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Digital Reset: Critical and Creative Interventions to Rewire Sense-Making

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Abstract

This paper explores how critical theory, art and performance develop alternatives to the dominant social media paradigm of psycho-social exploitation. Social media short-circuit experience and sense-making through a logic where modes of data exploitation take over the processes of affect and cognition. Tentacular and everywhere, corporate social media giants seem to present two options – either embrace them and their (false) promises or cancel them altogether. Digital reset explores another option: that of providing moments where the circuits of experience and sense-making can be reorganized and reinvented. The paper specifically focuses on three adversarial collaborations with digital infrastructures that rewire sense-making: questioning equivalences; parasitizing existing systems and animating malicious deceivers.

Keywords

critical practice, new media, research-creation, online manipulation, social networks

The digitized social

This paper reflects on our critical and creative work as part of research projects led by Wendy Chun at the Digital Democracies Institute that charted the rise of mis- and disinformation globally between 2019 and 2024. Central to this arc is the evolution of the digitized social as an assemblage produced by the tech oligarchy, anti-democratic political actors, institutions and groups, and new forms of capitalism that developed around the exploitation and commodification of data and information (Mejias and Couldry, 2024). The digitized social is a space of exploitation of the social and its co-optation into digital techno-capitalism, where users are defined as targets to be manipulated and activated through data correlation, aggregation and disaggregation (Chun, 2021). At its core a mediated space, the digitized social is populated and animated by a range of non-human proxies: technical affordances, API, data trackers, algorithmic recommendation systems, AI bots, among others (Mulvin, 2021; Gehl and Bakardjieva, 2016; Bucher and Helmond, 2018), which provide both the structures for information circulation and the stimuli for communicative reactions. While social media at first advertised themselves as a way for people to connect with each other, the model of the digitized social that has emerged employs these non-humans to operationalize dynamics of exploitation: of knowledge and information, of personal data, and of psycho-social capacities (Sampson, 2017). It is the latter that was the focus of our attention and intervention.

One of the key claims made by corporate social media is about their capacity to produce the social through psycho-social manipulation. The psycho-social involves individual and collective processes of sense-making where experiential inputs of all kinds are internalized and organized in such ways as to define possibilities of action, of encounters, and expectations (De Boever and Neidich, 2013). Psycho-social capacities of sense-making involve affect, emotions, impulses, desires (Bösel and Wiemer, 2020; Karppi, 2018; Leys, 2017; Paasonen, 2021), but also expression, thoughts and ideas (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Lazzarato, 2014). Communication technologies have typically assisted these processes of sense-making by establishing modes of transindividuation (Stiegler, 2010a). Together through time and space these modes of transindividuation articulate the always unachieved processes of individual and collective individuation, of constantly defining and becoming to oneself and to

others, building on past memories and projections and prehensions of the future. The association of psycho-social capacities that work toward individuation – of making sense of oneself and ourselves and (in) the world – and the technologies of communication that both exteriorize and internalize such processes stimulate into existence a social space of exchange. Yet, Stiegler denounced corporate social media as tools of deindividuation (Stiegler, 2010b) that allow logics of exploitation to take over and subvert processes of transindividuation. In the five years since Stiegler's death, such insight is all the more relevant, given the current industrialization of mis- and disinformation and the avowed alignment of US tech giants with the totalitarian and neo-fascist tendencies of the current Trump administration.

We paid attention to the various techniques that have been employed through social media to exploit the psycho-social; specifically, we focused on the processes through which data collection, analysis and rendering processes are linked with and take over the realm of sense-making: making sense of ourselves, making sense of the world, experiencing togetherness. Given the rise of mis- and disinformation, we accepted that the problem of sense-making through the digital was not one that could be limited to objective knowledge. Rather, the impossibility of making sense in healthy ways was a problem of how cognition is articulated through affect, alongside feelings, and, in the case of the digitized social, emotional manipulation.

