SOCIAL MEDIA ABYSS
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Amsterdam, September 2015
Social Media Abyss describes the drying up of a horizon, from the unbounded space of what was the internet into a handful of social media apps. In this global slump, IT giants such as Google and Facebook have lost their innocence. Existing governance models no longer have the necessary consensus to function. After Snowden, Silicon Valley reveals itself as deeply compromised, entangled in facilitating state surveillance and reselling the private data of its customers. For the first time, the Valley is confronted with waves of activism, from Wikileaks, Anonymous and Snowden to protests around Google
busses, Uber and Airbnb. The tide has broken, and while negations of this net culture are on the rise, controversies turn over into open conflict. Many have now understood the ‘sharing economy’ meme as a scam. The self-evident Californian Ideology no longer works. Two decades after the publication of the essay with the same name, the hegemony of the once powerful libertarians is finally being contested – but what can replace it?

In studying this question, I kicked off with social media architectures and internet revenue models to arrive at the organizational stakes: how can protest movements, from Occupy to Bangkok, prolong their presence and interconnections? Will eruptions transform into political parties or will the decentralized anarchist approach prevail? It sounds like post-1848 all over again. Are we waiting for our version of the Paris commune? But the present stagnation, interrupted by waves of dissent, indicates that we’re in a post-revolutionary period, with the ancien régime having lost its legitimacy, hanging onto power, while counter-forces still search for modes of organization.

In the aftermath of the Snowden revelations, internet users find themselves in a situation of tension that the pragmatic engineering class, who’ve handled internet governance so far, always tried to avoid. Everyone is exposed but supposedly no one should worry. The past years have been a period of social media consolidation with the overall trends moving from PC to smart phone, and from established to emerging markets. The pathos of this campaign phase would be that ‘The Internet is Broken’, but the registration of our defeat is better captured in the maxim ‘We Have Lost the War’, because it’s unclear who will fix it and how it could be rebuilt. The genuine techno-optimism amongst the white male geeks that a free and open internet, tied together by rebel code, would always persevere, has been replaced by the digital version of state monopoly capitalism, as Lenin once defined it. The innocent age of a laissez-faire consensus is well and truly behind us. Will capitalism’s infrastructure ever be considered important enough not to be left to a bunch of buccaneers?

**Let’s Talk About Platform-Capitalism**

If the 1980s gave birth to media theory, and the 1990s were the decade of networks, we are now living under the spell of the platform. As the word indicates, the tendency is to move upwards – to
centralize, integrate and synthesize. While network ideology boasted its decentralized nature, platform culture stands proud to announce that the Family of Man has finally found its common home. In his 2010 paper, Tarleton Gillespie summed up neatly the various reasons why the platform concept emerged in the aftermath of the dotcom crash. According to Gillespie, the word ‘platform’ was strategically chosen to present the contradictory activities of online services as a neutral ground for DIY users and major media producers, while enabling the collision of privacy and surveillance efforts, community and advertising investments. ‘Platform’ also hints at the integration of and by different players, through a variety of applications, into a higher synthesis.

Imagine disliking everything. Positive reformers will do whatever they can to stop us exploring the subterranean forces of negative empowerment. The power of critique is quickly dismissed as ‘extreme’ (if not terrorist). The fear of the crowd that abruptly unfollows itself brings back ancient traumas of the violent populist mob – and this fear at the level of (self)governance is no different in the age of platform capitalism. Where will the amorphous collective energies flow after we have overheated the internet? Why is it so hard to imagine a world in which all platforms or ‘intermediaries’, such as Google, Facebook and Amazon, have been dismantled – not just the old ones, but also, and in particular, the latest and the coolest?

