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DISPATCHES FROM THE EARLY INTERNET: HISTORIES, IMAGINARIES, AND ARCHAEOLOGIES

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Panel Abstract

The internet today is popularly defined by a range of often *appified* or *platformized* (Morris and Murray 2018; Helmond 2015) inequitable norms of access level, design uniformity, and cultures of use which appear to users as dependably available, predictable, and functioning. This '[World Wide] Web 2.0' formation – “the internet” now most commonly referred to – as directed by corporate social media giants, hardware manufacturers, and internet service providers has the effect of homogenizing, sanitizing, and monetizing internet use whenever and wherever possible. Outliers to these structures are known entities, often subcultural and/or troublemakers, access to whom are gatekept from general users by their unfamiliar interfaces or guarded communities and infrastructures – many of which are inherited from previous modalities of internet use.

The “early web” and “modem world” (Lingel 2020; Driscoll 2022) represent periodizations of internet histories which look and feel markedly different from much of the contemporary popular internet. These networked computing paradigms operated with different infrastructures than those of today, usually requiring users to build physical hardware and/or write software in order to create and access online spaces. These digital sites served their users in specific functionalities, often by virtue of being in some way constructed by, and thus familiar to, them. Though by no means egalitarian utopias themselves, early internet technologies afforded their denizens more control

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over their online engagement through direct involvement with the user groups that created or primarily populated them.

Recent interest in more thoroughly historicizing the internet beyond its ARPANET creation myth and subsequent “hacker” cyberculture has generated a wealth of research on different, plural “net histories” (Driscoll and Paloque-Berges 2017) working across technical interfaces, infrastructures, and cultures of use to paint a more complete picture of how internet and computing cultures, as we now know them, came to be (Mailland and Driscoll 2017; Brock 2020; Lingel 2020; McKinney 2020; Driscoll 2022). This growing body of work which investigates temporally situated, geographically disparate, and marginalized peoples’ internet histories raises questions about how we understand the contemporary internet’s composition through offering insights into how it has operated under prior, less centralized constructions. Each paper in this panel builds on and between these themes of inquiry to introduce new histories of their own, or to complicate extant concepts of internet history.

The first paper in this collection traces a lineage of terminological and identity evolution in transgender communities from the early internet to the present through the development of search technology and information seeking practices. The second presents the co-emergent narrative of “Furry” subculture alongside hobbyist computing, which shapes the form of this community and inspires a contemporary mythology of internet infrastructural maintenance. Shifting into a geographical register, the third paper traces a history of left-wing German political organizing on the early internet at the point of rupture beginning before the country’s reunification in 1989. The fourth paper continues this region-based analysis, documenting an ecosystem of “marginal” social websites which dominated and shaped online youth cultures and imaginaries in Canada during the late 1990s and early 2000s through a case study of Nexopia.com.

These papers engage with the internet at and across different times when and places where its constituent elements, many now either outmoded or taken for granted, were seen as revolutionary. As today’s internet scholars and users grapple with the many different ongoing web revolutions – be they the ever-vague “Web 3.0,” the fediverse, or new models of artificial intelligence – these new contributions to our historical understanding of the internet demonstrate how people have dealt with their own moments’ “revolution” in networked computing technology, and in some ways problematize the idea of a “technological revolution” itself. New technological developments are framed as revolutionary updates under the hegemonic logic of neoliberalism, but are actually just the most recent in a lineage of continuous and overlapping revolutions to the crisis machines of new media (Chun 2017). The histories presented in this panel continue to chart the “erosion of the distinction between the revolutionary and the conventional” (12) through close examination of their respective topics’ situations in relation to subsequent internet development.

Working in an interdisciplinary space (queer studies, fan studies, political history, media and communication studies), the scholarship which follows argues for a more nuanced and heterogenous, and less teleological-toward-democracy, approach to internet history

through its case studies. Resisting the “revolutionary” framing which has long dominated discussions of communication technology, these papers develop accounts of historical internet use which are now sublimated into and/or made invisible by the pervasive, falsely revolutionary narrative of “the internet.”