Our overall approach is very much indebted to Agre's (2014: 155) critical technical practice, which "require(s) a split identity – one foot planted in the craft work of design and the other foot planted in the reflexive work of critique". Our collective is made up of software developers, digital artists, performance artists, community activists, communication and media scholars and feminist scholars, with many of us wearing several of these hats at any given time. Through this, we were able to multiply our linkages between "craft work" (i.e. technical tinkering, software development, and artistic exploration) with critical analysis of the digitized social. In so doing, we developed small-scale, low-cost, feasible interventions to create spaces and moments where digital networked technologies intervene and extend the psycho-social in ways that are at least not exploitative, if not freeing. Our project provided moments where the circuits of extension away from and reintegration of the psycho-social into subjectivities can be reorganized and reinvented. The paper specifically focuses on

three adversarial collaborations with digital infrastructures to rewire sense-making: questioning the logics of equivalences between data processes and experience; parasitizing existing systems, that is, seizing technical affordances to reclaim agency; and animating malicious deceivers such as bots, algorithmic recommendation systems and AI through performance and story-telling.

The logics of equivalences

The intrinsic relationship between technologies and psycho-social capacities has a long theoretical history in media and communication studies. Our capacities to think, express ourselves, connect with others and make sense of our experiences require technical mediation that is never neutral, but in turn shapes, transforms, extends and neutralizes the senses, ways of thinking and knowing, and modes of experience. Digital networked technologies at play in the corporate social media universe are about the exploitation of user data for all kinds of purposes, including the manipulation of sense-making and perception of the world. Of course, the history of media is the history of how technologies of communication that enable specific ways of thinking and modes of knowledge can be used to extend empires, and the current alliance of the tech oligarchy and alt-right powers is another instance of such logics. But one of the characteristics of current corporate social media technologies is their capacity to operate fast equivalences between data processes and the social world they purport to mediate faithfully, thus fostering what we call the digitized social. Warren Sacks (2019) reminds us of the logics of equivalences as what happens when a software operation becomes equated with a social process: that a thumbs up emoticon can actualize a social bond. In actuality, we are talking about two very different operations – one involving choosing a limited range of symbols that sets out in the background a machinic capacity to measure reaction to a specific kind of categorized information, and the other, much more intangible, involving the expression of personal emotions as a binding to another person. Citing Callon and Latour's "he or she who holds the equivalences holds the secret of power", Sacks continues: "In science and politics – even in play – asserting an equivalence is not enough, however; an equivalence always needs to be demonstrated and then distributed widely through a set of translations that move us to believe the identity asserted" (2019: 35). STS literature points to the

discourses and practices (i.e. the demonstration, the experiment) that establish equivalences (Latour, 1999).

The first move of corporate social media was to establish proprietary platforms as an equivalent to the social and therefore as essential to society (Grossman, 2010). Another equivalence emerging from the Arab Spring was that social media makes democracy (Loader and Mercea, 2012; Tucker et al., 2017). While social media at the time enabled forms of democratic exchange through decentralized information circulation, the equivalence was specifically of social media as democracy and therefore as essential to the progressive political apparatus. Behind these equivalences lay another one: that the rising corporate tech industry was fundamental and essential to the functioning of democratic societies. It is this set of equivalences that gives a solid moral ground for increasingly nonsensical claims made by the tech oligarchy in recent months such as protecting free speech by turning away from any kind of content moderation and regulation, thus giving free reigns to propaganda, misinformation and disinformation actors to spread their manipulative content (Blenkinsop, 2025). But beyond discourses, the characteristics of the corporate social media model was an automation of equivalences through software operations. Expanding from Guattari, Genosko (2008: 15) highlights the role of part-signs that enable the smooth functioning of informational capital: the bank card is a part-sign that enables one to connect to the global flows of capital and to then activate these flows, just like an emoticon enables the recording of a user signal within a specific data set (i.e. a post made by user X) that then activates a series of algorithmic recommendations. Part-signs automate and activate, oftentimes with minimal or no recourse to representation or discourse. In so doing, they create the evidence of an equivalence, but can also be mobilized to quickly sever these links and create others in turn: being denied access to one's bank account or one's social media platform can provoke intense feelings of abandonment and despair (Kircher, 2025). Borrowing from Guattari, part-signs help create a system that quantifies potential and capacities in order to channel them according to logics of exploitation, mobilization and activation.

