influencers, for example (Tiffany, 2020). In such cases, the familiar and successful on Instagram becomes weaponised, exploiting an understanding of the logics of templatability – of how Instagram works – to potentially harmful ends (see Phillips & Milner, 2021).

Instagram, beyond the templates?

This paper offers a reconsideration of the logic of templatability on Instagram, taking into account new platform features as well as major global, political, social, cultural, and economic events. We re-examine how such concerns are apparent across different genres and content types on Instagram, from posts to Stories, as well as of cross-platform templatability, as popular content travels from TikTok, Twitter, and more, reframed and reshared for Instagram. In doing so, we re-evaluate what makes Instagram 'Instagram', and who this represents in the process.

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FACEBOOK: BECOMING CONCEPTUAL

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Introduction

Everybody has a Facebook story. Whether it is the story of how a relationship started, or ended, how people found long-lost loved ones, how they learned about the weddings, births, and divorces of old friends and acquaintances, Facebook has played – and still does – an important part in people's personal and professional lives. Seventeen years after Facebook first launched, an approximate one-third of the world's population uses one of its apps on a monthly basis, nearly half of Americans get their news from the Facebook feed, and 4 petabytes of data are generated through the site each day. Facebook has become one of the most important advertising venues to ever exist. This paper is based on my recently published book "*Facebook*" (Bucher, 2021), and asks to what extent we can still adequately think of Facebook as a social media platform or social network site?

Metaphors (un)limited

If Facebook was originally built as a site that would let people know to whom they and their friends were connected, this is no longer the case. Today, metaphors abound as to what exactly Facebook is. Some of the most prevailing metaphors used to describe Facebook include notions of the public square, company town, shopping mall, gatekeeper, operating system, broadcaster, editor, government or state actor. Facebook itself routinely presents itself as a 'social infrastructure' and 'community builder', to add to the long list of metaphors in use. Interestingly, the longer Facebook is in existence, the larger the amount of metaphors and analogies in circulation used to describe it. Unlike other technologies and media phenomena that usually experience this kind of definitional uncertainty at the beginning of its lifetime, Facebook ontology seems to have become bewilderingly uncertain much longer after the fact.

In other words, the language and metaphors used to describe Facebook no longer seem to capture the ontological variability and definitional uncertainty of Facebook today. Rather than opting for one of the many metaphors abound, this paper starts from the assumption that the existing metaphors no longer seem to serve us well. In a seemingly tautological move, I argue instead that Facebook *is* Facebook (Bucher, 2021). The fact that Facebook is Facebook speaks not just to its global corporate power but, more profoundly, to Facebook becoming a concept of sorts. What the many definitions and conceptions of Facebook in newspaper articles, lawsuits, congressional hearings, scholarly papers and company press reports suggest is that there seems to be a growing need for clarification as to what Facebook really is. The ontological question is not just interesting for philosophical and theoretical reasons, but serves a very practical and political purpose. In a world where Facebook and its founder and CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, exercise unprecedented power and the conversation on regulation has gained a new urgency, we might have to come to terms with the notion

that Facebook cannot readily be compared to something else but must be taken for what it is – Facebook.

Facebook *is* Facebook

This means grappling with multiple and overlapping concerns. First, it means interrogating the claim that Facebook has turned into a *concept* of its own? This is to say that, as time has passed, what we take Facebook to be has acquired a life of its own. It is no longer just a word, or a label for a technological platform or a social network site (if it ever was). We are living in a society where people are routinely socialized into acquiring a concept of Facebook, sometimes even without being an active user themselves. Conceptions of Facebook figure in policy discussions, academic discourse, news reports and public controversies. It plays a habitual role in people's everyday lives and exists more broadly as a global sociotechnical imaginary. As such, we might think of Facebook as a 'basic concept' in the sense of Koselleck; something we cannot do without when accounting for "the most urgent issues of a given time" (Berenskoetter, 2017: 157).

Second, to say that Facebook has turned conceptual is also to highlight its *multiplicity*. Facebook does not exist in a singular form. Rather we are dealing with multiple conceptions that take on different forms. Borrowing from Berenskoetter, we might say that conceptions of Facebook "evolve throughout history", "take on different empirical forms yet still maintains an abstract unity", and "artificially reified yet at closer inspection reveals nothing but fragments" (2017: 170). The idea, then, that Facebook needs to be understood as multiple is not about adding different perspectives to illuminate the meaning of a singular thing or to say that there are indefinite versions of Facebook that exist in parallel (Mol, 2002). How Facebook materializes in situated practices do not just produce different perspectives but enact different realities, or versions of Facebook as well.

Third, rather than thinking of Facebook in terms of fixed spatial metaphors such as squares, cities or states, the notion of *topology* offers a language for articulating the instabilities and fluctuations characteristic of malleable and changing entities such as Facebook. In contrast to '"Euclidean" space with its familiar geometry of stable, singular entities positioned against the external backdrop of a static space and linear time', a topological approach accentuates how the infinite and differential character of relations has the capacity to generate its own 'space-time, with its particular scales, extension and rhythms' (Marres, 2012: 292). Bringing a topological approach to bear on Facebook means paying close attention to unfolding configurations and reconfigurations, and grappling with the variations and multiplicities that Facebook produces. This means that what we take Facebook to be is a result of different elements being gathered in a specific way at a specific time.

Conclusion

Claiming that Facebook is Facebook is a way of *resisting easy labels*. While it at first sight may seem like an obvious statement, it is precisely in the seemingly obvious that we are confronted with the fact that no precise meaning exists so that we must "stay

with the trouble" of interrogating how the concept of Facebook is made to cohere in the present moment and what we would like it to mean in the future. Just as concepts can travel from discipline to discipline and take on new meanings (Bal, 2002), framing Facebook as a concept points to its generative force. The purpose of this paper, then, is not to come up with a precise definition of what Facebook is, but to think about the repercussions and implications of what its different conceptions do and the kinds of realities that are shaped by them. What do different labels do for an understanding of Facebook? What are the possible consequences of using certain metaphors rather than others? What stories are more or less likely to emerge in the different ways that Facebook gets framed?

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