

The Structures of Hyperspatial Politics

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Sites of content production in Web 2.0 are strategic assets which make up the terrain of political conflict in hyperspace.

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The Structures of Hyperspatial Politics

My one thought is that sites of content production in Web 2.0 are strategic assets which make up the terrain of political conflict in hyperspace. I call this ‘hyperspatial politics’ in an attempt to revive a discourse which embraces the Internet as something radically *new*. The claim that we are “post-internet” has always frustrated me – this idea that Internet-anywhere mobile devices have somehow made hyper- and meat-space indistinguishable. After all, we are well-familiar with the rules of meatspace, in the sense that we understand the physical laws that ground our actions within it, but when it comes to the structures of hyperspace we are still unsteady.

Our lack of familiarity, 10 years on into Web 2.0, is undoubtedly due to the pace of change in hyperspace. Think of how a platform update can sometimes break sociality itself. When the subtleties of new features or new privacy settings are lost on a userbase, it must still stumble and fumble forward through the chaos. At the same time, this rapid iteration is only possible due to the radical contingency of hyperspace; there are no natural limits as to how material is to be ordered. Unlike physics, platforms can have different rulesets relative to each other and also to themselves.

It is the study of these rulesets and their exploitations that I am proposing as necessary to an effective hyperspatial politics. The strategic and tactical analyses of hyperspace have thus far been limited to the strictly-technical sphere of ‘hacking’ and been developed mostly by state actors engaged in cyberwarfare. I believe it is no longer just firewalls and malware with which we need to concern ourselves. In this age of “fake news” and “meme magick,” sociality has come to the fore, but this time it has its own terrain to fight on.

I want to make two main thrusts, beginning with the character of social media platforms as strategic, ideologically-productive assets and then turn to social media platforms as sites of tactical engagements with structure. After that, I’ll self-crit the Left a bit, giving my take on why netizens have moved so far right.

Meme Machines

At the core of my argument is Conway’s law:

“Organizations which design systems are constrained to produce designs which are copies of the communication structures of these organizations.”^[1]

The claim is that the structure of the team designing some software will impact the user experience of that software. This is the result of the distribution of the software’s creators, who will naturally produce more modular software when communication is less frequent. I think it is useful to move past the focus on programmers and software toward design and user-generated content. Conway’s Law implies that, insofar as they set the relations of users, platforms are constrained to produce content which reflect the organizational methods of these platforms. Perhaps ‘user-generated’ has been the wrong word all along.

4chan

An easy platform with which to illustrate the effect of structure on production is 4chan, as its method of sorting content has had historically important effects on the lexicon of its users and their method of political organization.

4chan is divided into predefined boards on different topics. Each board represents a list of a finite number of threads, say 100, that house replying posts. Threads are “sorted by newest,” which is to say that each time a thread is created or replied to, it is put at the top of the list. Active threads are thus continually bumped to the top. When threads do not receive replies, they eventually exceed the maximum position in the list, 101, and are deleted. This sorting method creates a kind of snowballing of attention, whereby threads which are bumped to the top become more visible and thus more likely to receive another bump. Convicted LulzSec spokesman, Topiary, once explained 4chan’s persistent obscenity by way of this organizational form: “it’s whoever posts the best content, fleeting at the time, that [gets replies]. So it’s whoever posts the most shocking content, that stays [visible] for the longest.”

Matthew Baggetta, an Internet theorist based in Canada, describes communication on 4chan as being in an “anonymous-mode,”^[2] which is to say in the condition and practice of meaning-making given an ephemeral and anonymous environment. Identity in this mode, where “any meaningful characteristics differentiating one author-user from another remain mostly hidden,” is established in a user’s affective productions. Because there are no platform-defined indicators of reputation, each post must signal the user’s identity, from the image posted to word choice and grammatical stylings to the subject of the post itself. This anonymous-mode seems to increase the rate of activity on 4chan. On other platforms one can

Like or Repost without ever actually producing. On 4chan, however, if one does not post one does not exist.