The first intervention, "Data Double" by Roopa Vasudevan, illustrates a moment where such logics of equivalence and exploitation can be both seen and used as sense-making material. Users are invited to add the dataDouble extension on their browser

and upload a picture of themselves (Vasudevan, 2021; n.d.). The extension tracks browsing data, and the amount and type of data collected is applied using specific parameters (e.g. if users visit social media sites, this will visually emphasize the edges of their images; visits to a variety of news sites will saturate the colour of their images; and so on) to modify users' pictures, resulting in unique "data double" portraits. dataDouble is meant to make users aware of the constant data collection and analysis that goes on in the background as they use the internet. It is also meant to raise the question of how data trackers see users. What is unique about dataDouble is that it does not aim to only reveal, but mobilizes data tracking and profiling to promote new insights for users. While dataDouble is interesting for single users to understand that they are never alone online, it really comes into its own in group settings and discussions as people compare each other's data portraits. Browsing habits shape the portraits, and many times participants felt the need to explain, justify and sometimes excuse to others their own habits. Overall, participants started to see themselves differently as dataDouble offered a play on the invisual (Parikka, 2023), making visible how trackers see users. dataDouble reveals the exploitative and opaque operation of data trackers and, in so doing, offers materials for users to make sense of their experiences in different ways, encouraging exchange and coming together as community.

Digital objects such as data trackers, as Yuk Hui (2016) reminds us, seek connection and build relations and the question becomes one of understanding which logics of connectivity they enact. During the big data moment, for instance, correlation imposed itself as a model to discover (and fabricate) new chains of causality (O'Neil, 2017). If the point of the digital is to seek and concretize relations, then it makes sense as to why social media – a model of connecting and clustering users through identifying and building relational links through targeted recommendations – has found such success in replacing the social. In many ways, the capacity of digital objects to constantly seek and concretize connections is what made the digital so attractive as a space of social mediation in the first place: at first, connections were made that were unexpected, that challenged existing social orderings and hierarchies. The key problem lies in the deployment of logics of connection towards specific ends (e.g. propaganda) and therefore the shaping of the very logics of connection and relation. Key critical insights

into algorithms have uncovered biases in the data used (Noble, 2018; Monea and Blue, 2023) and flawed logics of clustering through similarity, which leads to homophily, or love of the same and hatred of the other (Chun, 2021). Overall, there was a shift with Web 2.0 from uncovering new modes of connection to industrializing specific modes of connection.

Here lies an important characteristic of how digital objects are mobilized in the logic of equivalence: digital objects can link emotion and feelings directly to networks that can amplify them to extreme degrees of magnitude. We keep coming back to the revolutions of 2011-2012 such as the Arab Spring, not because social media made them possible in the first place, but because they virally propagated a revolutionary feeling on a global scale (Poell and van Dijck, 2015). The exhilarating feeling of being plugged in to global networks, the feeling of being part of something that was palpable and visible despite its distance that many of us experienced back in the days is a visceral, felt reaction to being connected to new sense-making processes. The automated works in concert with the visceral reaction to amplify specific logics of equivalences. This helps further understand the "flaming" dynamics at stake with corporate social media: specific, targeted content mixed with automated connection fosters jolts of connective exhilaration, which, in turn, can evolve into intense emotional outbursts that are further reinforced through homophilic echo chambers (Chun, 2018). What we realized is that contemporary forms of mis- and disinformation rely on objects that are both emotional and digital (Tellis et al., 2019). They are emotional in that they carry a discursive provocation: that vaccines are poisons, that the Earth is flat, that there is a secret cabal of alien overlords, that sex education turns kids into sexual deviants, that women are inferior, that essential oils cure cancer and so on. They are digital in that they automatically connect the user who clicks on them to communities of the same, therefore creating feedback loops that keep on prodding, jolting and cultivating the same emotional responses.