Estimating time remaining [until the next revolution]...

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WHAT'S IN A NAME?: INFORMATION SEEKING PRACTICES, TERMINOLOGY, AND THE “TRANSGENDER” COMMUNITY

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For trans individuals, information access and retrieval long presented one of the largest barriers to raising awareness amongst the general public. Access to digital communications, beginning in the early 1980s, transformed this process from long, expensive, laborious, and personally risky to relatively fast, affordable, accessible, and increasingly anonymous (Whittle 1998; Shapiro 2010; Dame-Griff 2023). Yet this change has created unanticipated side effects, for as more and more information is framed and filtered through algorithms, trans individuals have increasingly less control over how “transgender” is defined and understood. In line with the conference theme, this paper explores how digital technologies, and search engines in particular, have been enrolled by trans individuals in service of revolutionizing transgender communities and politics. However, search’s revolutionary promises have been diminished significantly as they’ve shifted away from indexing the web to *interpreting* the web via the search engine results page (SERP).

This paper begins by exploring the early history of information search and retrieval within trans communities and the role of terminology in this process. It then shifts focus to consider how search engines transformed this process. Using technographic inquiry (Bucher 2018), I explore the operational associations the Google search algorithm makes around “transgender” as a concept through a close examination of one SERP widget: the People Also Ask feature. As I find, the PAA questions and answers actively reinforce dominant narratives around trans experience in ways that may have a negative impact on vulnerable information seekers.

Re(claiming) A Name

For many trans individuals, adopting a trans identity often comes only after coming in contact with trans narratives or communicating with another trans individual. This moment of encounter clarifies the individuals previously conflicted emotions and gives them a framework for their self-identity, as well as access to trans cultural knowledge (Zimman 2009). For those seeking out information on their cross-gender feelings, particularly before the advent of the Web and digital search, having the correct terminology (such as transvestite or transsexual) to describe their feelings functioned as keys necessary to unlock access to this seemingly “hidden” knowledge. Using what they’d learned, questioning individuals were able to make contact with community organizations and gain access to support group libraries, community periodicals, and other resources.

However, these terms’ cultural associations with pathology and deviancy often deterred questioning information seekers from doing more than a cursory search in their local library, where the texts they encountered reinforced these associations. As a result,

developing community-specific terminology for gender nonconformity had long been a key goal for members. In contrast to medical terms that forefronted negative associations, in-community terms aimed to describe individuals' experience of gender in more value-neutral ways (Feinberg 1992). Members also recognized how existing terms' impact on vulnerable individuals, and they engaged in, as Cait MicKinney defines it, "information activism" (2020) to circumvent these issues, ranging from public education campaigns and lobbying textbook publishers to 'hacking' libraries' physical card catalogs to replace existing reference cards with cards directing information seekers to relevant community organizations (Author).

None of these community-developed terms saw wide adoption until the introduction of "transgender" as a new umbrella term in the early 1990s. Unlike earlier medicalized terms, "transgender" was developed, defined, and deployed first and foremost by community members, and their efforts were bolstered by the publication of what sociologist Laurel Westbrook terms "teaching transgender articles," which defined and naturalized the term (2010). Once "transgender" had found wide acceptance among community members did organizations begin using it in other arenas, helping it to enter common usage starting in the late 1990s. In contrast to those using terminology with medical origins, information seekers using "transgender" as their primary keyword were far more likely to encounter community-produced resources that affirmed their experiences and sense of self.

People Also Ask...

At the same time as community members were encouraging the wider public to begin adopting "transgender," new methods for digital information search and retrieval were transforming how this public accessed information. While bulletin board systems increased documents' reach and speed of delivery, they lacked the ease of use and seeming stability of the World Wide Web (Driscoll 2022; Dame-Griff 2023). Once search engines began indexing the Web, what had once been a laborious process including furtive searches through library stacks and hesitant messages left on community groups' hotline answering machines was now reduced to a single keyword search: "transgender" (Dame-Griff 2023).

