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Will the 'hive mind' of social networking replace classical forms of knowledge production? Comparing Web 2.0 and small-scale, self-run cultural platforms, Olga Goriunova maintains the possibility for originality in both contexts, while identifying how the same old commercial and institutional pressures still operate

The term 'platform' is so common today it makes people sick (though not as much as 'Web 2.0' does). It is thought to have originated with Tim O'Reilly and his article on Web 2.0 in which he describes 'the web as platform', not as a figure of speech but a description of concrete developments. [1] Back in 2002, when I started conceiving of my work on the software art repository Runme.org in terms of a platform on which to build an art trend, it was difficult to decide on which term to apply. 'Platform' only had a history of metaphorical usage, such as with the Dutch 'Virtueel Platform' which was established in 1998 as an expertise centre 'stimulating innovation and supporting e-culture'. [2]

It seems that the web as 'platform' in O'Reilly's terms bears a mainly technical meaning. A platform spans 'all connected devices', 'delivering software as a continually-updated service'; 'a platform for interacting with content'. [3] Even 'the web and all its connected devices as one global platform' implies the meaning of a platform as of a *server* (or servers) 'delivering desktop-like applications over the web'. [4] Thus, a platform for Web 2.0 adapts serves applications to end-users through a web browser allowing interaction with content. Such a definition is useful and helps make a distinction for designers and programmers between Web 1.0 that supposedly was about static html-based web sites (with CGI or Perl on the back-end) and Web 2.0's dynamic platforms generally built with 'CSS for layout, XML for data, XHTML for markup, JavaScript and the DOM for behavior...' on the front end and 'PHP or (especially) Ruby on Rails' on the back-end. [5]

However, this description does not adequately address the politics of the technical architectures and applications involved. O'Reilly and his followers try to do this by nodding towards the fostering of community, collaboration, the 'architecture of participation', 'rich-user experiences', and 'collective intelligence', but continuously fail to prove that such cultural phenomena were not present in the times of what they term Web 1.0. My criticism is not original; Slate.com has been calling Web 2.0 a technical upgrade, while the participatory or social aspects of Web 2.0 are 'what the Web was supposed to be all along', as Tim Berners-Lee puts it. [6]

'Art platform' was the term I came up with as a solution for what to call an online platform that enables the building of a cultural movement entirely through the use of its own mechanisms. It describes a web platform that solicits, induces and produces a cultural or artistic phenomenon. Examples of such platforms include Micromusic.net, an 8-bit music platform, Runme.org, a software art repository, and Udaff.com, a 'mate lit' platform (mate or mat lit is my term for a current literary genre deploying obscene, colloquial, orthographic Russian discourse). [7] Two years ago, trying to provide a definition of an art platform, I wrote:

A platform differentiates itself from other websites by the relations of creative, social, instrumental, educational and historical character it establishes and is involved into. A platform is aimed at supporting and stimulating creative initiatives and work, and it provides a possibility for continuous exhibition of the artefacts, often accompanied by reactions to them, various discussions. Sometimes there is also a set of instruments for particular kind of creative work available. A platform often also puts efforts into translating digital creative processes into offline and more official cultural scenes, establishing connections between cultural movements of

different times and orders. Most platforms organize (ir)regular ‘real-life’ gatherings such as festivals, concerts, workshops or those of a less formal nature.[8]

Most parts of this description can be applied today to blogging, photo-sharing and other platforms. However, the art platforms I refer to are all quite classical static web sites. And, on top of building ‘communities’, ‘experiences’ and ‘collective knowledge’, they build distinctive cultural products, whether regarded as digital folk, creative practices of everyday or artistic trends.

An art platform appears as a reaction to the development of a particular cultural creative practice it focuses on. It is quickly built by a few enthusiasts. A platform is administered, and all incoming projects moderated by, a small group of people (usually 1-5). It has an open database with a user-friendly interface anyone can download from/upload to. It accumulates a number of creative products that in turn attract new users and new products. Building a database of works, a platform chooses a particular mechanism of reward and distinction, be it voting or featuring, and contributes to the discourse and context of the practice it works within. Working with the ‘grey’ zones of cultural production, with grass-root practices, such platforms can create significant artistic and cultural phenomena, and transfer the practice onto a different cultural level.

