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Platform values: an introduction to the #AoIR16 special issue

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ABSTRACT

Marking a decade of exciting interdisciplinary internet research, this is the 10th *Information, Communication and Society* special issue that features research generated by the annual Association of Internet Research (AoIR) conferences. This issue consists of eight provocative articles selected from #AoIR2016, the 17th annual conference, held at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany from 5–8 October 2016. The #AoIR2016 conference theme Internet Rules! invited participants to address the complex interplay of digital technologies, business models and user practices. For some, the Internet rules! Others are ruled by the internet. Reflecting the emergent focus during the conference, this special issue addresses the Internet as a set of connected platforms that have various technical, social, cultural, political and figurative meanings, and seeks to understand rules as a set of normative values. Offering a primer on platform values, the contributions share a commitment to social justice, offer innovative theoretical interventions and empirically ground the workings of platform values from various scholarly perspectives. They show how normative digitally networked technologies are mutually shaped by top-down decisions such as the profit-oriented workings of algorithms that differentially value some users over others and bottom-up user practices that both sustain and subvert value-laden mechanisms.

Marking a decade of exciting interdisciplinary internet research, this is the 10th *Information, Communication and Society* special issue that features research generated by the annual Association of Internet Research (AoIR) conferences. The annual conferences bring together international scholars interested in the societal, political and cultural dynamics of digitally networked technologies. The scholarship included here was first presented at #AoIR2016, the 17th annual conference, held at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany in October 2016. The meeting was hosted by the Alexander von Humboldt Institut für Internet und Gesellschaft (Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society – HIIG) and the Hans-Bredow Institut für Medienforschung (Hans Bredow Institute for Media Research). #AoIR2016 had 535 participants from 30 countries,

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and the programme included the presentation of 145 papers, 33 pre-constituted panels, 17 roundtables, 8 fishbowls, 4 experimental sessions, 8 pre-conference workshops and a doctoral colloquium.

As described in the call-for-papers, the #AoIR2016 conference theme 'Internet Rules!' invited participants to address the complex interplay of digital technologies, business models and user practices:

> the significance of the codes and rules that frame the Internet, as well as their playful circumvention, from technical protocols and popular platforms to the emerging, established, and contested conventions of online communities. Who are the actors both in practices of rule-making and rule-breaking, what are their motivations and resources, and how can their power relations and communicative figurations be described? How does the Internet influence the proliferation of the values that its platforms, services and infrastructures embody, and what spaces of creative resistance persist?

For some, the Internet rules! Others are ruled by the internet. 'Internet rules!' thus offered a distinctive lens to scrutinize for whom digital network technologies bring profit, meaning, entertainment, work, networking, gossip, pleasure, and for whom it brings distraction, discrimination, and exploitation. The conference theme raised the question who actually rules the internet: (supra)national governmental bodies? Legislative frameworks? The corporate interests of the U.S. 'big five': Apple, Amazon, Google, Facebook and Microsoft? Public interests? Digital platforms? Algorithms? Or Internet communities? During the conference, the broader theme was most prominently addressed from the perspectives of the internet as a set of connected 'platforms' and rules as sets of 'values', hence the title of our special issue.

Subverting the norm of male-dominated tech industry and scholarship, the #AoIR2016 agenda was set by four distinguished female keynote and plenary speakers. José van Dijck gave her keynote on 'public values in the platform society' (2016). In her analysis of contemporary public and private life, platforms are gateways to the ecosystems of everyday social life: automated technologies, business models, sociality and cultures of networked platforms become interwoven in wider ecosystems. These are shaped by normative mechanisms that emerge from the interplay of users and technological architectures.

In their plenary discussion on who rules the internet, Kate Crawford, Carolin Gerlitz and Fieke Jansen focused on the proliferation of values and persistence on platforms. Crawford, for example, touched upon the gendered workings of back-end technologies such as 'narrow artificial intelligence'; Gerlitz drew out how platforms 'lock-in users', while Jansen recognized the importance of arts and activism to question the politics of the global data industry (Crawford, Gerlitz, & Jansen, 2016). These interventions foregrounded how *platforms* and *values* are directly related to the various technical, social, political and figurative meanings of platforms (Gillespie, 2010).