Along with many others, I’m calling for a critical theory of intermediaries that is technical, cultural and economic in nature. In his Digital Tailspin essay, Berlin net critic Michael Seemann calls for ‘platform neutrality’, while keeping in mind the pitfalls that come with the term ‘neutrality’. He also argues in favour of ‘filter sovereignty’ as a new form of information ethics. On the positive side, Seeman acknowledges ‘the most important feature of these platforms is the unlimited, manifold network effects they can have’. In the social media debate, we urgently need to go beyond the culture of complaint that inherently comes with the bourgeois emphasis on the loss of privacy. Getting a better understanding of the political economy of private data is one thing – however, it could very well be that this does not automatically translate into a political programme. For Seemann, ‘loss of control’ is an important reframed starting point, for coming up with new strategies; ‘The most effective way of ridding ourselves of platform dependency is by building decentralised platforms.’ For a while, WhatsApp was such an alternative, becoming a retreat from Facebook – until Facebook purchased it.
In the past few years, a small number of attempts have been made to kick-off ‘platform studies’ as a separate discipline, so far without much success. We will have to wait a while for a comprehensive theory of ‘platform capitalism’. Is Platform Society, two decades after Manuel Castells’ classic trilogy Network Society, able to reach the same public as Thomas Piketty or Naomi Klein? Whereas the internet is now fully integrated with society, this cannot be said of academic efforts in this field. In part, there are institutional reasons for this. Internet studies is still situated in-between all secure departmental chairs, as it was neither allowed to become a fully fledged discipline of its own nor eagerly taken up by others. Nevertheless, the speed of the field’s development, twenty-five years on, is still breath-taking, making it hard for struggling academics to stay ahead of the game. The role that’s left to them is to measure the effects of the IT roll-out in a fast-expanding range of sectors.

In this monopoly stage, markets are fake and merely a belief system for dazed and confused outsiders. With Wall Street, Silicon Valley and Washington DC converging instead of competing (as the official version still proclaims), power itself is becoming a black box, with the algorithm as its perfect allegory. And algorithms have consequences, as Zeynep Tufekci has so clearly described. Her analysis of the 2014 protests in Ferguson makes very clear the powerfully contingent relationship of Facebook’s algorithmic filtering to political cause-and-effects, the impossibility of net neutrality rules in times of crisis, and the weird, incomprehensible logic to what is – and what’s not – ‘trending’ on Twitter.

The digitization and networking of all fields of life has not yet slowed down; there are still plenty of ‘innocent’ under-mediated contexts out there. But most worrying is the obscuring of the technology itself, which Frank Pasquale so accurately describes in his study The Black Box Society. The aim of more applied net criticism, as practised at the Institute of Network Cultures in Amsterdam, has been to focus on particular online services such as search, social media, Wikipedia and online video, amongst other topics. But what have we gained from such case studies? Are we merely rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic? What’s the status of speculative critical theory in the light of the growing divide between the social sciences and humanities? Can we be confident that the development of new and alternative tools is the most effective way to undermine the current platforms?

That our ‘thermidor’ moment in internet development has arrived is clear also in ‘clickbait’ technology. Clickbaiting is when a
publisher posts links with headlines that encourage people to click to see more, without offering much information about what will be viewed. This is tabloid press 2.0, Gleichschaltung on a global scale. What clickbaits do is to raise curiosity for an amorphous genre. The presented items are not quite news but present themselves as such, in being scattered formally and technically between news websites and social media. ‘Clickbait’ technology is reaching its moment of being ousted, as it is now widely understood by online audiences to be a sinister technique to raise online advertising revenue; media companies will soon have to look for other means to attract audiences. There is also a Facebook version of clickbaiting. Facebook was observed to start penalizing the type of page ‘that excessively posts repeated content and encourages like-baiting. Like-baiting is when a post asks News Feed readers directly to like, comment or share a post.’ Global current affairs news has meanwhile become fully interactive. Take the Taboola software, which helps news site administrators fine-tune their content. The Taboola founder explains: ‘For everyone who hates one piece of content, many others love it, and click on it. So we register it as a popular story, and leave it up, so more people can see it. If no-one clicked on it, or tweeted about it, then we would remove it.’