If we look at the interface, art platforms can be clearly differentiated from blogs. Art platforms are single interface platforms, and blogs or tagging platforms are multiple interface platforms. Single interface platforms have a single entrance, a point of concentration, of maximum understanding of the resource. Such an interface may include a list of categories, whether a straightforward taxonomic database interface, as in the case of Runme.org, or of the latest texts, as with Udaff.com. If you visit a multiple interface platform there is no home page or main entrance. In the blogosphere, you navigate through personal blogs, through photographs and cross-references, by means of user names, friends, comments and links. Although banal, this distinction reveals a further, more fundamental one: single interface platforms are devoted to a single ‘theme’, a shared aesthetic, creative, even political horizon.

If on multiple interface platforms there are tools that help maintain the ‘healthy’ functioning of the system (for instance, ‘abuse teams’ in the case of blogs), with single interface platforms there is a need for moderators who are responsible for the development of the interface, which in fact means control over the content development of the entire system.

Such centralisation renders moderation very crucial, and is far from being ‘automated curation’.[9] It is a taste-based, individualised decision-making process developed over time. Precise moderation, especially at the beginning, and the considered construction of a system is necessary to the survival of the platform and success of the trend. Moderation, together with users’ input, helps develop the cultural movement and its discourse.

Multiple interface platforms users visit selected pages. With singular interface platforms, the user, interested in the trend the platform is devoted to, can explore almost the entire database. Contributing to such a platform, the user enters and co-creates a content rich context. With such platforms it is possible to develop an artistic movement, to add some missing elements to a creative activity, giving it a theoretical, social or political dimension.

However, I would like to add that in terms of how and what they (can) potentially produce, art platforms and other platforms are not so different and can complement each other. This possibility exists against a general climate of mistrust on the part of researchers and intellectuals over the quality of the knowledge produced on platforms. There is a continuous outcry on the part of some theorists and developers, claiming that the horizontalisation of knowledge and power celebrated by projects such as Wikipedia is dangerous. Jaron Lanier talks of the dangers of online collectivism and the belief in the wisdom of the collective. Larry Sanger criticises not specifically the celebration of amateurism

but attacks on professionalism and expertise. Jürgen Habermas claims the use of the internet weakens the position of the traditional intellectual and undermines the achievements of the public sphere.[10]

However, the institution and construction of knowledge on Wikipedia, for instance, is really no different to the construction of offline encyclopedias. According to Wikipedia etiquette, as Fernanda Vegas and Martin Wattenberg mention in their study, before posting to an article it is desirable to discuss the prepared text on an article's 'talk page' with others, including 'permanent editors' of the article.[11] Trust for a certain author is built on the 'reputation' she develops over her history of participation in Wikipedia, and most authors possess individual personae known to others. The history of changes of an article presents a quite detailed and documented 'history of argument' and disagreement over a subject fighting its way through. The roles of institutions participating in the invention and construction of knowledge offline, such as scientific magazines with their peer-reviews or publishing houses with their publications and conferences, are seriously transformed but to a large degree reproduced online.

Wikipedia is a unique example, however. It should not serve as the face of Web 2.0 or some new generation of 'dangers'. Nor should it be mixed with tagging, blogging or mapping platforms which are much more oriented toward individual than collective production.

The central claim here is that, contra the critics of social network-based knowledge, the creativity of users across all kinds of platforms, from digital folklore, creative and liberating practices of everyday life, subcultural expressivity, and graphorrhea to artistic production, is capable of producing 'original' results, especially if certain human-technical decisions help channel the process.

For instance, with art platforms, the technical bottlenecks of moderating, featuring, voting and making comments that channel the collective effort help create an artistic or cultural phenomenon. An art platform works as an art institution – it allows for the bias of the curator or editor; it allows for the storage and exhibition of works, as do museums or libraries with journals; it allows for contextualising, as do publications or conferences; it allows for feedback and peer review, as do magazines. An art platform produces histories, identities, knowledge and social clusters, exactly in the manner of those interrelations constituting power which Foucault grasped. It represents a quite centred power model that is seemingly not characteristic of platforms considered to be Web 2.0 services.