Moreover, by the mid to late 1990s, the Web had radically changed how information within the trans community was disseminated. Not only did it make mass dissemination affordable for small organizations, but it also opened up the possibility of publishing to a far larger portion of the community. Trans organizations saw the website as a golden opportunity to provide information, raise awareness, and attract new members, while trans individuals embraced the personalized home page as a space for low-risk self-expression (Dame-Griff 2023). In a 1998 column on the future of the transgender community trans activist Dallas Denny and coauthor Jessica Xavier contrasted most community groups' existing print-and-mail information distribution model with using a search engine, which at the time returned over four thousand results for the term "transsexual." "With such a wealth available in seconds," they argued, "who in the future

will be inclined to wait a couple of weeks for an information packet from a gender organization?” (5)

As search algorithms' sophistication increased, the importance of having the 'terminological keys,' so to speak, in information search and retrieval decreased. Instead, the blank search box allows questioning individuals, scholar Vanessa Kitzie has found, to “express a natural language query specific to [their] experience,” like, “I was born a boy and wanted to be a girl” or “Feel male, but only inside” (2019; see also Huttunen, et al. 2020). Yet instead of guiding information seekers to resources created by and for community members, the search engine, via the SERP, acts as the mediator and guide, framing how these individuals understand “transgender.” As Safiya Noble argues, search engine results represent “an information reality, while the operations [that lie behind it] are rendered increasingly invisible” (2018). The SERP has now become, according to Jannis Kallinikos and his co-authors, “an interactive, radically open and distributed artifact that” mediates the interaction between “human actors and the cultural records they wish to access” (2010). Behind the SERP lies a complex database intimately shaped by dominant hegemonic norms which are then reproduced in what is presented on the SERP.

As I find, the search algorithm's understanding of “transgender,” drawn from existing search results and shaped by user behavior, either reinforces existing cultural biases or actively distorts the trans experience. For a topic like “transgender,” the SERP produces questions and answers that reflect a wider cultural focus on medicalization and surgery. Furthermore, the system's focus on producing helpful answers via short excerpts reduces complex questions to short snippets that don't always reflect a source's larger argument. In this way, what was once a tool used for revolutionary ends is now more likely to reinforce the same associations of pathology and deviancy activists sought to dispel with the introduction of “transgender.”

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FURRIES *BUILT* THE INTERNET: PRE-2000 COMMUNITY COMPUTING

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Recovering the Internet...from Midwest FurFest

On December 7th 2021, Amazon Web Services (AWS) went offline for several hours in what appeared to be a random error, disrupting users' access to its tools and the many sites which relied upon it. Responses to the outage ranged from annoyance at the failure of perceived ready-to-hand infrastructure, to schadenfreude at the ineptitude of the world's most profitable corporation to maintain its services. Twitter user Matthew Ebel, however, made an observation causally implicating this event in relation to another which had finished the night before: Midwest FurFest, the largest 'Furry' convention. "All the furries are hung over and recovering from @FurFest today. And AWS goes down. This tracks." (2021).

In this tweet, Ebel repeated a common myth surrounding internet infrastructure: "furries run the internet." This postulation can be found repeated across internet platforms today—whenever there is a major internet outage or perceived degradation of technical infrastructure the myth of the Furry hacker, or more aptly technical janitor, can be found among the discourse. For instance, following the layoffs spurred by Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter in 2022, user HansFaffing posted a joking "Critical Infrastructure Alert" warning that "Twitter currently employs 0 furries" (2022), implying a near future in which the platform might collapse.

I investigate the origin (and validate the accuracy) of this internet mythology through an analysis of archival documents from and about Furry Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), Multi-User Created Kingdoms (MUCKs), Usenet, and Internet Service Providers (ISPs), hosted primarily on textfiles.com, usenetarchives.com, and in fan archives. Through this historical analysis I document how Furry culture built, maintained, and shaped communications infrastructures for themselves, and how those technologies then in turn shaped Furry community—resulting in its implication internet infrastructural management. Through these historical analyses I document how Furry culture built, maintained, and shaped technical communications infrastructures for themselves, and how those technologies then in turn shaped Furry community.