How can we intervene in this process of automated actualization and activation that superimposes itself on processes of sense-making and binding to the world and to each other? By questioning the logics of equivalences, we are not advancing some kind of postmodern argument about the complete artificiality of using data to shape the social. That the digitized social activates us, makes us feel and react is undeniable. The

digitized social is the production of specific data processes and has absolutely real and palpable consequences with regards to the capacity to yield both soft and violent forms of power. The critical point we argue for, in turn, is to understand equivalence as the superimposition of two very different processes so that activation captures stimulation and, to borrow from Bernard Stiegler via Yuk Hui, drive, as addiction superimposes itself and eventually negates desire as libidinal investment, like love and friendship (Hui, 2021: 282). We were particularly interested in the phenomenon of digital lethargy, which Tunh-Hui Hu describes as "the failures of subjectivity in an age where each minute act of self-expression, choice and autonomy is converted to data and capital" (Hu, 2022: xii). Particularly relevant to the question of the social media user, Hu points out the equivalence that according to "the personal computer industry", (...) interaction is the source of agency, even personhood (xii)." This equivalence can be taken in different directions, from influencers constantly building their personas to increase followers to, at the opposite extreme, constant mindless scrolling as somehow key and central to one's existence. Building on dataDouble, we therefore looked into the paradoxes of equivalence to cultivate other ways of prodding users or helping users prod themselves. dataDouble invited us to question the logics of equivalences and to reuse data processes. In order to continue to do so, we had to turn towards further parasitizing existing platforms and infrastructures.

Parasitizing existing infrastructures

dataDouble revealed the parasitism of data tracking and collection online – how these processes feed off users to create these doubles that are then superimposed back on users themselves. Following Michel Serres's work (2007), we understood that while social media likes to boast of a symbiotic relationship with human users, its actants are actually parasites, feeding off and eventually exhausting its human sources, animating users but also eventually producing either somnambulism (Sampson, 2020) or digital lethargy (Hu, 2022). We had been noticing a tension in corporate social media about their users: on the one hand, the most globally present platforms (e.g. Facebook) demand, though rarely completely enforce, that users use their real identities on their platform. This makes sense in order to have reliable data points: the platforms want hosts (users) to parasitize. At the same time, platforms allow for the proliferation of bots, for marketers of all horizons to create fake profiles to promote specific messages

and manipulate other users and so on: such situations get messy quickly in that these fakes continue the work of parasitizing users, at the same time as they parasitize the equivalence between the digital and the social. We realized that to study corporate social media, contrary to a certain doxa in digital methods that posited social media as proxies for the social (see for instance, Latour et al., 2012), meant studying the parasitization that takes place through the digitized social, especially as when it involves non-actant proxies such as algorithms, bots and other hybrids like AI generated content. Our next intervention mixed digital methods and theatre and performance: we produced portraits of mis- and disinformation by creating our own personas that never interacted with other users, but solely with algorithmically recommended content. In other words: we created our own proxies to study how users were parasatized, especially with regards to mis- and disinformation pathways (Langlois and Sharp, forthcoming).

Importantly as well, Serres highlights the role of informational parasites as noise makers, who can usher in the destruction or transformation of a system. The question shifted from what kind of processes could we put in place to parasitize social media, to how we could encourage users to parasitize social media in turn to foster new ways of making sense of one's experience. This required a dual approach: moving away from the expectations of the platforms and decoupling from social media infrastructures. Our work took place right during the APIcalypse (Bruns, 2019), which leads us to another realization: corporate social media platforms do not like a specific type of parasite – parties that do not pay for exclusive access to platform data. Over the past few years, corporate platforms have significantly limited access to their APIs to obtain user data, thus preventing any form of public scrutiny of their workings. There were existing reasons to be wary of the data provided by APIs – it consisted of partial data and was scoped according to platforms' own imperatives – but this latest move was a final blow to a specific type of data-intensive digital research. However, we still needed to collect some of the data we produced from our research personas for ethnographic analysis. We developed a tool called the Agnostic Scraper (Canute, Fahner et. al, 2025), which processes screen recordings of platform browsing sessions and extracts textual and visual data. Doing so has allowed us to essentially create an autonomous database of public posts on Instagram and other social media apps. This database can be queried

in myriad ways, beyond the persona research we carried out. While not enabling the level of data tracking on the networks that was provided by APIs, this scraper gave us an opportunity to collect moments of being online, enabling new forms of archiving and thus new possibilities of data creation. With this sort of parasitic API, there is significant potential in enabling new forms of user agency, allowing individuals to extract from the extractors and shape their own experience of social media outside of the imposed logic of corporate platforms.