In order to create a focus, all platforms apply similar mechanisms rooted in the offline histories of power and institutions, however. For instance, when a community devoted to certain topics is formed on a blogging platform, a moderator turns up, a set of rules arises, and often after a while postings are re-filtered and organised in a database with a straightforward taxonomic interface. Such filters, human and technical, help re-create the figure of the professional or even intellectual, with individual judgement, taste and insight. It is a figure that re-vitalises the zombie of the traditional intellectual specialist, making it more 'autonomous' but also more vulnerable.

Bourdieu describes the intellectual as an historical product formed by a struggle between the forces of economics and politics, a struggle for autonomy.[12] The authority of intellectuals derives from their specific position in the relatively autonomous world of art or science and their adherence to values such as disinterestedness, ethical purity and expertise. Bourdieu calls for the preservation of the intellectual's autonomy currently endangered by corporate sponsorship of universities, and their direct subordination to business and political imperatives. Answering Lanier's criticism of Wikipedia, its co-founder, Larry Sanger, counters:

Slashdotters would not simply stand for a system in which some hand-selected group of editors choose or promote posts; but if the result is decided by an impersonal algorithm, then it's okay. It isn't that the Slashdotters have a rational belief that the cream will rise to the top, under the system; people use the system just because it seems fairer or more equal to them.[13]

While traditional bastions of knowledge/power suffer a crisis of authority arising from their loss of autonomy, many internet users, believing they are able to own their means of production, circulation and consecration, become the new intellectuals fighting for a 'fairer' space or principle, re-establishing autonomy through technical or human-technical decisions. They are in fact led by the very same imperatives Bourdieu describes.

Working on a platform is an economically vulnerable position. Such labour is usually performed by 'freaks' for free or for micro-money obtained for purposes loosely associated with their work on the platform. Nevertheless, a moderator or developer is well aware of their economic precariousness. The work of the ordinary user, by contrast, is not ordinarily understood as labour per se. It does, however, belong to the category of 'immaterial labour' as described by Italian marxists such as Maurizio Lazzarato, Paolo Virno, Tiziana Terranova and others. Such cultural production provides new types of products and relations which alter the process of surplus value extraction; it drives innovation, trains in precariousness, locates social desires.

The means of cultural production, in this case platforms, necessarily belong to the capitalist class and are either bought by companies or – today – built by them from scratch. These companies not only want to control the technical means, but the data as well. However, platforms' licences and terms of use vary drastically. Some, like Tagzania, use a Creative Commons licence, but most platforms stipulate shared copyright with the content's author.

Tim O'Reilly, an originator of the idea of the 'user ownership of data' (an oft repeated but rather unclear statement), claims:

Much as the rise of proprietary software has led to the Free Software movement, we expect the rise of proprietary databases to result in a Free Data movement within the next decade.[14]

However, there are several issues worth raising concerning the user's data and its ownership. First, data is not that important to platform owners. What is important is the presence of users and the continuous use of the platform's facilities. For instance, one cannot easily gather all the postings to a personal blog along with their commentaries and transfer that data to another platform. The data is intertwined in the platform and, until she loses interest, the user will be back to work on the relevant platform she has already devoted time to. Secondly, a person willing to make an open or free data platform will (and did) eventually find out that traffic volumes are too high for an individual to sustain and will eventually sell it. This complex set of interdependencies defines the current picture.

As Tiziana Terranova puts it:

... this mode also signals the emergence of new machines of control and subjectification which reimpose hierarchical relations at the service of social reproduction and the production of surplus value. These are moments which turn qualitative, intensive differences into quantitative relations of exchange and equivalence; which enclose the open and dissipative potential of cultural production into differential hierarchies; which accumulate the rewards or work carried out by larger social assemblages...[15]

However, Wikipedia managed to choose a different economic model for itself. The vicious circle described above can only be challenged if platforms are considered public spaces, analogous to those of a city. This said, other problems linked to public space and coupled with the issues relating to the nature of networks will inevitably arise.

The situation is different with art platforms. If platforms are increasingly corporately owned, art platforms tend to be run by enthusiasts. The developer of a platform can sell it, the moderator of an art platform can't. An art platform's moderator is the one who registered the domain name, collaborated on or supervised the technical development of the resource, invested, along with other moderators, significant amounts of time into 'raising' a platform, deciding on almost every single aspect of its development. The moderator(s) and the users together create a cultural entity which is coherent, specific and, importantly, small-scale. Its subject is avant-garde and marginal.