Recovering Furry...from the Internet

Furries and tech workers themselves locate experiential evidence in replies to posts which invoke the Furry-technologist narrative. Furry web developer Dragoneer, in response to Ebel's AWS tweet, recalled when "there were so many furries [that AWS] had an internal team group for them" (2021); user ottdogbuns commented on Musk's Twitter layoffs that the furries they knew working there "were either let go or resigned" (2022). In response to a tweet which asked users to share a piece esoteric knowledge specific to their fields, user mmsword wrote a thread which began:

“Telecommunications as a whole, which also encompasses The Internet, is in a constant state of failure and just in time fixes and functionally all modern communication would collapse if about 50 people, most of which are furies, decided to turn their pager off for a day.” (2019)

These Tweets, examples of a much larger corpus, represent pieces of internet folk knowledge, held far beyond the Furry community, that indicate a connection between participants of Furry subculture and the internet’s technological infrastructures which goes beyond simple stereotyping. As Twitter cybersecurity influencer @SwiftOnSecurity states: “furies built the internet” (2019).

Jessa Lingel’s description of this “early web” as “characterized by excitement at connecting with strangers from across the world and trial-and-error experimentation with online personas” (2020, 2) is particularly applicable to furies, who *still* connect with one another online primarily using bespoke pseudonymous identities, ‘fursonae,’ and exemplify excitement in their continued engagement with novel technology. While maintaining a critical view of the “democratic” potential in cybercultures, we can still understand how digital space and its built infrastructure can promote the positive development of identity and community. The pre-2000 Furry internet presents an opportunity for such reflection upon a situation not dissimilar to the potential present internet paradigm shift.

Interviews with former corporate scouts and a ‘greymuzzle’ BBS System Operator, have recalled a co-history of anthropomorphic animal fan culture and information technology, and offer a jumping-in point to connect this larger mythos to discrete practices. At the height of the 1990’s Dot-Com Bubble, tech company recruiters attended Furry conventions to hire furies for their firms because of computer system knowledge acquired through building community infrastructures around the budding Furry scene (Cole 2017). Archival documents show that these skills which attracted recruiters to 1990s fur-con floors stemmed from the co-emergence of hobbyist computing and “funny animal” communities a decade earlier, when what would become known as “Furry” began to constitute itself at side-rooms at science fiction conventions in the late 1970’s. This new community moved into cyberspace as radio hobbyists’ newfound interest in building networked microcomputers began creating homegrown communication networks over dial-up (Driscoll 2022). The Furry community grew and organized itself online, most notably on the ‘FurNet’ (and ‘Purnet’) echoes of the ‘FidoNet’ BBS network, the ‘FurryMUCK’ text-based role-playing system, the ‘TigerDen’ ISP, and, later, Usenet—building robust communication infrastructures and transferrable cybercultures in the process.

The Furry Internet: Then to Now

Undergirding all of these systems is a sort of community-built infrastructure—real material tech. Many of these BBS or role-play services themselves were hosted by furies, giving them the very real space to self-determine the boundaries of their community and its norms—something increasingly hard to imagine in an era of walled garden apps and platformized surveillance. This self-determination enabled for the

largely queer (and unquestionably weird) subculture to grow and reproduce its own specialized knowledge. At the same time though, by constituting itself through physical technological artifacts furries before Y2K developed real knowledge of this technology, which ultimately made them themselves valuable to outside interests.

The actual shape of the Furry internet changed with the wane of BBS and similar tech. As Usenet and “Furrynet” mailgroups took the place of FurNet, and IRC took the place of other text-based RP worlds, the terms of engagement were increasingly out of the hands of community members themselves. There’s evidence in archived Usenet conversations that furries were reticent to make the transition to Web 2.0—being moderated out of commercial ISPs/services like AOL (Milam, 1999). While the tradition of furries building their own spaces has continued it’s now undergirded by commercial platforms, ISPs, hosting services. In this way, Furry offers a paradoxical conclusion for us: an exemplar of both how a community can create infrastructure for itself, as well as how even outsider digital communities can be incorporated into the hegemonic regime of techno-capital.

