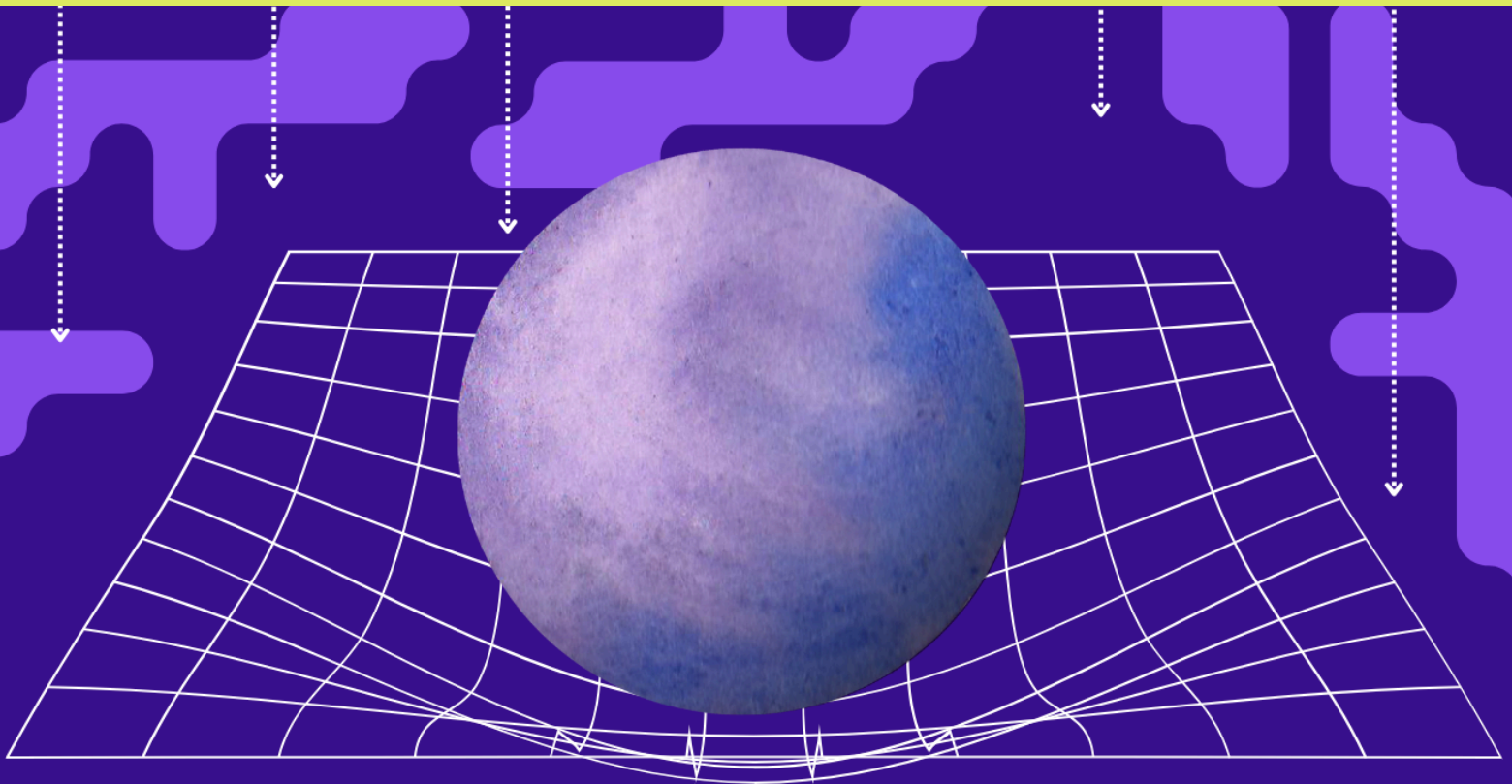# FIVE THESES ON THE GRAVITY OF PLATFORMS

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# FIVE THESES: PROLOGUE

Platforms are everywhere. The ubiquity of the word is both a sign of the digital's interpenetration into everyday life, and a metaphor that can provoke weary acceptance and eye-rolls (what are those damn platform companies up to now?!) Thus, the platform occupies both empirical and conceptual registers. It seems to assemble capabilities, users, and interests and thereby set new futures in motion. Though both the network and the platform are metaphors for forms of electronic commerce and connectivity, they are valued differently. If the value of the network is calculated by its size and reach, the strength of the platform is calculated differently. The platform isn't about its extension, *but rather its gravity*: the degree to which it can pull in and provoke actors to engender social, political, economic, and ethical transformations.