Without moderation and the trust of its users, the art platform turns into a dead archive. This is the core principle by which it is distinguished from other platforms that largely run 'by themselves', demanding maintenance from the owner in a way comparable to the maintenance of a bicycle. In conclusion, it is rather unlikely that art platforms in their current shape will become economically appealing to companies.

The term 'Web 2.0' was created as a business slogan, a logo, so it came as little surprise to hear that O'Reilly had applied for a patent on Web 2.0 as a service mark in 2003. The patent was pending the whole time O'Reilly was promoting it as a generic term. Despite the term's poverty, its success subsumes all the attempts to talk about social software, a participatory web, collective creation and other, different and pre-existing models.

Like Meccano, many buildings can be constructed from the same constitutive elements, and different purposes and principles inform different platforms. If we understand them in this way, platforms cannot in general be stigmatised as loci of the unoriginal 'hive mind', and there is no need for a term like Web 2.0.

[1] Tim O'Reilly, 'What Is Web 2.0. Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software', 2005 <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>

[2] Virteel Platform, 'About', see: <http://www.virtueelplatform.nl/set-223-en.html>

[3] Andrew Orlowski, 'Web 2.0: It's ... like your brain on LSD!', http://www.theregister.co.uk/2005/10/21/web_two_point_nought_poll/;
Richard MacManus & Joshua Porter, 'Web 2.0 for Designers', http://www.digital-web.com/articles/web_2_for_designers/

[4] Dion Hinchcliffe, 'The State of Web 2.0', http://web2.wsj2.com/the_state_of_web_20.htm; Paul Graham, 'Web 2.0', <http://www.paulgraham.com/web20.html#f1n>

[5] Jeffrey Zeldman, 'Web 3.0', <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/web3point0>

[6] Paul Boutin, 'Web 2.0 Doesn't Live Up to its Name', <http://www.slate.com/id/2138951/>; Nate Anderson, 'Tim Berners-Lee on Web 2.0: "Nobody Knows What it Means"', <http://arstechnica.com/news.ars/post/20060901-7650.html>

[7] For a more detailed analysis of mate lit, see Olga Goriunova, “‘Male literature’ of Udaff.com and Other Networked Artistic Practices of the Cultural Resistance”, in *Control + Shift. Public and Private Usages of the Russian Internet*, eds. Henrike Schmidt, Katy Teubener, Natalja Konradova, Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2006.

[8] Olga Goriunova & Alexei Shulgin, ‘From Art on Networks to Art on Platforms’, in *Data Browser*, volume 3: *Curating Immateriality: On the Work of the Curator in the Age of Network Systems*, ed. Joasia Krysa, New York: Autonomedia, 2006.

[9] The term ‘automated curating’ appears to originate from Eva Grubinger’s project *C@C – Computer-Aided Curating* (1993-1995). For an account of the project, see Eva Grubinger, ‘C@C, Computer-Aided Curating (1993-1995) Revisited’, in Joasia Krysa, op. cit.

[10] Jaron Lanier, ‘Digital Maoism: The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism’, 2006, http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/lanier06/lanier06_index.html; Larry Sanger, ‘Why Wikipedia Must Jettison Its Anti-Elitism’, 2004, <http://www.kuro5hin.org/story/2004/12/30/142458/25>; Jürgen Habermas, ‘Towards a United States of Europe’, 2006, <http://www.signandsight.com/features/676.html>

[11] Fernanda Vegas, Martin Wattenberg, Kushal Dave, ‘Studying Cooperation and Conflict between Authors with *history flow* Visualisations’, 2004, http://alumni.media.mit.edu/~fviegas/papers/history_flow.pdf

[12] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005

[13] Larry Sanger, ‘On “Digital Maoism: The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism” By Jaron Lanier’, http://www.edge.org/discourse/digital_maoism.html

[14] See Dion Hinchcliffe, op. cit., and Tim O’Reilly, op. cit.

[15] Tiziana Terranova, ‘Of Sense and Sensibility: Immaterial Labor in Open Systems’, in Joasia Krysa, op. cit.

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