Indeed, the technical achievement of the Agnostic Scraper allowed us to move away from the dominant system of equivalences as it relates to the exploitation of emotion online and to build another tool on top of it: the Image-Affect tool (Fahner et. al, 2025), which enables users to record their feelings from images seen online. One of the key claims of corporate social media is about affective and emotional manipulation: from early mood experiments to Cambridge Analytica (Booth, 2014; Cadwalladd and Graham-Harrison, n.d.), the claim has been that affective computing (starting with textual sentiment analysis early on and now moving to emotion recognition and AI-assisted user engagement) can be leveraged to both capture and cultivate emotions. Our challenge, then, was to create an anti-sentiment analysis tool: to allow users to express, explore and make sense of affective and emotional responses to content without the possibility of such expression being captured by anything or anyone. Building on affect theory, we sought to empower users to explore the complexity of affective responses to content. Contra affective computing, which forces users to choose between emotions (either like or dislike, happy or sad or angry), we wanted users to be able to express emotional contradiction: that something can make us hopeful and angry at the same time, that something can be both funny and sad.

While we recognize the capacious and at times seemingly contradictory scholarship under affect theory, we were particularly interested in understanding its entanglements with the history of computation. The main affinity between affect theory and computation is for structural binaries, which we find both in Affect Theory's Spinozist roots as well as in post-Freudian psychology over the 20th century. This strand of affect theory posits that lived experience is constituted through polarized valences and thus focuses on identifying either the positive or negative emotional charge that marks an expression, whether in language or embodied. Such an assumption continues with

contemporary sentiment analysis (Cui et al., 2023; Birjali, Kasri and Beni-Hssane, 2021). Also evolving out of earlier political polling schemes and clinical psychology, sentiment analysis does not just identify affect through strong binaries, but further focuses on the cultivation of such emotional charges, which is now built into the business models of corporate social media. On corporate social media, affects are encouraged through continuous scrolling, continuous liking, continuous hating, enclosing time and energy to sustain the expenditures of social media conglomerates and data brokers. A host of tags hidden from the user, so expansively calibrated as to be the sole purview of algorithms, map out a landscape carefully cultivated to encourage continued emotional interactions, creating the sense that these platforms are constantly growing, keeping pace with an affective reality well worth ongoing financial investment. And yet in doing so, the digitized social induces two felt effects. Ceaseless polling, an atmosphere constantly prompting its inhabitants to react and respond with "What's happening?", creates another false equivalency, freezing the feeling of affect, the "experience of experiencing" wherein Massumi (2002: 5) locates affect in the flat reality of the data point. More insidiously, the aggregation and regurgitation of these data, as recommendations and algorithmic refinements to user experience, erode the capacity to be affected, numbing the ambivalences of feeling in the "undivided coherency of statistics" (Baudrillard, 2007: 210). In this way, the digitized social extenuates a trend Jean Baudrillard once recognized in mass media: "the social loses its own scene" (Ibid.).

In developing the Image-Affect tool, we refused the assumption of strong binaries to instead focus on affect as the undetermined potentials of what a body can or cannot do (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Seigworth and Pedwell, 2023). In approaching affect theory as a method of digital intervention, we were informed by two primary touchstones. On the one hand, the expansive, if at times overbearing, theory of affects associated with Tomkins (1995) taken up by interlocutors in the theoretical humanities (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995; Sedgwick, 2003; Frank and Wilson, 2020). On the other, the dedicated critique waged by Bollmer (2023) to "foreground the material foundations of [affect theory's] arguments" and reconstitute affect theory as "a variant of materialist media theory" (206). Overall, the development of our Image-Affect tool took particular cues from forms of affect theory preoccupied by the interactivity of