These two components – the exponential attention-curve[3] favoring fringe content and need to act of the anonymous-mode – set the conditions for the anarcho-hacktivist collective Anonymous. Anonymous' operations were often proposed in threads on the /b/ board. As Anonymous was a brand without a defined membership, such proposals would have to properly signal affiliation through memetic literacy while still drawing attention through vulgarity or wit to achieve a critical mass of views. When successful, users would reroute that attention to an IRC chatroom to plan the details of the action. It was like a Darwinism for activist projects where only the most hip-to-it and engaging came to fruition, with no limit on how many could be tested for fit each day.

One must remember, however, that 4chan has swung to the far-right in recent years. It was a hotbed for alt-right organizing in the 2016 US presidential election, with users forming adhoc working groups in much the same way. Operations included the engineering of memetic propaganda, for example the widely spread

Clinton-Byrd photo or the less successful text-to-vote disinfo campaigns, perpetual brigades of social media profiles belonging to liberal pundits and so-called cuckservatives, the creation of sockpuppet accounts to spam social media, and tactical spread of fake-news talking points.

There has been a lot of discussion over whether or not Trump's effective capture of social media, largely driven by the alt-right, played an important role in the 2016 election. Essentially: is the social web, hyperspace, hegemonic? The question seems to me irrelevant. Bar global catastrophe, the Internet's role in establishing political consensus will continue to grow. Instead, the question is this: does 4chan's structure breed not leftist organizing, but an activist populism? If so, does it not make the platform an important meme-machine to occupy?

Reddit

I will now discuss Reddit and the effect of a simple change in its structure on its userbase's political organization before moving into a discussion of tactical engagements with hyperspatial structures.

Reddit allows users to create their own communities called subreddits. Content is sorted within subreddits by an algorithm that looks at the number of votes a post receives over the number of minutes since it was posted, ranking each post in a numbered list accordingly. New posts start somewhere in the middle of the list, moving to the top as users “upvote” them. As posts age, they drift down the list into functional obscurity. Users can view individual subreddits, but they may also subscribe to subreddits to add them to a personalized Reddit feed which is also governed by this algorithm.

With the slogan, “powered by community, democracy, and you,” Reddit embraces, at the level of design, a certain democratic libertarianism; it determines the visibility of content not by any blackboxed, centralized apparatus like Facebook’s unified News Feed, but through the voting practices of its subcommunities. Disillusionment with one subreddit, perhaps caused by the perception of low-quality content or the experience of social frictions, has been traditionally overcome by the creation of a new subreddit on a topic. If a user doesn’t like a community and the way it organizes content, they are free to leave and make their own. This is evidenced in a subreddit naming pattern that has emerged, “/r/reddit, /r/truerreddit, /r/truetruerreddit,” as well as population shifts from boards like /r/marijuana to the euphemism /r/trees in response to community drama.

Reddit’s users have long been fervent supporters of the right-wing libertarian senator Ron Paul. Paul holds radically isolationist and anti-government positions, especially the federal government which he believes should play almost no role in the administration of the United States. The Paul ‘08 campaign peaked on Reddit during the primary process, with as many average daily submissions as then-Senator Barack Obama; surprising, in so far as Obama has been touted as the first social media candidate. Support had not dwindled by his 2012 presidential campaign, when Paul was mentioned in submissions more often than the incumbent.

In 2016, however, there was a massive shift of support to Bernie Sanders, a democratic socialist, maybe what you would call a left-libertarian. Reddit accounted for more than 5% of his total fundraising contributors, raising \$2.7m, with /r/SandersforPresident reaching 250,000 subscribers during his candidacy. I believe Reddit’s change of political orientation is directly attributable to the rise of a reddit feature called /r/all, essentially a shared space which combined content from all the different subreddits using the same votes-over-time sorting algorithm. In 2014 Reddit began having problems with racist and misogynist “hate subreddits” and would frequently see atrocious content reaching the top of this shared list. As well, the increased cross-community visibility led to “brigades,” with users of some subreddits

raiding other communities not only with their votes, but by leaking personal information of prominent users and engaging in standard online harassment tactics. The intervention of Reddit's administrative staff became more and more frequent to fend off the attacks, with communities and users being banned and new rules put in place to stop the harassment. It seems natural to me that once users in a hyper-libertarian community become exposed to the need for a central governing body that their political views might shift accordingly.