Recently, we’ve seen a cultural shift away from the active, self-conscious user towards the subject as docile, ignorant servant. In a variation on what Corey Robin writes about conservatives, we could say that we feel sorry for internet users here, and identify them as victims. In the public imagination, the user has flipped sides and has morphed from an empowered citizen to a hopeless loser. Now the genre of our engagement is a tragic one, but we’re not sure of which plot, which repetitions or histories (see Franzen) even apply. Users are simultaneously aggrieved, convinced of the righteousness of their cause, and of the unlikeness of their heroic triumph. Whether we are rich or poor or somewhere in-between, this user is one of us. But why should humility come from what is incontrovertible about the present defeat? Piety is not compatible with dignity. How can the user become a master of his or her fate again in this ‘administrated world’, to use the term from Adorno and Horkheimer’s universe? This might only be possible if the surveillance infrastructure is dismantled. Much like the nuclear threat during the Cold War, the knowledge of how to employ cameras, bots, sensors and software that, for instance, came to light in the Snowden files, is clearly revealed. Only when the technology is decommissioned and neutralized will collective fear dissipate. A first step here is to ‘make things
visible’, as Poitras, Greenwald, Appelbaum, Assange and so many others are doing. This is the ‘Berlin’ strategy presently in operation: creating a critical mass of civil techno intelligence non-profit orgs to relentlessly annoy the bourgeois mind with a never-ending stream of revelations.

**Social Media Abyss**

‘War is life, peace is death’ is one of the Orwellian slogans in Dave Eggers’ Silicon Valley parable *The Circle*. How do these motifs play out in this era of monopolistic consolidation? In this digital age of Total Integration, there are no old industrial giants anymore that need to be overthrown. Today’s barons live in Mountain View – and they shy away from war and imperial occupation. Instead of our image of Bay Area industries as the fortuitous tech-evolution of Whole Earthers that has transmorphed, been co-opted and corrupted, I would propose another reading of Silicon Valley as the degeneration of libertarian conservatism, in the opposite direction to its realization. My guide here, so powerful to read in the internet context, is Corey Robin’s *The Reactionary Mind*. Robin’s lead forces us to shift our mindset and no longer see the Silicon Valley as fallen hippies betraying progressive goals but to read their cruel yet innocent minds as reactionary, aiming to further strengthen the power of the conservative 1 per cent. The real hippies retired long ago. Their legacy was easy to delete. This perspective gives us the liberty to instead reread the dotcom age as a ‘weakened moral fiber’, dominated by a ‘lost martial spirit’. The problem with bourgeois society as Robin describes it is its lack of imagination: ‘Peace is pleasurable, and pleasure is about momentary satisfaction.’ Peace ‘erases the memory of bracing conflict, robust disagreement, the luxury of defining ourselves by virtue of whom we were up against’. Once Silicon Valley lost its innocence, it took a bit of time to realize that it was now gearing up for war and conflict.

In contrast to most DC think tanks, Silicon Valley calculates with, and not against, the Apocalypse. Its ever-implicit slogan is: ‘Bring it on’. Writing about the neo-cons, Robin notes that ‘unlike their endgame, if they have one, there is an apocalyptic confrontation between good and evil, civilization and barbarism – categories of pagan conflict diametrically opposed to the world-without-borders vision of America’s free-trading, globalising elite’. This openness of conflict is absent from the Valley. Google’s over-identification with,
and then later abandonment of, its old slogan ‘Don’t be Evil’ says it all. Against this initial do-good mentality, we need to be able to occupy the mindset of venture capitalist guru Peter Thiel, who is willing to think with Evil, and one of the few to talk openly about the autistic tendencies of the tech elite. In his book, *From Zero to One*, Thiel formulates four rules for start-ups: ‘1. It is better to risk boldness than triviality. 2. A bad plan is better than no plan. 3. Competitive markets destroy profits. 4. Sales matters just as much as the product.’ To get there, companies must remain ‘lean’, which is code for ‘unplanned’: ‘You should not know what your business will do; planning is arrogant and inflexible. Instead you should try out. Iterate and treat entrepreneurship as agnostic experimentation.’