affects, or more daringly, the intra-activity of affect materialized in the instrument of the interface (Bollmer, 2023). Image-Affect worked to find a way out of digital lethargy (Hu, 2024) through an alternative interface capable of changing the terms through which affect is frozen as data. The tool gives users the opportunity to record and reevaluate their affective experience online, uploading content captured from scrolling sessions and using adjustable affect tags to build a flexible, personalized archive. Tagging takes place through a modular system, with eight primary affect categories arranged around a circumpolar scale of intensity. Rather than working from the inside out, this system enables users to drag and drop different kinds of feelings in close proximity, literally colouring a canvas for each image extracted from their recorded browsing and integrating this data into a series of visualizations where affects are layered in ways akin to marbled paper. Crucially, this style of data capture and collation never leaves the front end of the interface. Each step of the process is available to the user and can be easily adjusted as participants continue to reflect on their feelings. The data created are necessarily fuzzy and resistant to extractive instrumentalization as discrete, mutually exclusive sentiments. While the tool still starts with naming qualitatively distinct feelings, the layering of colour and the play on colour intensities invites new combinations and therefore new potentials. In the end, nothing prevents users from lying, for instance, or from focusing on colour play rather than naming emotions: only users themselves can make sense of what they have done with their feelings. Image-Affect parasitizes existing social media, by mobilizing social media visual and textual content, but repurposing it, offering users new ways of interacting with it and therefore new ways of making sense of it.

Animating malicious deceivers

Our work with Image-Affect revealed twin logics of the exploitation of the psycho-social: on the one hand, users are required to feel and express feelings online. The assumption from the part of the platforms is that such feelings are real, so that as they are extracted, they constitute the basis for further operations: feelings are measured, compared to content, other reactions and so on through recommendation algorithms. In reality however, there is a split. In all of our user testing sessions with Image-Affect, one of the first questions that we were asked was: "Should I put in how I feel, or how I should feel?" This, for us, was a key moment where we identified the work and failure

of the equivalence between affect and data. When offered an alternative way to track and record emotions, users decoupled themselves from existing social media infrastructures and recognized an affective split whereby they obeyed the logics of the platforms while ignoring their actual layered, and oftentimes contradictory and temporally variable, affective experiences. Socially recognizable and technically acceptable emotions took over, showing self-deception at work. This self-deception, however, answers to the promise that the platform will see us if we engage with its logics: a kind of perverse drive to negate ourselves in order to find ourselves. We deceive ourselves in order to be deceived by social media into feeling something authentic: this logic of mutual deception deserved further exploration.

The corporate social media apparatus promises to understand and predict "us", but actually acts as what Ioana Jucan calls a "malicious deceiver", following Descartes, who in his radical doubt exercise raised the possibility of being continuously deceived by a supreme power (Jucan, 2023). The answer to the malicious deceiver problem, for Descartes, is one's capacity to think, but this capacity is not any kind of thinking: it is thinking that cuts itself from the world of the senses and the sensible (these subjects to malicious deception) to enter the realm of mathematical abstraction. There is not enough space here to fully delve into the profound cultural impacts of the malicious deceiver and Cartesian thinking in the age of digital media, from red pill vs. blue pill to the reduction of the world into measurable and interchangeable bits. Many narratives around digital media eventually suggest, however, a profound need to return to some sort of tangible feeling in answer to a world of pure abstraction. Refusal of the digital is one answer, albeit one that heavily relies on others taking over the burden of digital processing (Sharma, 2018). There is a need for the emotional as something authentically felt, but this is now heavily mediated and technically produced, just like the trad lifestyle that now dominates some corners of corporate social media promises an authentic return to the land and freshly baked bread, albeit one that is spectacularized. The experience of feeling is something that we are meant to crave, even if it means plunging one's head repeatedly in ice water, as some TikTok influencers do. That the user-tester asked the question of whether we wanted actual or demanded feelings revealed a specific operation of corporate social media: that we are asked as users to cut ourselves off from the world of the senses and the sensible (to

deny our affective experience) in order to let the technical apparatus of social media fulfill its promise of letting us fully exist and feel online. The problem is that corporate social media are malicious deceivers – they never give back to us the world, but rather set the stage for never-ending cycles of affective exploitation. As Juncan further explains, expanding Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, the "world picture" (or digitized social) that social media gives back to us to exist in "is more than deception: it is of the order of (dis)simulation, the conjoining of deception and performaticity" (2023: 26). The digitized social, in other words, wants us to perform, and therefore to inhabit the feelings that have been defined for us.