Over the past decade, platforms have garnered centrality in fields as disparate as economics, management, media and communication studies, anthropology, sociology, science and technology studies, to name but a few.[1] At the same time, disciplines like computer science have also been influential in this field without depending on the term.

What kinds of habits of mind or intellectual dispositions are needed to say something useful about platforms today? This is a ripe and urgent moment for precisely this kind of critique, for as A.I., the platform whose weight sucks so many things into its orbit, scales so tremendously it exceeds our capacity to address it using older methods and metaphors. The digital network gave rise to its own periodization–the Age of Networks (Sampson)–its own political economy–The Wealth of Networks (Benkler)–its own science and methodology–Network Science (Barabási)–and even its own theory of society (Castells).[2]

We are an eclectic set of scholars who came together at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Spring of 2024 to consider this question and playfully experiment with

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[1]    For a smattering of review pieces see: Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin, 2020; Matassi & Boczkowski, 2021, 2023; Rahman, Karunakaran and Cameron, 2024.

[2]    Sampson, T. D. (2012). *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*. University of Minnesota Press. https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816670048.001.0001. Benkler, Y. (2006). *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. Yale University Press.
Barabási, A. L. (2016). *Network Science*. Cambridge University Press. https://networksciencebook.com/.
Castells, M. (2010). *The Rise of the Network Society*. Wiley-Blackwell. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9781444319514.

what a Platform School might look like.[3] The IAS was a place built for experiments, for the contemplation of Natural and Mathematical Sciences, with both Seriousness Of Purpose, and a call (as it says on the marked bench as though Einstein and assorted Great Men sat there) to follow the will-o'-the-wisps from within, those most gentle ideas that flutter away when pursued too closely. If the atomic bomb, or rather, the effort to redeem knowledge after its creation, animated this place when Oppenheimer was appointed its longest serving Director, is a benchmark that lingers in the air and the bones of this place, how might we use this platform to sit with the intellectual challenge of the Platform?



The Benchmark: "Those who have moved the world have usually been those who have followed the will–o'–the–wisp of their own intellectual and spiritual curiosity" – Abraham Flexner, first director (1930–1939), photo credit: Marc Aidinoff

Platforms are physical, ideational, and political objects that exert force, uphold arrangements, and behave as bodies determining time and space. We propose a physical theory of the platform as a gravitational force because we can then imagine the platform as a boundary object where a new social theory can be brought to bear, based on the willingness to experiment with new logics and forms of language. This is not the only way to think with the platform as a socio-technical formation, but at least it is a different way. Platforms have been studied as economic systems, as care delivery apparatuses, as spaces for temporary labor that has become permanent, and as political message delivery vehicles for some time. They are all of these things, indeed, that is why they are so weighty.

**3**     See the Laboria Cuboniks collective's Xenofeminist Manifesto for an inspiring example:
Cuboniks, L. (n.d.). *Xenofeminism: a Politics for Alienation | Laboria Cuboniks*. https://laboriacuboniks.net/manifesto/xenofeminism–a–politics–for–alienation/.

What is it about platforms that make them "the thing"? And why is it so hard to talk about? What's gravely needed in our scholarship and research that is lacking now? How can we exploit the affinities and frictions between our areas of local expertise to understand the platform's gravity and gravitas today?

Platforms traffic in metaphors shared with the language of flows, i.e. capital, users, innovation.[4] Keeping this multiplicity and proliferation in mind, the force that platforms exert has less to do with the traffic of flows, and more with the opposite, the solidity and weight of the cathedral of the 21st century. (In 1999 digital media theorist Lev Manovich asserted that the Hollywood Film, think Jurassic Park, was the medieval cathedral of the 20th century because of the vast and heterogenous forms of human and computational labor and creativity that were needed to produce it.) Even smaller platforms like Rover, the dog walking service, dwarf films like Jurassic Park. Fold in the bigger public and private platforms, like India's citizen database Aadhaar, along with Amazon and Google, the gravity of the platform becomes clear. The term "platform" has become a term of art among scientists and virologists as well, who refer to vaccines as platforms to be revised, shared, bought, and sold.