All this applies to the logic of the war economy, run by a cold cynicism that looks down on the naïve idealism of free market advocates. Peter Thiel publicly admonishes Hobbesian status-quo thinking. Frank Pasquale, meanwhile, comes to similar conclusions but voices a new social realism. With competition muted and cooperation accelerating, ‘most start-ups today aim to be bought by a company like Google or Facebook, not to replace them. Rather than merely hoping for competition that may never come, we need to assure that the natural monopolization now at play in fields like search and social networking doesn’t come at too high a cost to the rest of the economy.’ In the blurb for Julian Assange’s *When Google Met Wikileaks*, we can find the following contrast between the hacker-whistleblower Assange and the Google executive Eric Schmidt: ‘For Assange, the liberating power of the internet is based on its freedom and statelessness. For Schmidt, emancipation is at one with US foreign policy objectives and is driven by connecting non-Western countries to Western companies and markets.

A Quick Update on Attention

Let us now focus on what has been going on in internet theory over the past few years. Leaving aside the usual techno-optimists and Silicon Valley marketing gurus, there are two trajectories that need discussion. The American approach, coming from Nicholas Carr, Andrew Keen and Jaron Lanier, who are primarily business writers, not academics – with the exception of Sherry Turkle – critiques social media for its superficiality: the fast, short exchanges within people’s ‘echo chambers’ (that can even affect the brain, as Carr tried to prove) are causing loneliness and a loss of focus. More recently,
Petra Löffler from Weimar has given these concerns a Euro-historical twist in her study on the role of distraction in the works of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Krakauer. The case study in this book on the Europhilic ‘net resentment’ of the American writer Jonathan Franzen can be situated between these positions. Net criticism cannot pretend that it sits outside of these very real concerns around info overload, multi-tasking and loss of concentration, and related work, as dealt with by scholars such as Trebor Scholz and Melissa Gregg. However, it is also good to sometimes forget such anxieties and turn our attention to the material roots that underlie pressurized social media timelines.

In contrast to the moralistic turn in US mainstream outlets, Europeans such as Bernard Stiegler, Ippolita, Mark Fisher, Tiziana Terranova and Franco Berardi (and I include myself here) stress the wider economic and cultural context of (the crisis in) digital capitalism which is producing its own ‘pharmacological’ effects (directly linking to self-adjustment through medicines). According to these authors, an embodied approach is necessary in order to overcome simple resignations into ‘offline romanticism’ – a position taken all too easily when we feel that our bodies no longer cope and routine takes over. The politics of the internet, including its interface aesthetics, should go beyond the Sloterdijkian mental training proposal, ‘mastering’ away the temptations of technology via life-changing individuated routines. Prescriptions of therapeutics must always combine with a political economic position on the financialization of the economy, the effects of 24/7 availability and invisible infrastructures, and the role of climate change, while we are working through the digital.

Irrespective of our feelings and resentments about a technology that overwhelms us with too much data, what are we going to do when, as David Weinberger says, it is all ‘too big to know’, and the eye candy of info visualization does not give us easy answers either? Whether we are North America industry sensitives or up with the Euro-theory, the current downturn in critical theory production around distraction and disciplining of the workforce only means that this is here to stay. Nevertheless, moral memes might occasionally step in – for example, to make staring at smart phones in public uncool overnight.