Nevertheless, the building of Furry media infrastructures demonstrates how subcultural communities can and have built these things by-and-for themselves. Early furries not only participated in a computing culture where the infrastructure of the internet was rendered visible, but where these same users were themselves the workers who created and maintained many elements of it—a sharp contrast to now, when the physicality of communications is often invisibilized (Parks 2015). This shaping of an internet use-practice by furries, too shaped the way that the community came to proliferate itself online: eking out space for itself across the internet’s entire lineage, and becoming its not-so-imaginary caregiver.

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NETWORKS OF SOLIDARITY: THE LEFT-WING OF THE EARLY GERMAN INTERNET

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The (Online) German Left

The early internet straddles a historical period in which massive political and ideological upheaval were matched by equally massive upheavals in technology, communication, and the very fabric of social life. Germany was in many ways an epicenter of all these changes, as it experienced the merger of the previously divided East and West worlds in a way that no other country during this period did. Similarly, it was a country that had already developed significant communication infrastructure, along with a population that was ranked 3rd globally in internet users by 1995. Among these users were members of the nascent German online Left, who from the 1980s to the early 2000s developed a series of sites, Bulletin Board System (BBS) lists, and online networks that aided their organization and communication.

This paper follows the development of this Left's organizing on the early German internet, focusing especially on the period from 1980-2004 and seeks to build a bridge between internet studies and histories of the German left, and particularly contemporary German labor histories.

The period from 1980-2004 saw many significant developments within Germany, beyond just reunification in 1989-90. On the Left, it also saw the rise (and brief fall) of the Green Party during the 1980s; the integration of the East German Communist party's successor, Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), into German politics; the mass protests caused by the total privatization of the East German economy after reunification in the 1990s; and the Hartz IV protests during the early 2000s against the further erosion of unemployment benefits. In many ways, these protests are all a part of the same struggle, beginning with the ascendance of neoliberalism in the 1980s and marked by periodical moments of struggle from the global Left, pushing back against encroaching privatization and the advance of neoliberal hegemony.

At the same time as these massive economic and political battles are being engaged, the early internet emerges as a key site of organizing, and information dissemination, particularly for groups who lacked traditional access to mainstream mass media sources such as newspapers, radio, and television. Both more organized networks like Usenet, and less organized networks like BBSs served as key sites of organization for many marginalized groups, as explained extensively in Kevin Driscoll's seminal work *The Modem World*. I seek to extend this research on the "grassroots internet" through exploring how the internet was used as a site of solidarity and organizing for groups on the West, and later united, German Left. Much of my data was collected through internet archaeologies, particularly using the Wayback Machine, the USENET Archives, and textfiles.com (Brügger & Schroeder, 2017; Ogden, 2021; Dame-Griff 2019).

The project has three primary goals. First, to trace how the advent of digital technology and media changed (and did not change) the wider structures and strategies of the German Left. Second, to trace the discursive relationship between grassroots democracy (a frequent demand of the 1990s Left) and the horizontalist aspirations of many left-wing digital media projects. Third, to establish how the internet enabled more international networks of solidarity on the Left.

Core Groups

Within the online German Left are several key groups that my research sees as important to its broader network. The Chaos Computer Club were active throughout this period and represented a radical activist hacking community in the very early stages of digital communication networks (Kubitschko, 2018; Coleman, 2013). The CCC first burst onto the scene with their hack of Bildschirmtext (BTX, a West German videotex service in the 1980s which has significant structural parallels to the internet), in which they stole 134,000 Deutsch Marks from a Hamburg bank, before returning it the next day.