In awe and anger at the gravity of platforms we propose five theses. In a separate opinion piece co-authored by our Platform School group entitled "The Platform Polycrisis," we argue that the gravity of our situation requires major capital investments in research and theorizing, at the scale of the International Space Station and the Frankfurt school. Respecting gravity, we make forceful propositions. Respecting gravity, we also expect to fall. These theses build from a generation of platform scholarship, much of which we cite here. We synthesize these to ground our five calls to pay attention to platforms' laws of attraction and repulsion.

4    Llamas-Rodriguez, J. (2022). *The Tunneling Metaphor in Networked Technologies. Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 8(2). https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v8i2.37276.

# YOU WILL BE PULLED BY PLATFORMS, AND YOU WILL PUSH.

Platforms exert a sometimes irresistible pull over users. Like other massive bodies, the larger they are, the more sheer mass they gather up in the form of our and others' data, global participation, and ubiquity across devices, (what doesn't have voice recognition, search, and GPS onboard anymore?) the more effectively they incorporate you and me into their orbit. Their 'micro-physics' penetrate across all the tiny, mundane everyday forms of life and intimate spaces, playing upon and intensifying our most basic desires.

Platforms are ***socially symptomatic***, and we propose that they be read that way: OnlyFans, the pornography delivery video platform, pulled in millions of users during the isolation of COVID-19. This sheds as much light upon the pandemic and its impact upon intimacy and touch as it does upon digital commerce and innovation. Why would we study disease and vaccines without studying the ways that platforms pull people in to address what they engender?

Our scholarship on platforms begins with that feeling. What is the feeling of being pulled in by the platform? As Tressie McMillan Cottom writes, of being included in predatory ways that often feel good but aren't good?[5] When we realize that we must engage with an apparatus that is invisible, whose rules change frequently, and whose ownership is both arbitrary and despotic, without accountability or real agency? What is the sensation that comes along with being pushed out by it? When we don't have the device or the system that lets us do what everyone else is doing–find work, laugh at content, or have a political voice.

What positions of relation are available for us and others that both acknowledge the platform's force and use it as an occasion for discerning who has the most and least degrees of freedom in its orbit? Again, this is a way in which the social theory of platform gravity is really the study of physical and symbolic relations, and the ways that their force fields illuminate the social through its symptoms. It is not possible to exist outside platform relations; as theorist Achille Mbembe writes, theirs is a

**5**   Cottom, T. M. (2020). *Where Platform Capitalism and Racial Capitalism Meet: The Sociology of Race and Racism in the Digital Society. Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 6(4), 441–449. https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649220949473.

planetary logic.[6] All politics have to be planetary politics now as worlds heat up, partly as a result of data platforms, and our futures have become entwined around them.[7] And platform politics are terrifyingly local–the platform is here, in my home, taken with you to bed, turned off (perhaps) for sleeping.

Even the term to "push back" assumes a more solid body than ours that can always resist the force we exert against it. The act of platform resistance or rejection must necessarily orient itself *around* the platform, which behaves like a solid mass that supports our reactions. Being engulfed by the infinite scroll-feed that platforms produce can feel like falling into a hole meant for a rabbit, not for a person. The sensation of security, of being held, by the platform that never goes down, hits differently for its creators of scale. Women of color enable scale to take place. They make it feel solid by providing the brute labor that means that if it goes down, we never feel it, and they are the precondition for the platform's gravity. To forget this is to forget how planets are made.

The Kenyan and Nigerian and Phillipine women whose hands and eyes clean the mass of textual and visual data that provide the volume that platforms like A.I. need to run and achieve critical mass are part of the platform's smallest and least free orbit.[8] They have the least degree of freedom in relation to it just as they are themselves part of what gives a platform weight, that is to say, to heft that enables greater degrees of freedom for minority world users like us. Again, seeing this about A.I.'s platforms like ChatGPT, Midjourney, Dall-E and others is part of a theory of the *platform as social symptom*. Rather than assuming that new technologies will produce different and more equal forms of social hierarchy and relation as many of the network theorists did, our theory of platform concedes that platforms are gravitic fields whose shifting constellations and dynamic forms as objects enter and exit, grow weightier and closer or smaller and more distant, and that to look at them this way is to see specific systems of social relations like racial capitalism writ both large and small.

