A Chat Room of One's Own

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introduction

Social networks are web applications that allow users to post content and interact with other content and content creators. Since the launch of Myspace in 2003, social networks have been an integral part of the internet, and their existence affected both the online and offline experience of billions of people. When Time magazine dedicated the 2006 person of the year issue to user generated content, Facebook was one year old and had 12 million followers. Today, that number is around 2.3 billion.

4.6 billion people in the world have internet access, and among those, 4.1 billion use social media. Social media use not only grew, but it eclipsed the majority of online spaces. This ubiquity is not undeserved either, the idea of social networks brought along a democratization of the ability to broadcast. Anyone with an internet access post their content on Myspace or DeviantArt and gain an audience. And as internet use became more widespread, as celebrities, politicians, CEOs and other public figures started to use Twitter, social networks enabled the general public to directly address people who they would not have any means to interact with. Through the years, not only social networks became more politically relevant through their users, but also through the power they held through owning important infrastructures of communication and the access to the large amounts of user data. Activists have been using internet for communication and organization almost since it's inception, but the world at large realized the impact social networking can have on politics relatively recently. Major protests in Egypt in early 2011 and in Turkey in 2013 were in part made possible by the effective utilization of Facebook and Twitter, and they continued to be important tools for

communication and organization throughout the protests. Social networks became integral in documenting police brutality as well, Greg Doucette, a criminal defense attorney used Twitter to compile documented instances of police brutality during Black Lives Matter protests in the US in 2020. The twitter thread currently contains almost a thousand tweets.

The problem is, as users, we don't own a lot on the internet. And we don't have a lot of say in the state of the services that we use. Sites that we visit can change drastically without any input from us, and things we enjoy can suddenly disappear because they don't bring in enough revenue for their owners. Alphabet Inc., Google's parent company, is notorious for purchasing and then shutting down websites and services. (Ogden, 2019) What is even more concerning is that, in situations of political conflict, the companies that own these services cooperate with the side that will benefit them the most, and that side is very often the side that holds the most power. As oppressive governments become aware of the power social media can have, they try to monitor, censor and control social media use through various methods. The Turkish government holds significant power over mainstream news channels, and in the last decade has been consistently working towards gaining control over public discourse on social networks as well. A legislation passed in 2020 requires social networks with more than a million users to establish legal entities in Turkey (TBMM, 2020), which means they would need to comply with law enforcement and government when it comes to sharing user data to avoid fines and bandwidth throttling. The strategy of the Turkish regime is not only to stifle dissent, but also to cut off communication between those who have similar dissenting opinions. For those who are critical of the government, especially for those who are from

marginalized backgrounds, and are willing to organize and work to protect their right to exist with peace, only a few options remain: to keep using mainstream social media and risk their safety, to log off and risk losing communication with friends and comrades, or maybe, to find communication channels where users have agency over their data.

Is it possible to democratize the ownership of the internet? Can we have more agency on the services that we use, especially when it comes to ensuring our safety and well being? If so, (and hopefully it is so) what tools can we use to make this possible? This text explores these questions in three main chapters. In the first chapter, I analyze social networks as they exist today, focusing on the motivations of companies that own them and how these motivations shape the culture within the networks. In the second chapter, I explore their intersection with politics in different parts of the world with a focus on Turkey; how they are utilized by activists and oppressed groups, and by power structures. The third chapter is a look into online communities and communication channels that existed before social media, and newer ones that provide users more privacy and autonomy. Through this exploration, I hope to find ways we can create online spaces that facilitate communication and have agency over our online presence.

networks

As an umbrella term, "Social Network" is vague and to some extent, deceptive. While it's easy to associate the words "social" and "network" with sites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram; it's not always easy to see why certain websites are categorized as social networking sites. Why is YouTube defined as a social network when from the vantage point of majority of it's users, it shares more similarities with Netfilx than Facebook? The most important criteria of social networks, especially for the purposes of this thesis, is that they do not create content. They host and curate content created by their users.

