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REPLATFORMIZATION: RACIAL CAPITALISM AND THE STACK- CONSCIOUSNESS OF KIWI FARMS

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Introduction

The “regulatory turn” in Internet studies is underway as scholars evaluate ICT firms’ efforts to manage violent uses of digital platforms (Schlesinger 2020; Flew and Gillett 2021). The problem of scale is essential. Digital platforms depend on the “Stack” (Bratton 2016), or a modular hierarchy of infrastructure, to deliver content to users and to regulate offenders. A single platform contracts numerous firms including ISPs, web hosts, domain registrars, cybersecurity providers, ad brokers, and more. The international, multi-sided, and conflicting relationships between stack suppliers pose obstacles for implementing policies to curtail disinformation and hate (Tusikov 2018).

The concepts of (de)platformization help us appreciate the problem of scale but require updating to attend to recent industrial developments in reactionary digital media. “Platformization” names the convergence of myriad sectors on digital platforms, or online services that deploy proprietary data-driven algorithms to organize interactions among users, providers, and industries (Helmond 2015; Gillespie 2018; Nieborg and Poell 2018). As platforms increasingly mediate social life, platform policy functions as social policy and ICT firms as judge, jury, and executioner. For example, major social networking sites engage in “deplatforming” or the suspension of accounts violating their Terms of Service, such as the 2021 removal of Donald Trump from Twitter following January 6th (Rogers 2020; Floridi 2021). Deplatforming is plagued by scale due to its focus on individual figureheads. Reactionary platforms like Gab emerge as safe harbors for the deplatformed, while low-regulation platforms like Telegram bridge mainstream and fringe environments (Jasser 2021; Agarwal, Ananthakrishnan, and Tucker 2022). Meeting the problem of scale, José Van Dijck et al. (2021) coin “deplatformization” to describe the systematic denial of service to reactionary platforms. Unlike content-focused deplatforming, deplatformization targets a network’s stack to revoke access to payment processing, domain registration, web hosting, app stores, and other critical infrastructure. Unlike deplatforming which is easily curtailed by moving to a new platform or account,

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deplatformization disrupts the technical, social, and economic reproduction of an entire web site. Deplatformization by Amazon Web Services has interrupted Parler, which once mediated hundreds of thousands of racist users and now stands as a static webpage perpetually “coming soon” (as of February 2024).

Nevertheless, reactionary networks adapt to deplatformization by developing their own service providers and a corresponding consciousness toward the Stack. For example, service denials by domain registrar GoDaddy have decimated “Alt-Right” web traffic. Enter Epik LLC (formerly Epik Holdings), a multimillion-dollar conglomerate that provides domain registration for Gab, Bitchute, Patriots.win, and numerous other white nationalist sites, immunizing these communities from deplatformization. Similar firms include web host Rightforge, a “cancel-proof” web host that built the prototype of Trump’s Truth Social platform; VanwaTech, responsible for re-platforming 8chan and Q-Anon; and Parallel, a payment processor hosted on the white nationalist social network Gab. In this trend which I term “replatformization,” extremist networks are producers of infrastructure, not just content. If the dialectic of deplatformization continues unabated, we may be witnessing the genesis of self-sufficient industry of far-right digital services whose ultimate goal is the Balkanization of the Internet in the name of short-circuiting public policy. To meet this problem with the scale it requires, I address the following research question: How do reactionary digital platforms modulate the Stack to amplify their leverage within (de)platformization?

Methodology

I analyze a single case study, Kiwi Farms (KF), to pay close attention to the Stack-consciousness of a reactionary online subculture. Established in 2013 by Joshua Moon, KF is a text forum used by 16,000 users daily to harass vulnerable people, particularly transgender women, whom they deem “lolcows,” existing solely to be “milked” for laughs (Breland 2023). Kiwi Farms harassment campaigns have caused multiple suicides of transgender youth. After a 2022 viral #DropKiwiFarms campaign on Twitter brought this forum’s complicity to public attention, KF has been subject to deplatforming by service providers including host Cloudflare, ISP Hurricane Electric, Tor router HARICA, and *dozens* of domain registrars (Tiku 2023). Nevertheless, KF remains online using its own services such as web host “Final Solutions LLC” (named after the Holocaust), DDoS mitigator “KiwiFlare,” and Lolcow LLC Litigation Fund. To quantify the “Stack-consciousness” emerging on KF: Over 1 week in February 2024, KF users raised over \$150,000 to fund frivolous lawsuits in defense of their infrastructure.

The paper applies materialist analysis, anchored by theories of racial capitalism, to understand the replatformization of Kiwi Farms in context of the disproportionate leverage structurally afforded to reactionary media over and against marginalized people. Racial capitalism names that Euro-Western racism is the ideological foundation the extraction, valuation, and circulation of capital (Robinson 2021). Racial capitalism has inspired Internet researchers to identify the whiteness, masculinity, and bourgeois character of platform capitalism as it manifests through predatory inclusion (McMillan Cottom 2020), value extraction (Franklin 2021), and the geopolitics of platform economies (Gebrial 2022). With racial capitalism as a guide, I situate KF in the context of social reproduction,

meaning that I evaluate the forum within the inhospitable conditions of capitalism rather than characterizing it as an exceptionally extreme environment. This decision is critical to pay heed to the ways in which production prefigures the content-consumption patterns that dominate current research on deplatforming (Mirrlees 2021).

My archive is diachronic, tracing change before, during, and after replatformization, between 2014-2024. Texts include Kiwi Farms' and its service providers' terms of service, funding pitches, and PR statements; the same texts from KF's stack suppliers; Joshua Moon's communications publicized on Telegram; and statements by both de- and re-platforming stack providers. Additionally, I consider the user experience through analysis of graphical user interface, affordances, and community habits.

Findings

Replatformization is the flip-side to deplatformization as racial capitalism disproportionately empowers reactionary webmasters. I trace a shift in how KF users identify with/of the platform, from a posse of "harmless" pranksters united by "lulz" to a self-imagined vanguard of online reactionary cultural production who explicitly advertise their intent to fracture the online public sphere. As KF users turned their attention to infrastructure by necessity, they ratcheted up their antagonism against Internet governance in order to, paradoxically, defend their self-imagined right to impose mob rule against marginalized people. There by, replatformization radicalizes Van Dijck's critique of deplatformization by bringing to light reactionary response patterns which proceed from the bourgeois management of digital infrastructure. Replatformization unifies considerations within the regulatory turn including critiques of "Alt-Tech" platforms as "parallel ports" which reveal the ideological implications of platform governance in mystifying the rise of the far-right (Donovan, Lewis, and Friedberg 2019).

Second, this study situates racial capitalism at the center of the regulatory turn's problem of scale. Private ownership of the means of mediation is the "platform" on which the far-right's emerging infrastructure industry is built. It is by design, not coincidence, that the far-right may easily re-turn to their online audiences after deplatforming because platform capitalism promises unmediated expression to those whose social position converges with the default whiteness of the net. Hence, the field must adopt its own consciousness toward the Stack attendant to how social antagonisms scale alongside Internet infrastructures.

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