One author who so far has been able to productively overcome the information overload thesis would be Evgeny Morozov. In his 2013 study *To Save Everything, Click Here*, he presented a general theory that leaves behind surface-level media and representation analysis. Central to this critical project is the IT marketing tactic he calls...
‘solutionism’. Cost cutting and disruption have become goals and industries in themselves that can – and will – be applied to all fields of life. After his first book on US foreign policy and the ‘internet freedom’ programme of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Morozov expanded his analysis to healthcare (the quantified self), logistics, fashion, education, mobility and the control of public spaces. He warns us that technology cannot solve social problems: we must do that ourselves. Remaining sceptical about human nature, his message is that programmers should take the complexity of human customs and traditions into account and hold back from making bold claims.27

Early in 2015, Morozov made an interesting change of tack. In an extensive personal interview with New Left Review, the ownership of IT infrastructure becomes the key issue: ‘Socialise the Data Centres!’ – ‘I am questioning who should run and own both the infrastructure and the data running through it, since I no longer believe that we can accept that all these services ought to be delivered by the market and regulated only after the fact.’28 He dismisses Europe’s attempts to regulate Google.29 A European search algorithm won’t do the job: ‘Google will remain dominant as long as its challengers do not have the same underlying user data it controls. For Europe to remain relevant, it would have to confront the fact that data, and the infrastructure (sensors, mobile phones, and so on), which produce them, are going to be the key to most domains of economic activity.’ The reason Europe can’t do much against its dependency on American companies is because such measures ‘would go clean against what the neoliberal Europe of today stands for’. Morozov proposes that one company should never own citizen’s data: ‘Citizens can own their own data and not sell it, to enable a more communal planning of their lives.’

**The Internet as Techno-Social Unconscious**

Having turned into a general infrastructure for everything, the internet is now entering its maturity phase. ‘Reification’ is not our social media problem. Nor does ‘rationalization’ capture the challenging behind-scenes processes of our time. In The Uprising, Franco Berardi states that ‘in the digital age power is all about making things easy’.30 Leaving behind the modern age of mass education and class compromise, operating as that did under the umbrella of the welfare state and the Cold War, datafication and financialization are taking
command as two sides of the neoliberal society of control. There must be a ‘Universal Reason of the Digital’ but what does it consist of? Without a plan or decision in sight, the digital presents itself as the comfortable yet unquestioned new norm. There is nothing anymore to verify, nothing to see (but cute cats). New-school clueless users, busy with their everyday lives, have installed the apps, signed-in, created an account and agreed on the terms and conditions, to enter the world of smoothness. Welcome to the regime of liminal comforts, the unbearable lightness of swiping, clicking and liking.\textsuperscript{31}

Here lies the thesis of this book: tomorrow’s challenge will not be the internet’s omnipresence but its very invisibility. That’s why Big Brother is the wrong framing. Social media are anything but monstrous machines. The sweet ‘eye’ of the screen is a spectacle that easily distracts us. Mind control is more subtle, and does not congeal in exemplary images and objects. Social media gather influence in the background. We need the input here of a new generation of technopsycho-analysts to radically update the disappeared ‘mass psychology’ discipline, from Freud and Canetti onwards, to explain these new states of collective unconscious. These insights, in turn, should be paired with an equally new batch of sociologists who can think through the abstraction of work (due to digitization and automation). How can sociology be lured away from Big Data and, once again, contribute to critical theory? Is a new Methodenstreit necessary or can the regressive obsession with quantitative analysis be countered in a different way? Needless to say, our expressionist science has to get over its own defensive, depressive state. One way of doing this would be a radical reassessment of ‘French theory’ and the mechanical way theory has been utilized in the recent past.\textsuperscript{32} It is all very well to dream of swarms and proclaim the networked multitude (and warn of its dark side), but it is equally important to design new forms of sociality that harness these energies, for instance in ‘collective awareness platforms’ that emphasize long-term collaborations over spontaneous one-off gatherings.\textsuperscript{33} The power of concepts that are implemented and start to live a life of their own is still imminent, and there are plenty of examples of this, also, in this book.