**6**   Mbembe, A. (2021). Futures of Life and Futures of Reason. *Public Culture* 33 (1 (93)): 11–33. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-8742136.

**7**   Wainwright, J., & Mann, G. (2018). *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*. Verso. See also Planetarypraxis.org for a critical social science take on smart forests, political ecology, A.I. and environmental risk, etc.

**8**   The instances of PTSD and disabling trauma acknowledged by the firms that broker their labor to Meta, OpenAI, and others are the price of scale and of platform. Abuya, K. (2023, September 7). Sama Hires 2,100 Kenyans for AI Work. *TechCabal* (blog). https://techcabal.com/2023/09/07/sama-to-hire-2100-kenyans-for-ai-work/.

# REMEMBERING PLUTO AND THE SITUATIONAL PULL OF THE FIRST PLATFORMS.

I will never get over the day I learned that Pluto was no longer considered a planet. It was too small, exerted too little mass, and had thus been demoted to the status of something much smaller: a dwarf planet. Who and what are less perceptible, but are still part of the platform's orbit, are constitutive of it, or at least our idea of it, and must be disavowed? Who benefits from this reorganization?

For example, did you know that the social network "friend," or profile that can build a persistent and public link to another profile on a social network, was prototyped by a collective of young Asian Americans? In 1997 Merrill Lynch investment banker Ben Sun launched a new social networking service for Asian Americans with his friends out of his Wall Street apartment. He realized having worked to finance early dot.com companies that there was a great opportunity to bring together users who were not being served by internet service provider platforms like AOL. By 2000, AsianAvenue had over 2 million users, and was the model for Omar Wasow's social network for black users, BlackPlanet, which by April of 2002 had 5.3 million users. Sun created a parent network aggregator company for these new platforms, Community Connect, which expanded to include MiGente, a social network for Latinx users.

By 2008, Sun's Community Connect was one of the top three social networking sites based on advertising sales. Importantly, Sun launched the company with $300,000 in seed funding that he and his partners raised from their friends and family. Thus, the world's first large social network platform was both non-white and was funded by a "kye," a Korean term that describes a form of investing where members contribute to a group fund, knowing that they will each get their turn at an interest-free loan. Asian entrepreneurs in the U.S. and elsewhere have long relied on each other to fund businesses, knowing that as racialized and sometimes not-legally-documented immigrants they were not attractive borrowers to American banks, and that they could not afford its interest rates. "Bootstrapping" Asian Avenue through financing that emerged as a result of institutional racism allowed Sun to be independent and nimble, making the sometimes risky decisions that benefited the company while keeping him accountable to his community.

This is a very different story of platform innovation, eclipsed by the trajectories of big white personalities like Mark Zuckerberg, Tom Anderson, Sergei Brin and Larry Page, and others. As Charlton McIlwain has written, black entrepreneurs and early tech workers were deeply involved in developing computer culture in the 70's and beyond.[9] Like Pluto, AsianAvenue and its sister Latinx and Black social networks were once undoubtedly part of the constellation of platforms–the social network– that would come to signify what a platform is. It has since become obscure(d) despite its role in creating the ruling logics of social media networks.[10] In answer to our earlier question--who must be disavowed from platform history's reorganization, and who benefits?

Just as Pluto is no longer defined as a planet because it orbits around a different star than Earth, so too are some platforms viewed as "dwarves," or as minor, because of their differing orbits.[11] Asia, specifically India and China, constitutes by far the biggest mass in platform culture, yet does not appear in much scholarly writing about platforms, even though they are always inside platforms (the majority of semiconductors are made in Taiwan by TSMC, a company founded by Chinese Taiwanese engineers trained after the war at National Taiwan University, and later sent to American universities like our neighbor down the road, Princeton, on a charter flight[12].) Platform studies and our fields suffer from this exclusion, while U.S. empire benefits from this arrangement that centers venture capital (with the emphasis on capital), versus the state or other national projects like TSMC.[13]

**9**  McIlwain, C. D. (2019). *Black Software: The Internet & Racial Justice, from the AfroNet to Black Lives Matter*. Oxford University Press.