While social networks made it possible for everyone to have an internet presence without the need for extensive technical knowledge, the growth of these sites also arguably has lead to a more monotonous online experience. This can be observed best in the reactions to the closure of StumbleUpon, a content recommendation platform, in 2018. The news of StumbleUpon's closure brought on reflection about how the way we use internet has changed. Megan Farokhmanesh writes *"The conundrum of the internet in 2018 is that, despite being more connected than ever, it's increasingly a challenge to have fun online."* (2018). Dan Nosowitz highlights how Facebook and Twitter have taken over his online experience, and how internet became a utility rather than a world to be discovered. *"Where once we'd had a rich ecosystem of extremely stupid and funny sites on which we might procrastinate, we now had only Twitter and Facebook."* (2018) With the recent discontinuation of Adobe Flash Player, countless browser based flash games and animation disappeared from the internet. A collection on the Internet Archive dedicated to Flash games and animation was

launched in October 2020, and currently contains 3,188 items. Another archiving project, BlueMaxima's Flashpoint, has saved 70,000 flash games and 8,000 animations since early 2018 (BlueMaxima, 2018) and thanks to these archiving efforts, this plethora of material isn't completely gone. But the fact that Adobe Inc. did not seem very concerned about preserving material made with Flash is concerning. Tech companies that provide the infrastructures for online content don't have any reason to put effort into preserving content once it stops being profitable.

To what extent do social networks facilitate meaningful social interaction? While, especially in its earlier years, Facebook gave a channel of communication to people who might not have kept in contact otherwise, its affordance has shifted over the years. Facebook, like Twitter and Instagram, gives its users a space to broadcast their opinions and snippets of their lives, but the way these platforms are built ensures that a large majority, if not all, of the self expression and interaction that happen are performance or spectacle, rather than sincere forms of socialization. A lot of socialization on Twitter take place in the form of arguments. Instagram was ranked as the worst social network for mental health in a survey by Royal Society for Public Health (2017). In contrast, YouTube, a social networking site that is arguably not a social network for most users but a content provider like Netflix, is the only social network that has a net positive effect on mental health according the same survey. As humans, we are inherently social and cooperative. Socialization and caretaking are recognized as the human traits that led to the development of our technology and culture. (Burkart et al. 2014) So why do these

platforms that are supposedly defined by socialization, make us feel worse?

Because they're not really concerned with socialization at all.

In 2020, 86% of Twitter's revenue came from advertising services (Twitter Inc., 2020), and YouTube made 15 billion dollars from ads in 2019 (Alphabet Inc., 2020). It's clear that the customers of these companies are not their viewers or users, but advertisers and the buyers of the user data they have collected. Birgit Bachler questions the way Facebook collects information from users. *"While Facebook suggests that creating a profile of ourselves is a way to express who we are to our friends and family, what we are actually doing is filling in a form that makes it easier for algorithms to analyze us. (...) our online presence becomes a product, interesting for marketers and valuable to Facebook."* (2012)

Social networks are incentivized to provide their users with content that will keep them engaged, but this does not necessarily mean that said content needs to be of good quality, useful, or healthy. This is the incentive with which these platforms curate content. Instagram is the worst platform for mental health because the only way it can continue its existence is by keeping its users in a mindset in which they are likely to spend money. Inadequate, unsatisfied. Considering all this, the addition of a "Shop" tab to its homepage in late 2020, a time period defined by mental health strain and isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic does not feel very inconsequential.

The effects of this ad revenue based business model is omnipresent in all social networks. YouTube does not outright remove

content on the basis of not being advertiser friendly, but it discourages the creation of such videos through demonetizing[1] and not recommending them to users. And due to the size of YouTube, the process of deciding which videos need to be demonetized cannot possibly be executed by human reviewers. The process of recognizing "advertiser unfriendly" content is automated, where certain words and visuals are recognized by bots. YouTube's own guidelines on "Advertiser Friendly Content" clearly states that, for example, videos that contain "exposed breasts or full nudity" will not be monetized. But their guidelines on violent content are much less specific, this leads to situations where videos containing life drawing models with the purpose of education are demonetized and age restricted, while prank videos where men "pretend" to pressure their girlfriends into sex are not only allowed ads, but are also accessible by everyone. This techno solutionist approach to content moderation eliminates nuance and can prevent meaningful discussion because it forces content creators to stick to “safe” subjects.

YouTube’s contradictory content moderation stems from the prioritization of “engagement.” For years, YouTubers garnered attention by creating increasingly over the top content, and their behavior was actively encouraged by YouTube. At a point when YouTube was already under fire for spreading misinformation, two popular YouTubers became involved in a number of controversies.[2] This lead to YouTube putting more focus on predictable and risk free

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[1] Removing the ability to make money from ad revenue, or reducing the amount of ad revenue can be earned. Generally, family vlogs and children’s content bring more ad revenue.