The term *platform* has become a buzzword, making the concept with broad explanatory power a success story in the field of internet studies and beyond (Bogost & Montfort, 2009; Helmond, 2015; Van Es & Schäfer, 2017). In spite of its increasing academic popularity, no consensus exists about the exact definition and meaning of the fuzzy notion nor how it can be best operationalized in internet research. Sociology of science research indicates that the success and wide adoption of buzzwords in academia – such as the feminist theory of intersectionality – can be explained particularly because of their 'ambiguity' and 'open-endedness' (Davis, 2008). In this special issue, the term is mobilized critically to

account for their (re-)production of normative values. The contributions to the issue further conceptualize and empirically study platforms from various scholarly perspectives, showing how platform values are mutually constituted by top-down decisions such as the profit-oriented workings of algorithms that differentially value some users over others and bottom-up user practices that both sustain and subvert value-laden mechanisms.

Attention paid to social media platforms increased significantly after the election and inauguration of Donald J. Trump as the new president of the United States. Coverage and analysis of these events as well as responses from platform owners created greater awareness about a number of issues the internet research community has also been grappling with. Particularly, the algorithmic values of Facebook were questioned by journalists, as they explored whether 'filter bubbles' led to political polarization (Wong, Levin, & Solon, 2016). Facebook CEO and founder Mark Zuckerberg initially belittled the circulation of fake news; instead, he celebrated Facebook's role in the election, allowing people to assert their voice and mobilizing people to vote (Zuckerberg, 2016). However, the company has responded to accusations, although Facebook representatives claim that they 'cannot become arbiters of truth ourselves', they have enabled users to report 'Fake news' (Facebook, 2016) and it has made changes to its 'Trending topics' feature so that it would no longer be personalized; this move may present users with a greater diversity of perspectives (Nieva, 2017).

More broadly, this process raises many questions about platform values, including:

- Questions about ethics and the political economy of platforms. Platforms are algorithmically biased towards sameness; can they be asked to algorithmically foster encounters with diversity?
- Questions about filter bubbles and audience segmentation, which may be racialized, classed, gendered and/or biased along intersecting power hierarchies of nationality, religion or generation.
- Questions about labour: a profitable industry has emerged around publishing 'clickbait' and 'fake news', do platforms have an ethical position? Are they a mere channel or can they be held accountable for published content?
- Questions about curation: Facebook is putting into place new policies to verify content (Facebook, 2016), what can they learn from platforms such as Wikipedia that have historically built in community-centred content curation?

Internet researchers should continue contributing to this unfolding debate, and this special issue shows how social justice-oriented interventions successfully draw and contest the construction of values through/on platforms.

More specifically, the special issue provides a primer on platform values. The articles in this collection will introduce the readers to the intricacies of platform values with keywords including 'platform architectures' (Van Doorn, p. 910), 'platform churn' (Van Doorn, p. 904), 'platform curation of content' (Matamoros-Fernández, p. 931) 'platform cooperativism' (Van Doorn, p. 910), 'digital inclusion' (Davies, Eynon & Wilkins, p. 861) & 'platform economy' (Duffy & Pruchniewska, p. 845), 'platform governance' (Matamoros-Fernández, p. 930), 'platform intermediaries and clients' (Van Doorn, p. 898), 'platform labour' (Van Doorn, p. 899; Duffy & Pruchniewska, p. 845), 'platform memes' (Katz & Shifman,

p. 830); 'monitoring platform' (Maiers, p. 918), 'platform non-participation' (Lutz & Hoffman, p. 879), 'politics of collaborative knowledge production' (Kumar, p. 812), 'platforms' self-representation' (Matamoros-Fernández, p. 930) 'platformed racism' (Matamoros-Fernández, p. 931), 'platform strategies' (Van Doorn, p. 902), and 'platform-mediated work arrangements' (Van Doorn, p. 909).

The eight articles included in this special issue were first peer reviewed prior to the conference by the larger community of AoIR scholars and researchers. Building from the conference review process, the special issue editors, together with the president of the association and the conference programme chair, made a selection of exceptional and provocative papers to consider for the special issue. Authors were invited to submit full papers, and after a double-blind peer-review process and multiple rounds of revisions, we are happy to present these eight articles of exceptional internet research:

In the first article, Sangeet Kumar considers platform values from the perspective of community content curation. He shows that Wikipedia's platform values that are visible from rules, policies, guidelines and procedures contrast starkly with everyday user practices. Rather than showcasing apolitical global representation, egalitarianism, neutrality and the merits of argumentation, collaborative knowledge production reproduces hierarchical geopolitical power relations. The edit-war about the naming of Wikipedia's English-language page on the Indian river Ganga/Ganges makes apparent the Eurocentric universalism of the platform, which revolves around a postcolonial politics of knowledge production.