**10**  This is also the case with e-commerce platforms; the Latin American platform Mercado Libre was launched in 1999 and though its market capitalization is $76 billion it often goes unmentioned as a key progenitor in the history of digital retail.

**11**  Pluto's "historical downgrade" is observed every August 24th by the international scientific community as "Pluto Demoted Day." Bittel, J. (2022, February 19). Ever Wondered Why Pluto Is No Longer a Planet? *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/kidspost/pluto-not-a-planet/2021/08/23/ae8fd57c-fbb8-11eb-8a67-f14cd1d28e47_story.html.

**12**  As physicist and chief TSCM engineer Shang-Yi Chiang remembers it, there were so few flights to the U.S. from Taiwan in 1969 that he and his 18 classmates had to fly together on a small plane.

**13**  See work by Kapila, Weigel, etc.

# STILL MAKE SOCIAL THEORIES ABOUT PUBLICS, EVEN WITHOUT CODE.

You will be many more, and you will tip into a crowd.[14] But what will draw you together might be the weakest of attractions—emotional spectacles that dazzle then dissipate beneath the threshold of the scrollbar. For platforms to do more than conjure clickbaited coteries of opinion requires caring about and for the means and mechanics of intra-action, the affective forces through which publics can arise.[15]

A public, as Noortje Marres puts it, "comes about when actors are implicated in a particular distribution of problematic effects"[16], and this implication cannot be managed through existing institutional arrangements or administrative procedures. Publics coalesce around particular 'issues', brought together by the interests they hold in common— "all those," according to Dewey, "who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions, to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for."[17] Those 'matters of concern' are articulated through local values and intimate investments that can be alternatively, and all at once, economic, normative, and vital.

Since the turn of the 21st century, platforms have increasingly become the primary instrument for the articulation of such 'matters of concern'—an arena for political contestation and provocation. Social networks like Facebook and (formerly) Twitter

14   Granovetter (1978), Threshold Models of Collective Behavior, theorizes models of collective action and behavior and the thresholds through which individuals aggregate and create situations irreducible to individual preferences.

15   Karen Barad suggests intra-action to foreground the ontological relationality of agency—in contrast to 'interaction' which posits discrete and pre-existing phenomena which then relate to each other, intra-action emerges as a dynamism of forces through which 'things' are in constant a state of perennially entangled process of exchange and diffraction (Barad, 2007, p. 141) in Barad, K. M. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke U Press.

16   Marres, N. (2012). The Invention of Material Publics: Returns to American Pragmatism. *Material Participation: Technology, the Environment and Everyday Publics*, (p. 43).

17   Dewey, J. (1927). The Public and Its Problems, 15–16. See also Barry, A. (2021). What is an Environmental Problem? *Theory, Culture & Society*, 38(2), 93–117.

promised dialogic space for issue-formation, the kind of problems that exceed institutional capacity, and generate demand for democratic debate and animate action.[18]

But the political capacities of the digital forum cannot be reduced to the enlargement of democratic discourse. The ease and facility of communication on the internet made it possible for any manner of interest group to form and exchange opinions on the state of the world.  Publics are the product of social imagination—a sense of its community that transcends the space of discourse, which on the seemingly infinite communicative expanse of the internet, Chris Kelty (2005) argued, was necessarily recursive. 'Recursive publics' are imagined not through some shared identity, but rather from the technical and legal work through which collective commitments can be articulated. In other words, where assembly is easy, what comes to matter is the infrastructures of communication and the degree to which speech can be rendered authentic, independent, and meaningful. "Openness" Kelty writes, "is a practice and a concept on which recursiveness depends: If one cannot access and see the software and protocols, if they are not open, this particular public cannot exist."[19]

Twenty years on, the openness Chris Kelty sees nurtured by movements such as Free Software, is becoming harder to come by. Changes in the algorithmic orders on platforms to prioritize monetizable 'interests'–the hegemonic extensions of capital that foreclose the kinds of direct engagement and technical adjustments capable of yielding more *consequential* forms of social imagination.