Economics

We can look at other examples of Conway's Law in action, especially in relation to the way the structure of platforms shapes the way users monetize them.

Youtube and Instagram, for example, are both profile based, meaning users can build reputations by increasing subscriber counts. They are visual platforms, opening the door for product placement. Combine the two and you get a rash of undeclared affiliate advertising – users promoting products without disclosure – so popular on these platforms that the FCC had to release a clarification of its rules: yes, they do apply to the Internet.

Similarly, Facebook found itself vulnerable to fake news during the 2016 campaign because, unlike Google, it does not check for “duplicate content” in links posted to users' feeds. Early fake news took the form of clickbait articles constructed piecemeal from other sources and posted to so-called “dumpster fire” blogs stuffed with advertisements. It was an economics game: constructing Frankenstein articles made from the most salacious bits of mainstream news articles lowers overhead, you don't need to pay a writer; when paired with an enticing headline and spammed across Facebook, the Likes and Shares would bring in thousands of views for massive profits. The Macedonians who pioneered this tactic reported making thousands of dollars a day.^[4] On Google, however, this content was mostly filtered out of search results because that platform actually checks to see if you've ripped off your content from other sources. Conway's Law can be used as a method of critique of almost any platform or userbase. I like to think of it as a possible avenue for critical anthropology to move online, now that 90s netzkritik ('net criticism') has mostly died down. More quantitative research is being done by people like Tarleton Gillespie who uses the term “the politics of platforms” to describe the political effects of

platforms inherent to their structures. For the most part, however, open source quantitative tools are far and few between.

Tactics

While I have thus far attributed the activity and constitution of social media userbases to the structure of platforms, the rise of the pro-Trump subreddit `/r/the_donald` during the 2016 campaign serves as an example of how platforms are not just strategic assets but also landscapes of tactical engagement.

In February 2016, `/r/SandersforPresident` was a year-old community with firm control of reddit. They had 190,000 subscribers and reached the front page of `/r/all` dozens of times a day. `/r/the_donald` was a small community of 20,000 subscribers with little presence on `/r/all`. Then something changed. `/r/the_donald` began to hit the frontpage every day, multiple times a day. This exposure led to the rapid growth of the subreddit, reaching 200,000 subscribers by mid summer, with an increasing frontpage presence along the way: sometimes they would have 30 posts in the top 100.

It turned out that the subreddit was abusing a reddit feature called the ‘sticky.’ Posts can be pinned to the top of an individual subreddit by its moderation staff. While most new posts of an active subreddit must be upvoted by users looking specifically at new posts, a sort which is used less often than the default of votes-over-time, stickied posts are visible right at the top. `/r/the_donald` had figured out that by stickying a brand new post, it would immediately receive upvotes. Since Reddit’s sorting algorithm is based on a metric of votes over time, these posts would rapidly reach the frontpage, even if they were downvoted into oblivion once they reached it. As soon as a post reached the top, the stickied post was swapped out for a new one.

This tactic allowed `/r/the_donald` to punch above its weight, seizing control of the platform from the Sanders subreddit that vastly outnumbered it. A feedback loop occurred: as the visibility of their posts led to more subscribers who could then push more content to the frontpage faster. The reddit admin staff attempted to preserve it’s adherence to neutrality, seeking a unitary sorting algorithm that could govern `/r/all`. After three changes to this algorithm did nothing to stop `/r/the_donald`, the Reddit staff prevented stickied posts from that subreddit from appearing on `/r/all`, giving it a privileged position in the platform’s physical laws.

While this is the only instance of platform capture that I know of – reddit is now often referred to as one of the major centers of alt-right organizing – there are other examples of the tactical abuse of structure. GamerGaters use archive.org webcaches to view opposition media in order to deny them ads revenue. Trump supporters used a popular Sanders phonebanking platform, BerniePB, to pull independents toward Trump – the platform lacked any kind of verification that users did indeed support Sanders. White supremacists surrounded the names of jews with six parenthesis, so-called “echo brackets,” allowing other users to easily search for and harass them. Or, for an older example, 4chan fighting the introduction of reCAPTCHA by replacing the unknown word with racial slurs, thus poisoning Google’s optical character recognition algorithm.