Where do you find comrades to work with, to live with, to love and care for? How can we envision new organizational forms that are both horizontal and vertical, with an external arm and a rich internal structure? Are we ready for political dating sites and hyper-local social signaling? What’s a ‘like’ with technical consequences? How can we move on from the simple ‘clicktivism’ level of Avaaz to scalable local organizations that can respond to sudden events while
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having a long-term agenda? What could peer-to-peer solidarity look like? This is why the Anonymous episode of 2009–12, so accurately documented by Gabriella Coleman, remains so deeply subversive and inspiring, despite all the tragic mistakes and betrayals, leading to the lengthy prison sentences of Barrett Brown and others. ‘What is to be done?’ is a question of not merely how to address world leaders during their summits, but also how to design digital sensibility, so as to forge direct and ongoing involvements with as yet unknown others.

Furthermore, as Michael Seemann writes: ‘Decentralised approaches will only work if you keep the data open. Only open data can be centrally queryable and avoid misappropriation at the same time.’ Is the ‘federated web’ a viable alternative to the centralization strategy of the status quo? What does it mean when we federate? Obviously federation is an ancient political concept, meaning voluntary association into a larger state unit. In the internet context, federation goes beyond direct, peer-to-peer connections and addresses protocol issues and governance. But can we also speak of a federation of abilities? When we mash data from various sources and bring them together in our browser, we oppose the logic of the centralized data silos. Would this be an effective answer to the uncontested rise of data centres? It’s easy to dismiss this approach as a techno-fix. Engineering Our Way Out of Fascism, as Smari McCarthy proposed, should be taken seriously as a strategic contribution. Fascism is defined here as ‘the perfect union of state and business’. Today’s questions of political organization are technological in nature. Those who argue alongside Machiavelli, Hobbes, Hegel or Schmitt repeat the problems of the ruling elites and implicitly desire to overrule social movements and their dynamics with a higher body (the Party) that will coordinate and control political dissent.

Technology is always political; there can be a consensus about this, yet it is hard to consider that politics is technical in nature. We’re attracted to the purity of the separated realm of intrigue where interests clash and the power game is being played out, rather than confronting ourselves with the ‘Albert Speer’ legacy: we, the programmers, are hacktivists and geeks; the technocrat is always the other.

We need a shift from the attention economy to a web of intentions. The strategy should be to crystallize the social through ‘networks with consequences’. The current social media architectures merely capture value (from a business perspective). They monitor events and commodify news (without producing it) for audiences whose
preferences can be sold to the highest bidder. Abstraction is our black hole. The proposed solution here is focused user groups (also called organized networks) that can operate outside of the ‘like’ economy and its weak links. Mutual aid outside the recommendation industry. Sharing outside of Airbnb and Uber. A cooperative renaissance on the internet is possible.\textsuperscript{39} We should not give up on the multitude of attempts to design general software and related machine languages, as these are our only viable strategy against the monopolistic intermediates. We will have to define a seductive mix between federalism and ‘re-decentralization’. Celebrate the aesthetics of collective meaningfulness and develop the tools that encode the principles that we value in society. This will only become possible when we say farewell to the free and built-in counter-monetization procedures on all levels, so that the gift will, once again, become a precious gesture, not a slippery, hidden default. In order to get there, we need to recapture the network as a distinct form, different from the working group, the party and the old hierarchies inside companies, armies and religious organizations. How does the network as a social practice relate to the co-op as a legal form? This type of strategic thinking makes it possible to free ourselves from the ‘reticular pessimism’ that according to Alex Galloway, claims ‘that there is no escape from the fetters of the network’.\textsuperscript{40} ‘Networks are a mode of mediation, just like any other’, he concludes. Let’s, therefore, zoom in on the unforeseen organizational possibilities that lie ahead – inside and outside the network. Let’s re-position ourselves on its edges, to understand networks as new institutional forms.
WHAT IS THE SOCIAL IN SOCIAL MEDIA?