The platforms themselves have the mass and scale that politicians and political discourse lack. This is precisely why we need to study the gravitational logics of platforms as bodies that attract and repel. Looking at platforms with gravitas, with dignity and care, means being willing to make the solid claims that can exert their own force of agreement, disagreement, or apathy, to resist the postmodern impulse to hedge, temporize, and otherwise dance around "the thing." Accounting for the gravitas shortage in public life requires an account of the platform's affective attractions and its potential to generate the kind of black holes from which no form of light or life can escape.

In the 2000's, researchers who wanted to see platform culture in action could join open source programming production teams like the Debian LINUX open group meetings.[20] Platform production has become much more sequestered and private, therefore, we need to compensate for this by being theoretically more adventuresome, pushy, and big. We need to bring social theory to platforms even if we

**18**  van Dijck, J., & Nieborg, D. B. (2009). Wikinomics and its discontents: A critical analysis of Web 2.0 business manifestos. *New Media & Society*, 11(5), 855–874.

**19**  Kelty, C. (2005). "Geeks, social imaginaries, and recursive publics." *Cultural Anthropology*, 20(2), 185–214.

**20**  Coleman, E. G. (2013). *Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking*. Princeton University Press.

can't get access to source code, to think through people and culture and discourse.

A social theory of the platform derived for these five theses must ground itself in materiality/bodies, not solely tempting abstractions. Firstly we no longer have access to the abstractions (code) that matter. Though we need access to the black box of code, and as researchers we ought to have it, in the meantime, we can think through our bodies and their specific gravities in and with platforms.

# PLATFORMS ARE NOT PHENOMENOLOGICALLY AND EPISTEMOLOGICALLY EQUAL.

Is social connection the same thing as buying vegetables, or hailing a ride? The self-same nature of platform architecture renders these actions, now called "micro-behaviours" to look *as if* they are the same, performing similar things, and making the same kind of intervention in our world. It is our proposition that the inescapable gravitational pull of a social networking platform does not capture the same vital aspect as a medical platform, less still a pornography based one. A research platform that makes possible a techno-scientific breakthrough and a pornography platform that provides access to myriad forms of erotic content may share a similar technological scaffolding. Furthermore, they may render collaborative intellectual labour in pursuit of a new drug and the leisure(ly) pursuit of erotica as phenomenologically equivalent acts (clicks of tabs, screens, informational flows, cloud architecture, etc.). But good social science warns that we pay heed not only to the technological similarities of platforms but more importantly, to the divergent and diverse social forms they bring together and in turn give rise to.

The power of the platform lies in rendering these effects as if they are similar entrapments, incarcerations, transformations. Screens are everywhere and are the universal face and form of platforms. The screens used for accessing healthcare in rural Kenya, for receiving welfare payment in peri-urban India, shopping online in Djakarta, receiving psychotherapeutic counseling in Buenos Aires, and for working via OnlyFans in urban United States may formally look the same, but each of these screens interfaces with different registers of statecraft, market logics, supply chains, labour arrangements, and social inequities.

The ease and the lure of a click mutually constitute each other, though their transformational powers are not the same, or at least they do not flatten subjectivity into a self-same in every instance. Some clicks leach away your money (Amazon), some your inner dispositions (Facebook and Instagram), while others your freedom (Aadhaar).The gravitational force may be experienced similarly in each of these, but the source of the gravity is not at all shared across platforms. These are, to continue the metaphor, gravitational pulls of different planets.

The ability to conceal or flatten these underlying processes and inequities is sometimes called the algorithmic sublime (Ames 2018, Marx 2000, Nye 1994) to capture this power of unknowability and irrationality at work. Their blackboxed power is

beyond calculation and certainly cannot be reverse engineered. Because of this irrational basis to their power, they appear charismatic. The gravitational pull does not appear terrifying, but rather alluring, if inescapable.[21] More and more work is corralled into the gig economy. They draw by force as much as they allure by the charisma they exude, and together these two different forces result in creating a new kind of collective (a "blind following"). This new collective is neither the engaged, dialogic "public" of the public sphere, nor the purified "population" of biopolitics.