In 'Making Sense? The Structure and Meanings of Digital Memetic Nonsense', Yuval Katz and Limor Shifman introduce what the authors call 'digital memetic nonsense', clusters of seemingly meaningless digital texts imitated and circulated online. Based on a systematic analysis of 139 nonsensical memes, they identified 5 rough categories of digital nonsense: linguistic silliness, embodied silliness, pastiche, dislocations and interruptions. The authors engage in a helpful comparison of nonsense in the pre-digital and digital ages, and conclude by problematizing the supposedly dichotomous split between the 'playful' versus 'subversive' uses of nonsense. Their integrative analysis of the various categories of memetic nonsense led to conclusions about the shift in the meaning of contemporary forms of nonsense from an exploration of the *effects* of digital nonsense to an execution of *affect* among community members sharing and experiencing the nonsensical content.

In 'Gender and Self-Enterprise in the Social Media Age: A Digital Double Bind', Brooke Duffy and Urszula Pruchniewska track the discourses of entrepreneurialism in the digital media economy, and provide new insights into the ways that gender works to shape the behaviours of female entrepreneurs in this domain. Through a qualitative study of female small business owners and their use of social media, Duffy and Pruchniewska utilize a feminist approach to critically interrogate discourses of digital entrepreneurialism. Their central finding is that female entrepreneurs are in a 'digital double bind': they simultaneously find themselves required to self-promote, but only in such a way deemed acceptable within the constraints of normative feminine behaviour. As a result, the self-promotion strategies used by these women are located within spheres that are relational, emotional and home-based, suggesting that lingering gender norms still play a prominent role in the lived experiences of female digital entrepreneurs.

In the fourth contribution, titled 'Neoliberal Gremlins? How a Scheme to Help Disadvantaged Young People Thrive Online Fell Short of its Promises', Huw Davies, Rebecca

Eynon and Sarah Wilkin question the values of a UK government anti-digital inequality scheme. Grounded in their work with disadvantaged young people in educational settings, they offer rich ethnographic insights to counter the dominant neoliberal equation of digital technology with socio-economic progress. Discussing the many obstacles faced by those expected to find ways to 'thrive online', they argue that the global network society is value-laden, reflecting 'a choice, a choice made by some and working in the interest of some' (Biesta, 2013, p. 734).

In 'The Dark Side of Online Participation: Exploring Non-, Passive and Negative Participation', Christoph Lutz and Christian Hoffmann question values around digital divides scholarship by drawing on the terminology and user experiences of 96 German Internet users. They demonstrate that greater awareness of agency and valence in certain forms of non-participation is necessary to think more constructively about 'the dark side' of political and non-political online participation. The sixth article by Niels Van Doorn is a position paper about the exploitation of low-income service work and contributes to the areas of digital labour studies and platform studies. The article is a call to action, inviting internet researchers to expose the values of 'platform labor' by taking an ethnographic, intersectional approach: 'its primary intention is to advocate an intersectional approach to the study of "on-demand" and "gig" economies, highlighting the ways in which these economies are historically constituted by class, racial, and gender inequalities' (p. 900)

Claire Maiers, in the seventh article, describes how medical professionals negotiate the values of predictive algorithms. She presents an ethnographic study of how clinicians engage with predictive analytical data in Neonatal Intensive Care Units. Observing 'conditioned' and 'cumulative' data reading practices, she wonders about the epistemological implications of the ongoing turn towards precision medicine based on quantified metrics. What happens, she wonders, when experiential knowledge, in this case consisting for example of years of hands-on caring for infants, is overruled by efficiency-driven predictive analytics? In the final article, Ariadna Matamoros-Fernandez explores 'platformed racism', a new form of racism emerging from platform architectures, settings, business models and terms-of-service (TOS) agreements as well as user cultures. Drawing on digital methods, the mediation of racism on social media of the Indigenous Adam Goodes Australian Football League is unpacked. Findings indicate platforms serve as amplifiers of detrimental content; while 'modes of platform governance' (p. 930) can both serve to reproduce but may also address inequalities. In sum, we are confident that these eight articles offer us various entry points to gain a better understanding of platform values and offer ways to trump their top-down and bottom-up (re)production of inequalities.

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Disclosure statement

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