Headlines for the Few: ‘Next time you’re hiring, forget personality tests, just check out the applicant’s Facebook profile instead.’ – ‘Stephanie Watanabe spent nearly four hours Thursday night unfriending about 700 of her Facebook friends – and she isn’t done yet.’ – ‘Facebook apology or jail time: Ohio man gets to choose.’ – ‘Study: Facebook users getting less friendly’ – ‘Women tend to have stronger feelings regarding who has access to their personal information. (Mary Madden) – ‘All dressed up and no place to go.’ (Wall Street Journal) – ‘I’m making more of an effort to be social these days, because I don’t want to be alone, and I want to meet people.’ (Cindy Sherman) – ‘30 per cent posted updates that met the American Psychiatric Association’s criteria for a symptom of depression, reporting feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness, insomnia or sleeping too much, and difficulty concentrating.’ – ‘Hunt for Berlin police officer pictured giving Nazi salute on Facebook’ – ‘15-year-old takes to Facebook to curse and complain about her parents. The disgusted father later blasts her laptop with a gun.’

The use of the word ‘social’ in the context of information technology dates back to the very beginnings of cybernetics. A sub-field called socio-cybernetics was created inside of sociology to study the ‘network of social forces that influence human behaviour’, able to optimize or modify information systems. With the production of software well underway, the social pops up in the 1980s emergence of ‘groupware’. In the same period, Friedrich Kittler from the materialist school of German media theory dismissed the use of the word ‘social’ as irrelevant fluff (computers calculate, they do not interfere in human relations, so we should stop projecting our mundane all-too-human desires onto electronic circuits, etc). Meanwhile, holistic hippies of the Wired school ignored such cynical machine
knowledge from Old Europe, celebrating instead a positive, humanistic approach that worshipped computers as tools for personal liberation, a mentality later turned by Steve Jobs into a design principle and marketing machine. Before the dotcom venture capital takeover of IT in the second half of the 1990s, progressive computing was primarily occupied with making tools, and focused on collaborations between two or more people; not for ‘sharing’, but for getting work done. The social, in this context, meant exchanges between isolated nodes. Owing partly to its ‘alternative’ beginnings, the Californian individualistic emphasis on cool interface design and usability was always supplemented with ‘community’ investments in networks. But this Californian ‘social’ just means sharing amongst users. It doesn’t get close to anything like collective ownership or public utility.

Computers have, in fact, always been hybrids of the social and the post-human. From the beginning of their industrial life as giant calculators, the linking up of different units was seen as both a possibility and necessity. In his never-published essay, ‘How Computer Networks Became Social’, Sydney-based media theorist Chris Chesher maps out the historical and interdisciplinary development – from sociometry and social network analysis (with roots going back to the 1930s) through Granovetter’s work on ‘weak links’ in 1973, to Castells’ *Network Society* (1996) and the current mapping efforts of the techno-scientists who gather under the Actor Network Theory umbrella – of an ‘offline’ science that studies the dynamics of human networks. The conceptual leap that is most relevant to grasp is the move from groups, lists, forums and communities to the empowerment of loosely connected individuals in networks. This shift had already begun in the neoliberal 1990s, facilitated by growing computing power, storage capacity and internet bandwidth, alongside simplifying interfaces on smaller and smaller (mobile) devices. This is where we enter the Empire of the Social.

If we want to pose the question of what this ‘social’ in today’s social media really means, a possible starting point could be its disappearance, as described by Jean Baudrillard, the French sociologist who theorized the transition of the subject into a consumer. According to Baudrillard, at some point the social lost its historical role and imploded into media. If the social is no longer the once dangerous mix of politicized proletarians, frustrated unemployed and dirty *clochards* that hang out on the streets, waiting for the next opportunity to revolt under whatever banner, then how do social elements manifest themselves in the digital networked age?
The ‘social question’ may not have been resolved, but for decades in the West it has felt as if it was neutralized. In the post-World War II period, instrumental knowledge of how to manage the social was seen as necessary, to the extent that thinking about ‘the social’ in an intellectual and technical sense was delegated to a somewhat closed circle of professional experts. Now, in the midst of a global economic downturn, can we see a return or even renaissance of the social? Or is all this talk about the rise of ‘social media’ just a linguistic coincidence? Can we speak, in the never-ending aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, of a growing social and class awareness, and, if so, can this spread into the electronic realm? Despite the hardships of unemployment, increasing income disparities and the achievements of the Occupy protests, a globally networked uprising that scales up quickly seems unlikely. Protests are successful precisely because they are local, despite their networked presence. ‘Memes’ are travelling at the speed of light, spreading basic concepts. But how can the separate entities of work, culture, politics and networked communication in a global context be connected in such a way that information (for instance, via Twitter) and interpersonal communication (email, Facebook) can have an effect on the actual organization of world events?