How do we address such wide-scale deception? We argue for another perspective on what is often presented as the dichotomy between the digital and some other way of being, either face to face or analog. In their exploration of malicious deceivers, Ioana Juncan turned toward performance and theatre: in the context of the digitized social as "world picture", this is a variation on the classic *mise en abyme* move, where placing a fiction within a fiction helps animate processes and dynamics differently, inserting a new logic of stimulation for characters and audiences. In the case of a play within the digitized social, some protagonists and audiences overlap in the form of the user, which Juncan mobilizes in creating highly interactive, live and streamed plays, such as *Left & Right*, or *Being Who/Where You Are* (2021). *Left & Right* deployed two key protagonists in the form of two bots created by Roopa Vasudevan that were fed each a politically biased textual corpus (Jucan et al., 2021). Left and Right bots interacted with each other, with the characters played by human actors and with the audience to offer a playful questioning of political stereotypes and polarized political discourses. As a play within the broader play of deception that is the digitized social, *Left & Right* brought back a way of being an audience that has disappeared with the digitized social: curiosity, attentiveness and rooting for complex characters. Here, we are not dealing with a return to more analog ways of sensing as opposed to the digital. Rather, becoming a theatrical audience as we inhabit our user positions provokes a new way of engagement with the spectacle of the digitized social as it is animated by its malicious deceivers. The bots, being characters who can never quite become fully fledged, complex characters, but are bounded by the data they are being fed and the algorithms they obey, become poignant, as opposed to a source of intense like or dislike. We feel

differently when watching *Left & Right*: our sensibilities are rewired: we are not just critical, but also attracted and moved by these flawed bots. These affective states indicate a rewiring of sense-making towards something yet undefined, but nevertheless different.

Rewiring sense-making

The drive to rewiring is present in all our interventions, as we move from prodding users to prompting them in playful and creative ways. Our notion of rewiring is strongly bound with play as something both creative and serious. We refer back to D.W. Winnicott's (1982) understanding of play as a safe space of experimentation of self and others and the world, an important moment where new modes of engaging and being can be experienced without real consequences. Such play (to distinguish it from more contemporary forms of capitalist play such as playbor) is contingent, time-limited and involves a parenthesis on common rules. It is this very ephemeral quality that makes it such a simple yet powerful space of transformation and crafting of potentials. Our interventions were meant to be playful, engaging fleetingly with the digitized social without any consequences with regards to data exploitation. They provided the space for rewiring sense-making by experimenting with new circuits of affect and data.

Animating malicious deceivers helps build new relationalities with the technical infrastructures that surround us. In so doing, we might be able to find a "we" again, as opposed to what Wendy Chun calls a collection of YOUs, "never simply singular, but also plural… [a] singular plurality [that] forms the basis of data analytics, which treats individuals in relation to, that is 'like', others (2021: 250)". As opposed to being only seen and captured in our likeness to others, as only constituted through homophilic networks of sameness, the we of transindividuation works across difference and uniqueness through connection and relationality: we build relations to the world and to others because we seek to become to ourselves and to others, and this process is neverending. For Sedgwick (2003), the draw of affect theory is that "there is no distance at all between affect theory" (133) as a mode of speculative thought pursued to intellectually define the experience of affect and the "largely tacit" (134) everyday practice of navigating our individual and collective emotional states.

We all have our own affect theory, an "ideo-affective organization which informs the individual of the relevance of a broad band of contingencies… and a set of strategies for coping with each of these contingencies" (Tomkins, 1995: 166), and work constantly to transindividuate these contingencies within ourselves and with others. These are the psycho-social tools by which we braid together affect and cognition, co-constructive amplifiers that scaffold our ability to make sense of the world around us. As we pointed out, digital networks mediate such processes. The rewiring that needs to happen necessarily has to engage with these apparatuses.

