Transient-Platform Paradigms: Narratives Of Blockchain Experiments For Social Media Platforms

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This paper develops the concept of *transient-platform paradigm* by closely examining a blockchain technology experiment for a social media platform. Since late 2022, 'generative AI' (GenAI) has been the buzzword *du jour*. There are new 'hypes', 'hopes' (Boler, 2007), critiques and cynicism around GenAI, and much is unexplored about the new wave of automation. GenAI is an example of a recurring socio-technical phenomenon or technological 'trend' (Powers, 2019) that the digital media and technology industry portrays as a catalyst that will bring seismic change to the Internet and digital communication. Such trends and their corresponding hype signified (from an anthropological perspective) an 'anticipation' to connote the "practical and material acting-in-advance" (Stephan & Flaherty, 2019, p. 2). In retrospect, we can also recognize that the trends and buzzwords are foundational in shifting the 'paradigm' (Burgess, 2015; Freedman, 2015), or the way people think about and associate with digital technology or media. They are pivotal in guiding the future (shaping perceptions and compelling actions) (Powers, 2019, p. 26) of the Internet, the Web and the associated industries.

For example, social media platforms have prominently shaped everyday communication practices and several industries, including media, telecommunication, information technology and advertising. The 'platform paradigm' emerged in the 2010s when a handful of platform companies played a central role in combining user-created content with social networking features, allowing people to create, share, and connect easily (Burgess, 2015, p. 282). Simultaneously, these platforms gradually

displaced "more diffuse, bespoke models of publishing and distribution" of user-created content (Burgess, 2015, p. 282). While the users were crucial for the rapid scaling of these platforms, over time, the advertisers and other aspects of the business have organized or reconfigured the industry around these digital platforms.

Such reconfigurations did not go unopposed. Short-lived "Killer Hype Cycles" (Zulli et al., 2020) boosted the alternatives to mainstream social media platforms. Alternative social media (ASM) platforms (Gehl, 2015) emerged in response to changes on large platforms. For instance, the introduction of the real name' policy (Salisbury & Pooley, 2017, p. 9) by Facebook in 2007 triggered the creation and uptake of platforms such as Ello and Diaspora. In 2022, the acquisition of Twitter and destructive changes to its platform governance resulted in drastically changed participation. This assisted the adoption and growth of ASM such as Mastodon (and the uptake of ActivityPub protocol by Meta and Bluesky).

Not so long ago, blockchain-based social media (BSM) initiatives attempted to build viable alternatives using blockchain technology. These developments occurred alongside the emergence of Mastodon (and the underlying ActivityPub protocol). BSM platforms were also situated at the intersection of the emergent Web3 discourse and the dominant platform paradigm. BSMs applied ideologies of decentralization in attempts to develop community-led alternatives to mainstream commercial platforms. To do so, they leveraged the affordances of blockchain technology, such as tokenization, autonomous organization, and a decentralized power structure.

This paper presents partial findings from the platform biography (doctoral thesis) (Burgess & Baym, 2020) of one such BSM, DTube. DTube aspired to provide a fair and transparent alternative creator economy built without the foundations of an advertising revenue model (unlike YouTube). It relied on the critical affordance tokenization or cryptocurrency to overcome the economic challenges. It emerged amid a rapidly changing landscape of digital technologies such as social media platforms, financial technology systems, GenAI, and cloud computing. DTube remained as a minor platform (Nicoll, 2019).

The research was conducted in three phases between 2019 and 2023. Phase One involved identifying the key constitutive elements of DTube, namely its forums, blockchain, and protocols for platform governance.

These elements were foundational to DTube and shaped the platform and user practices. Phase Two involved a multi-sited ethnography across the DTube video-sharing interface, Discord server, other public forums and trade press. In doing so, qualitative data was gathered to understand the conversations, discourse and practices around the platform. Phase Three involved semi-structured interviews with community members and participation as a video creator on the video-sharing interface. The data collected in the three phases was analyzed using Raymond Williams's (1977) framework of dominant, residual, and emergent systems or cultures. This research is motivated to articulate the emergent "structures of feeling" or the "social experience which is still in process" (Williams, 1977, p. 132). It aims to comprehend the imaginaries of a future Internet / Web that experiments like DTube are trying to articulate.

DTube (and BSMs) represented an emergent system since it introduced "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships" (p. 123) in a social media system. The discourse of rewarding social interactions was a definitive characteristic in this emergent culture's new meanings and practices. The rewards became currency for further participation. DTube articulated or influenced a new way of thinking about social media or creator culture, a new platform paradigm. Socio-technical discourses of ASM and Web3 significantly shaped this paradigm.

BSM platforms and Fediverse platforms (such as Mastodon) are second-generation alternatives that attempt to overcome any economic and logistical challenges of the earlier ASMs. These alternatives imitate the functions and operations of popular platforms. They differ by placing users in charge of the platform governance and operations. Importantly, all ASM/BSM platforms have two things in common. First, many of these initiatives were open-source projects or 'recursive public' (Kelty, 2008, p. 3), i.e., individuals and collectives were independent of large institutions convened to develop solutions that complemented or opposed dominant systems. Second, they were socio-technical or socio-economic imaginaries for alternative platforms with decentralized decision-making (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2006, p. xv) and (democratized) access to media production and circulation (Couldry & Curran, 2003, p. 5). Although such utopian imaginaries have never proven to be successful in their entirety, they never disappear. They surface regularly in response to renewed worries about the 'future of the Internet' (Zittrain, 2013) or 'Googlization' (Vaidhyanathan, 2012). In the process, they shape a new paradigm that this paper calls a 'transient-platform paradigm', *where dispersed initiatives attempt to recreate*

social media platforms for users by the users. The transient-platform paradigm is a new way of thinking about and organizing communities to form, operate and govern social media platforms.

Given these initiatives' unconsolidated nature, they produced different versions of the paradigm. This discourse or paradigm is not entirely new, nor does it shift the dominant paradigm. It is a response to or solution to the drawbacks of the dominant platform paradigm. Moreover, it represented attempts to normalize power hierarchies with a renewed focus on decentralization and autonomy. As minor platforms, in Nicoll's (2019) words, they "point toward alternative possibilities for a future yet to come" (p. 40). For instance, the Fediverse (a catch-all term for federated social media initiatives and technologies including but extending beyond Mastodon) represents a transient-platform paradigm characterized by decentralized instances of a given social media platform connected using the ActivityPub protocol. BSM represents a transient-platform paradigm characterized by blockchain-based governance and cryptocurrency incentives. This paper does not speculate concrete shifts with decentralized systems; instead, it suggests that these transient-platform paradigms are fleeting and potentially shape the emergent discourse or paradigm. Moreover, it can subsequently shape cultural and industrial landscapes.

Word count: 1186

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