Here we must reframe considerations of the social into a larger, strategic context than the typical ‘social media question’ poses. Maybe all these neatly administrated contacts and address books at some point spill over and leave the virtual realm, as the popularity of dating sites seems to suggest. Do we only share information, experiences and emotions for the mirroring sake of it, or do we also conspire, as ‘social swarms’, to raid reality in order to create so-called ‘real world’ events? Will contacts mutate into comrades? It is clear that social media solved some of the organizational problems of the social that the baby boom / suburb generation faced fifty years ago: boredom, isolation, depression and desire. How do we come together, differently, right now? Do we unconsciously fear (or long for) the day when our vital infrastructure breaks down, and we really need each other? Or should we read the Simulacrum of the Social as more like organized agony – confronting the loss of community after the fragmentation of family, marriage, friendship and so on? With what rationale do we assemble these ever-growing collections of contacts otherwise? Is the Other, relabelled as ‘friend’, going to be more than a future customer, or ‘lifesaver’ only of our business dealings in precarity? What new forms of social imaginary already exist? And on the other side of these questions, should solitude as a response to the daily...
pressures of the ‘social’ be promoted as *Kulturideal*, as the likes of Nietzsche and Ayn Rand also proposed? At what point does our administration of others mutate into something different altogether? Will befriending disappear overnight, like so many other new media-related practices that vanished into the digital nirvana, such as Usenet forums, telnet log-ins to servers, or our once wide-spread HTML coding of our own websites?

The container concept ‘social Web’ once described a fuzzy collection of websites from MySpace, Digg, YouTube, Flickr to Wikipedia. Five years later, the term was broadened to include a wider range of soft and hard devices (including not only PCs and laptops) and rebranded into ‘social media’. There was very little that was nostalgic about this project, no revival of the once dangerous potential of ‘the social’ along the lines of the angry mob that once demanded the end of economic inequality. Instead, to remain inside Baudrillard’s vocabulary, the social was reanimated as a mere simulacrum of its own capacity to create meaningful and lasting social relations. Roaming around in virtual global networks, we believe that we are less and less committed to our roles within traditional communities such as the family, church, political party, trade union and neighbourhood. Historical subjects, once defined in terms like ‘citizens’ or ‘members of a class’, carrying certain rights, have been transformed into subjects with agency: dynamic actors called users, customers who complain, and prosumers. The social is no longer a reference to society even – an insight that troubles us theorists and critics whose empirical research still proves that people, despite all their outward behaviour, remain quite firmly embedded in certain cultural, local and especially hierarchical structures. Stripped of all metaphysical values, the social is becoming a placeholder for something resembling inter-personal rubble, the leftovers after the neoliberal destruction of ‘society’, a loose collection of ‘weak ties’. As a concept, it lacks both the religious undertone of terms such as ‘community’ and the retroactive anthropological connotation of the ‘tribe’. To put this in marketing terms, the current ‘social’ is just that which is technical and vaguely ‘open’ – the space between you and me and our friends.

Accordingly, the social no longer manifests itself primarily as a class, movement or mob, nor does it institutionalize itself anymore, as happened during the post-war decades of the welfare state. Even the postmodern phase of disintegration and decay seems over. Nowadays, the social manifests itself in a network form. Its practices emerge outside of the walls of the twentieth-century institutions,