**21**   Cameron, L. D. (2022). "Making out" while driving: Relational and efficiency games in the gig economy. *Organization Science*, 33(1), 231–252.

# YOU FANTASIZE ABOUT ESCAPE, AND YET YOU DO NOT SEE THE ONES WHO NEVER JOINED.

The pull of platforms triggers a desire to escape. For with a bit of luck, we realize at some point that we have been captured. We have been captured linguistically, getting used to using "platforms" as a shorthand for all kinds of phenomena and problems that are, in practice, very different. Sex work, statecraft, e-commerce, neighborhoods, supply chains, biometric identification, and medical technologies all become the same because we're getting used to seeing only video games, Uber, Amazon arbitrage, and AstraZeneca's non-replicating viral vector vaccine. We've been captured politically as "platforms" are being taken up by policy-makers and designers looking for interventions into regulating "them." We've been captured economically as funding bodies and foundations are announcing research programs into "platforms" for their (by now) self-reinforcing public relevance. We've been captured socially as our colleagues flock to "platforms" as a focal point for workshops, research themes, and special issues.

Once we've realized that the subject of our thinking has come to occupy the subject position in our thinking, we start to fantasize about escape. Tragically, platforms have been sticky in that they offer a solution for that problem too. Especially economists and political scientists have theorized this issue. One prominent example is Albert O. Hirschmann's essay on *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*.[22] If you don't like a platform, the story goes, consider exit (leaving the platform for another one), voice (raising your concerns to those who operate a platform), or reconsider loyalty (the reasons why you might stick to the platform in spite of everything). The problem is of course that voice ceases to be effective when the platform does not need you, that exit is difficult if there are no alternatives, and that loyalty is not a quality of customers but rather a de facto condition of our participation.

The question, then, is how to challenge, redirect, subvert, and struggle with the pull of platforms without excommunicating ourselves. How to develop and critique a phenomenon without contributing to its pull? One possibility is to foreground the many contradictions, paradoxes, and absurdities that characterize our work. Irony can be a powerful tool, allowing us to work with "contradictions that do not resolve into

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22  Hirschman, A. O. (1970). *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States*. Harvard University Press.

larger wholes."[23] In fact, the very project of studying platforms without taking them for granted requires an ironic stance. So why not learn from those who have worked with irony on conventions of genre or citation metrics.[24]

Another possibility would be to learn from those who have been dealing with these challenges for at least as long as ourselves—people operating in the shadow of the platform, tackling problems that we care about as they are resisting being flattened. Sex workers, for instance, have been organizing, finding ways of contestation that mediate between refusal and submission against new forms of platform regulation.[25] Similarly, food delivery workers have banded together online to decline lower-paying orders.[26] What can the people often seen as "outcasts," "weirdos," "troublemakers" teach us for our own practices as analysts and scholars? Can we think of strategies like humor, irony, ridicule, foot-dragging, work-to-rule, etc. as forms of engaging with platform research?

Platforms have managed to convince us that escape is just another key on our laptops. Our task is to find creative strategies between refusal and submission that allow us to engage creatively with platforms—to explore them without taking them for granted.

**23** Haraway, D. (1991). A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist–Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge. (pp. 149–181).

**24** Woolgar, S. (1991). Beyond the citation debate: towards a sociology of measurement technologies and their use in science policy. *Science and Public Policy*, 18(5): 319–326.

**25** *About*. Hacking//Hustling. (2021, October 17). https://hackinghustling.org/.

**26** Mayberry, K., Cameron, L., & Rahman, H. (Forthcoming). Fighting Against the Algorithm: The Rise of Activism in the Face of Platform Inequality. In Julie MacLeavy and Frederick Harry Pitts (Eds.), *Handbook of the Future of Work*. Routledge.

# CRITIQUE IN THE AGE OF PLATFORMS

The most powerful gravitational waves are created when objects move at very high speeds. At times authority and expertise are understood as the speed at which commentary can be brought to bear on an issue of seeming salience, creating heat through the force of engagement.