Less researched groups such as SoliNet and later SoliServ.de both came online during the 1990s as sites of general left wing, and especially labor, organizing. Both served as a hub for accessing forums and BBSs, and for their system operators (SysOps) to organize wider networks of support and solidarity across Germany and into Austria. SoliNet featured a variety of resources for workers, including explanations of labor laws and links to the official sites for different unions, along with discussion forums covering topics like individual unions, women's rights, and unemployment advice. SoliNet also operated off the Z-Netz protocol, developed in Germany in response to the perceived overly hierarchical aspects of FidoNet. Soliserv.de is a similar site, still in operation today, which is geared more towards serving works councils – a smaller German labor organizing structure that often works in conjunction with labor unions – but had significant overlap with SoliNet at the time. Like SoliNet, it hosted information for workers, particularly that which was geared towards the operating of work councils, such as other councils' contract agreements with their employers. On both sites were calendars and forums dedicated to upcoming and ongoing protests and strikes. In this way, these sites were able to serve as communication loci not just for social networks that existed solely on the web, but for building movements in the “analog world” that could affect change outside of the digital space.

LabourNet.de also proved to be a site of left-wing labor organizing and agitation. Unlike SoliNet and SoliServ.de, LabourNet was founded as part of a pre-existing international network. The friction in this network would eventually lead to its splitting in the late 1990s, however LabourNet.de continues to this day. In the case of LabourNet in particular, the web as a means of alternative media (later coalescing into the term “Indy Media”) became especially important as the site tried to publish updates on the war in the former Yugoslavia.

Protest and Solidarity on the German Web

The concept of the internet as a site for organizing popular insurrection is something which has come into focus over the last 30 years. The most notable early example was the 1994 revolution in Chiapas in which the Zapatista insurgency used the internet to communicate directly with the world, undermining the Mexican federal government's attempts to control the narrative and proving key to the revolution's success (Martinez-Torres, 2011; Cleaver, 1998). Later, the Arab Spring again highlighted the importance of the internet as an infrastructure and location for popular organizing, this time with Twitter and Facebook playing decisive roles, particularly in Egypt (Herrera, 2014). In both cases, the internet served as a key organizing infrastructure, affording members of insurrectionist groups the ability to communicate both between themselves and with the outside world.

This project will continue to tell this story of an internet that has served as a network for the marginalized and site where the Left has been able to consistently organize and form networks of solidarity even as they are unable to access more traditional forms of mass media. From the CCC to SoliNet and Soliserv.de to LabourNet, the early internet in Germany was rich with these networks of solidarity. This project builds a bridge between current research on early internet activism and contemporary German Left and labor histories. Understanding these networks can help us better understand the internet as a site for both political organizing and protest and insurrection, not just in Germany but around the world.

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EARLY INTERNET MEMORIES OF A SMALL PLACE CALLED HOME

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For young people growing up in Canada between 1995-2005, online engagement typically oscillated between spending time in places they built and places they found. While large scale and popular platforms sit at the forefront of our cultural imagination of the internet's past - like AOL, MySpace, GeoCities, and MSN (Miltner & Gerrard 2021; MacKinnon 2022) - smaller, local, tightly networks social platforms like MyKNet.org (1998), OutaouaisWeb.com (2001), CaraMail.com (1997), Bluekaffee (2002), and Nexopia (2003) are meanwhile obscured. We might consider them part of the *marginal web* (Clavert & Schafer 2023), in opposition to the mainstream web, or that which is given priority, attention, and focus by academics, news media and policy makers. The marginal web, by contrast, includes digital spaces occupied by people that are undertheorized, represented, critiqued, celebrated or understood.

Many young people in Canada were spending time in these places, calling them home, and building networks of trust and vulnerability through their engagement with the affordances of the early platforms (Abidin 2021). While these places were imbued with a “messy serendipity” that was characteristic of the early web (Lingel 2021), they also had features that encouraged the young users to use these spaces as deeply private and personal diaries, to connect with friends from school, to meet new people from other nearby schools, and to project a desired image of themselves. While engagement with these smaller platforms reflect what others have demonstrated as digital spaces extending school-based ties for young people (Shade, Porter, and Sanchez 2005), it also expands historical boundaries of where individual and collective early internet memories took place that inform our cultural and nostalgic notions of the ‘early web’.