At the beginning of GamerGate, there were 12 articles released about how the identity of the “gamer” was dead – they proclaimed that everyone is a gamer. While that may be true, it seems to me that hardcore gamers have simply switched from video games to hyperspatial politics. It’s just the same as speedrunning: there are rulesets that can be bent and broken in the service of achieving a win condition.

In a postmortem of the first MMORPG, Habitat, the designers noted a distinction between what they called the percipient layer – the world that users see via User Interfaces – and the implementation layer – the actual codeworks which undergird it.^[5] They said you can never trust a user to stick to the percipient layer. It’s sort of a Matrix thing – “there is no spoon” – and we should not be surprised that these same gamers now refer to understanding human behavior as having consistent rules which can be abused “taking the red pill.” It’s gross that they have set sexual conquest as the win condition, but it’s entirely consistent with their hyperspatial upbringing.

Self-Crit

So here’s the Left self-crit:

In 2012, a Canadian man named Gregory Alan Elliott was charged with harassment over the Twitter platform. He had gotten in a months-long flame war with several local feminist activists. After he posted a number of times in a hashtag they were using for an event, they feared he might harm them and reported Elliott to the police. The case centered around the proper use of Twitter, over whether hashtags can be considered public spaces or not. In lieu of any threats or sexual harassment, the judge ruled that limiting the use of the Twitter platform would not be consistent with a “free and democratic society.”

Essentially, the ruleset was the ruleset and it was not his job to moderate its use; that lay with the platform owners.

The Left was rightly upset: there are social norms online and Elliott had violated them. No one likes it when someone likes a 9-month-old bathing suit selfie. The Left then began a campaign to lobby major platforms to enforce stricter codes of conduct, a hot topic given the rising presence of hate speech online. To the netizen community which has long understood code to be the limits of freedom, this move was incommensurate with their ideology. Over time, the accumulation of highly-publicized dramas like Elliott's pushed the once-anarcho-libertarians to the Right, seeking old alliances with pro-market, far-right politicians, just as they had in the 1990s through publications like WIRED when the Clinton administration sought to limit online speech.^[6] Given what I understand to be a netizen nativity to tactical hyperspatial engagement, I think this was a strategic error of the Left.

Undoubtedly we would all like to see less hate speech online. However, increasing the centralization of power over speech in for-profit platforms cannot be our only move. It is incommensurate with their left-libertarianism and denies us valuable allies. I think we pushed the netizens far-right, and now we're in Trumpland. Or maybe that's how it went, I can't be sure. But I do know that if we want to win them back, it will require looking beyond quick fixes. The netizen faction of the alt-right is already having a crisis of conscience over Trump's attempts to eliminate net neutrality. Now is the time to offer an olive branch, proposing the construction of hyperspaces in which we all want to live and work and play. It is up to us to define hyperspatial structures which propagate the ideologies that we want to see in the world.

A Note from 2021

A lot has changed since 2017, particularly netizens' relation to the far-right. As in the 1990s, their alliance-of-convenience did more to hurt the free and open Internet than to protect it. Perhaps as a result, the Redecentralize The Web (Web3) movement has increasingly turned from politically-agnostic development based on 'trustless' cryptography toward the recognition that even on distributed, blockchain-driven platforms, the governance question still remains. From the popularization of Mastodon to the construction of robust distributed democracies like Aether to the start of development on a Web 'governance layer' by big-name university Media Labs, I have a lot of hope for Web3.

At the same time, it seems that, in terms of mass-politics, only the far-right remains convinced of the value of social platforms as strategic assets. During Trump's exit from office, 'free-speech' social platforms (and poor facimiles thereof) began to appear en masse, seeking seed populations of QAnoners and anti-vaxxers who were being blocked from the dominant social platforms. This intuition has only been kept from realization by absolute incompetence, from massive data-leaks to 'social platforms' that lacked any capacities for uploading user-generated content. The Left remains, for the most part, focused on the need for more authoritarian content moderation schemes and perhaps how little the Zucc pays in taxes.

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