As for us, we sat together at a table in order to generate energy around the study of platforms and to create a collective research agenda: How we might best study how platforms's force, the ever changing ways that they create and transform markets, concentrate power, scale near instantaneously, and consolidate socialities with distinct geographies and histories? We take the "form" of platform studies both seriously and playfully, just as we do our individual research platform research. Gravity's effect on heat is to push candle flames up, buoyantly, and similarly our shared effort paradoxically seeks to defy the gravity of all the attention placed on platforms and the pressure-cooker of constant innovation, scholarly production, and critique.

At the same time, mounting crises marshal a sense of "too lateness" and spiraling futures down the technocratic drain, from the blackboxing of labor to the Silicon Valley "prepper" mentality and the drumroll of extinction panics. How do we galvanize and sustain the energy needed to limn the planetary scale—beyond the tunnel visions of innovation and black holes of data accumulation—and, instead, to bear the moral weight of future generations and conviviality with the geographically distant?

We finish where we started: with the physical features and high aspirations of the Institute for Advanced Study where we work. The wall plaques and benchmarks of Great Men demarcate epistemic authority all over its campus grounds. How might we reimagine IAS Director Robert Oppenheimer's failure to integrate the sciences and humanities as a platform for queer arts of humanistic inquiry?[27] How places and spaces like this platform new styles of social theory that takes account of its biggest formations?

In the summer of 1947, in the few months preceding the start of Oppenheimer's long tenure as Director of IAS, the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* debuted the Doomsday Clock on its cover, to signal how "scientific and technological breakthroughs pose great

**27** Halberstam, J. (2011). T*he Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press.

risk" and demand creativity and commitment to build a safer world.[28] A "platform for dialogue and debate among scientists, policymakers and the public" more than 70 years later, the internationally recognized symbol honors vulnerability while rejecting militarism and the atomic fetish, recalibrating the urgency of disruptive technologies and worlding-in-common concerns (climate change, global pathogens, ethical obligations) with every allegorical reset of the minute hand closer toward midnight.

Twenty years later Theodor Adorno mobilized a positive nuclear metaphor to describe Walter Benjamin's intellectual commitments—one that offers an evocative dis/orienting device for platform studies: "Everything which fell under the scrutiny of his words was transformed, as though it had become radioactive. His capacity for continually bringing out new aspects, not by exploding conventions through criticism, but rather by organizing himself so as to be able to relate to his subject-matter in a way that seemed beyond all convention."[29]

**The platform needs a Doomsday Clock, and we hope that our five theses can get us part of the way there.** We need a scholarship that tells us where we are in space, with an eye towards action. As more and more aspects of life, human and otherwise, are pulled toward platforms, a greater diversity of scholars and stakeholders must turn our attention towards a social theory purpose built to address them. We bring new skills, methods, and techniques to theorize and analyze platforms. In this article we played with gravity as a trope for visualizing and feeling how platforms come together and apart, but also to reflect a felt sense in our bodies that something is bigger than can be borne, and we feel its weight in a visceral way. We can learn to account for these new normative orientations and affective engagements by returning to our five theses.

One, that envisioning platforms as socially symptomatic gets us out of the trap of determinism and offers a new way of intellectually engaging with massively multi-actor systems that selectively pull us in and push us out. Two, that the most attractive and most influential platforms are the most invisible to scholars and are excluded when we talk about platforms, wasting an opportunity to limn how their platforms are socially symptomatic. These are symptoms that are disregarded, and therefore the most ripe for analysis, as they invite us to explain how and why they are pushed to the side. Three, that platforms are now themselves both publics and politics that operate both independently and interdependently with other public and political formations, and we must theorize them that way despite our lack of access to some of their workings if we want to get anywhere close to politics. Four, we must resist the charismatic pull of the platform's sublime qualities, its arbitrariness and unaccountability coupled

**28** How the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* Got Its Start. (2024). The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. https://thebulletin.org/virtual-tour/how-the-bulletin-of-the-atomic-scientists-got-its-start/#:~:text=In%20the%20aftermath%20of%20World,the%20%E2%80%9Chorrible%20effects%20of%20nuclear.

**29** Adorno, T. W. (1981). *Prisms* (S. Weber and S. Weber, Trans.). MIT Press. (Original work published 1967) see p. 229.

with convenience and seeming flatness. And lastly, five, how can we resist the pull of platforms to interpellate us into their logics and terminologies, and what can we learn from specific people, like sex workers, who have very different investments in them from us?

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