Marginal Web Studies

Researching these spaces requires specific attention to scale, not only to design triangulating methodologies that reflect their marginality, but also to respond to a presumed obsolescence of the personal and sensitive materials within these platforms. As platforms become forgotten in the cultural psyche, users might not anticipate the type of long-term presence and permanence that the web preservation provides as they might have with larger platforms that are still discussed, researched and celebrated years after their decline. For example, GeoCities has been presented publicly and academically as a “stand-in for the past web” (Lialina 2019): “a representative for a certain visual style, or simply as a digital artifact and data set” that Olia Lialina calls “netslagia,” which is ultimately “sweet but deceiving.” This emphasis on GeoCities comes, in part, from the large-scale collection the Archive Team commenced once notice was given in 2009 that the site was being sunsetted, which has provided “an abundance” (Milligan 2019) of academic access to historical web materials.

Smaller, marginal platforms functioned similarly to other, larger sites, but they are not studied or written about. Gaps in internet histories can be due to a lack of information access, but gaps are also produced through academic marginalization, where platforms are dismissed or considered “niche online destinations,” as BlackPlanet.com was which “hindered it from being considered one of the first social networking sites” (Brock 2020, 135). Despite limited academic and public attention, these smaller platforms loom large in many individual early internet memories; contribute significantly towards the cultural, political and economic history of the web; and are key to individual orientations of digital sociality, data privacy and internet imaginaries. While large parts of marginal web spaces have been preserved by the Internet Archive, the study of historical marginal platforms requires building on individual memory and experience. This paper demonstrates a pathway forward through a case study on the popular 2000s Canadian platform Nexopia that responds to specific ethical and methodological issues.

Nexopia.com (2003)

Nexopia was a forum-based social platform that included a front page, user profiles, forum threads, and general topics with headers such as Off-Topic, Site General, Entertainment, Life, Hobbies and Interests, Super Secret Forums. While it was accessible globally, it was used exclusively by teenagers living in Western Canada provinces Alberta and British Columbia. It was created by 18-year-old Timo Ewalds in 2003 while he was living with his parents in Edmonton, Alberta. In four years, it grew significantly, with over 1.2 million registered members and a billion pages each month, reaching 70% of teenagers and young adults in Western Canada.

The Internet Archive Wayback Machine (IAWM) has 1,645 page captures from Nexopia that include profile pages and forums on topics ranging from: Attention Seekers, Adults Only, LGBTQ+, Site Suggestions and Support, TV + Movies, Music, Would You F**k The Person Above, Relationship Advice, Food Forum, Video Games, Politics and Debate. Each forum topic details how many posts have been made at the time of capture, and the username of the latest poster with the date of their post. Despite these metrics, the archived web pages are limited in what they represent about this marginal social web space.

In the Early Internet Memories project (2019-2022), interviews were conducted with people who grew up in Canada and were interested in locating their digital traces in web archives. Many identified Nexopia as a significant site of sociality and development, revealing how, to them, this was a place that contained memories of sexual awakening, pain, awkwardness, embarrassment, and deep connection. Together, we look for their digital traces in the IAWM: for their profiles, their images, and comments. Through this approach, the archived version of Nexopia sits in conflict with their memories: profiles are crystalized in specific moments in time, between inside internet jokes and brief flashes of teenage immaturity; forum comments and images uploaded remain visible and traceable; accounts across platforms are connected, and their presence on the web, despite what they might have thought, lives on.

Through this collaborative process, the wider context of the archived data is revealed: the motivations, hidden meanings and connections, impressions and reflections of the personal and cultural significance of this place they once called home. Marginal web histories demonstrate the vastness of the internet, as it was experienced across intersections of race, gender, class, age, and geographic location, which worked to differentiate many young people's experiences and memories of the web.

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