The necessity of engagement with technical apparatuses poses a simple problem of feasibility. We were lucky to have software developers among us, but even such precious expertise oftentimes feels risible when faced with the behemoth that is corporate social media. We tinker, we do small-scale interventions and we know that such interventions will be short-lived as funding runs out and technical standards change and require updating. The obsolescence of our interventions is undeniable. We do not see this as a problem, however, even though there is often this idea that any tech solution needs to come at scale – needs to be as viral and efficient so as to occupy the same scale as corporate social media. This, unless there is drastic policy intervention combined with targeted funding for tech development, is simply not possible. But beyond feasibility, we argue that small-scale interventions are what is needed to disentangle one's own everyday affect theory and practice from the malicious deceivers. And thus, we end this paper where we started this project: at a poetry workshop, building on Alexandra Juhasz's work (Juhasz, 2022), organized at a large yearly meeting for a digital methods summer school. In a schedule packed around learning scraping, coding, dealing with large datasets and the likes, a poetry workshop led by Juhasz and Juncan where prompts were given to participants to engage in spontaneous performance came as quite a destabilizing moment. The palpable puzzlement in the room quickly became curiosity and enjoyment. The prompts and resulting performances guided participants in giving voice to the digital processes they were entangled in, including disinformation and polarization. Juhasz and Junan led variations on that exercise in other places. These workshops were oftentimes serious and humorous at once as people embodied everything from data processes to political trolls and internet cats. Participants enjoyed moments of togetherness, even if bound

by the short time of a workshop. Most of all, participants mentioned how much they liked the building of community through these workshops, even if, again, this community would disappear after the workshop. What was created, even if fleetingly, was again the possibility of engaging differently with the digital, which opened up a space for potentials as opposed to pre-emptive prediction. The serious play (Winnicott, 1982) that participants engaged in helped define other ways of paying attention and being together. Collectively, participants built ways to "leave the confines of the subject", to borrow from Guattari, and to explore how subjectivity as ways of being with and to each other occupies non-human spaces, agents and processes. Playing becoming a data process, for instance, allows for one's understanding of their own subjectivity as partially distributed and mediated through machines, analog and digital, just as like Guattari states, a politician is never just a politician, but extended and modified through other politicians, through media systems, expressing broader assemblages of corporate interests, discursive values and so on (Kowalski and Guattari, 1994: 3). In the performance workshops, participants were asked to take on aspects of this assemblage of collective enunciation that speaks through subjects, and in so doing, their articulation with such assemblage becomes distorted, and that creates moments of suspension of power. Importantly as well, the workshops might start with individual reflection and engagement with prompts, but they move quickly to the collective by requesting a kind of group production. The collective allows for a mapping of subjectivities as they circulate inside and out of individual subjects, thus moving beyond the reliance on that individual, Cartesian strategies that lead to further deception. Participants could literally give away and redistribute pieces of each other and pieces of the networks, of non-human actants, building new assemblages, enabling moments of transindividuation. There is rewiring of not only sensing and feeling, but of becoming to and with each other in general. These fleeting transindividuating rewirings show that building community is neither necessarily complicated nor has to be burdened by technical complexity in order to address our entanglements with digital systems and infrastructures.

Our conclusion at the end of five years of collaboration is that we figured out that there can be other ways to be with(in) social media. Our ways of being, feeling and sensing are materially instantiated by the digital infrastructures we inhabit, and these

infrastructures deploy a massive apparatus for prompting, measuring, and recalibrating the "experience of experiencing" (Massumi, 2002: 5). By exploring processes of parasitizing existing infrastructures in order to create ways of experiencing our experience, through, for instance, tracking feelings, we created systems that fed off but did not have to obey the logics of corporate social media platforms. By animating the malicious deceivers that promise more authentic and felt experiences, we developed new ways of paying attention to systems and users and to reconfigure ourselves. By rewiring sense-making, we experienced and shaped the distribution of subjectivity in collaborative ways. Small and time-limited interventions like ours need to be repeated, re-created in educational and community settings, requiring collective efforts to imagine not only new ways of making-sense, but new digitized social worlds that do not operate under the logics of technocapitalism.

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