[2] [2] YouTube openly endorsed creators such as Felix Kjellberg (Pewdiepie) and the Paul brothers on the basis of being popular, and since a majority of these creators used click-baiting and exploiting various controversies to get views, they were constantly having to outdo themselves to stay trending. In 2017, Kjellberg posted a video where he paid two men to hold up an antisemitic sign. After that, In 2018, Logan Paul posted a video that contained footage of remains of a suicide victim. These did not come from nowhere, Kjellberg was known for offensive statements disguised as jokes long before 2017, and Logan Paul was known for careless and dangerous actions before 2018. These two events were just controversial enough for advertisers to refuse to be associated with.

corporate content. *“Individual YouTube creators couldn’t keep up with the pace of YouTube’s algorithm set. But traditional, mainstream outlets could: late-night shows began to dominate YouTube, along with music videos from major labels. The platform now looked the way it had when it started, but with the stamp of Hollywood approval.”* (Alexander, 2019) It’s hard to call YouTube a self broadcasting platform at this point. And it isn't just YouTube, corporations have the means to hire social media experts, designers and professional photographers to ensure their tweets and Instagram posts reach as many people as possible. Brands are pretending to be depressed millennials on Twitter and there are virtual influencers on Instagram. For most of us, internet is not a place to explore content other ordinary people post anymore. Everything is a PR stunt, everyone is trying to sell us things.

In The Origins of Totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt contemplates loneliness as a factor that can draw those who suffer from it into totalitarian ideology, as well as how loneliness is induced by totalitarian regimes in order to keep masses under control. In the chapter Ideology and Terror, she writes:

> *"Isolation and impotence, that is the fundamental inability to act at all, have always been characteristic of tyrannies. Political contacts between men are severed in tyrannical government and the human capacities for action and power are frustrated."*
>
> *“Loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government, and for ideology or logicality, the preparation of its executioners and victims, is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluousness which*

have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our own time. To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all." (Arendt, 1958 p. 474-475)

We can see the induction of isolation and loneliness in tactics of many authoritarian regimes, where parts of the population is marginalized, ostracized, criminalized.[3] We can also see loneliness and uprootedness being used as scare tactics by many right wing groups. The disconcertingly popular "Great Replacement Theory" claims that the white population of Europe is being replaced by Muslims by way of mass immigration, and that this will eventually lead to Europe losing its identity and traditions. Similarly, American conservative commentator Tucker Carlson calls for more strict immigration laws in the US, he claims that people who come from different cultural backgrounds can't form communities and thus immigration causes the "original" residents to become alienated from their communities. This warning of becoming the minority, losing one's community and being left alone is ever present in similar ideologies.[4] Quoting Epictetus, Arendt makes a distinction between solitude and loneliness.

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[3] LGBT+ people are accused of corrupting the youth, Kurds are accused of dividing the nation, Women's rights activists are accused of endangering the traditional family. Actions are taken to break peoples' resolve and prevent organized resistance and minimize the amount of sympathizers.

[4] Not because it has any truth to it, but because it's advantageous for the beneficiaries of the status quo (in this case, rich conservatives and capitalists) when the working class blames other underprivileged groups (in this case, immigrants) for the agonies caused by the aforementioned beneficiaries.

"In solitude, in other words, I am 'by myself,' together with my self, and therefore two-in-one, whereas in loneliness I am actually one, deserted by all others." (1958, p.476)

We reflect on our experiences in solitude, and that opens up for more opportunities to connect with others. Solitude is not only distinct from loneliness, but also necessary to a certain extent to prevent it. We need to be alone with our thoughts from time to time, we need to reflect upon and make sense of our interactions with others in order to keep healthy connections. When we lose that moment of privacy, the proximity of others becomes a burden.

(Spoiler warning for the 2018 horror film, Midsommar)

The 2019 horror film Midsommar is about the main character's -Dani's- indoctrination into a cult, after the death of her family in a murder-suicide committed by her sister leaves her traumatized and alone. Her only emotional connection is her boyfriend Christian, who is looking for a way out of the relationship. The film overwhelms the audience with Dani's loneliness. It doesn't stem from the loss of her family -at least, not primarily- but from being surrounded by people who refuse to connect with her. We see it in the close friendships other characters have with each other, contrasted with their stunted, awkward interactions with Dani. We see it in Dani, processing her grief away from others because she can't be vulnerable with them. We see it in the line "Do you feel held by [Christian], Dani? Does he feel like home to you? Asked by the only major character who shows a semblance of compassion towards her. Dani's loneliness is so devastating that she can't help being lured into joining a fascist, white supremacist, homicidal cult, obsessed with tradition, obsessed with

blood purity to the point of encouraging incest to ensure it. In exchange of accepting the ideology and actions of the Harga without doubt or question, one will be cared for, and won't have to suffer loneliness, ever.

Midsommar is a work of fiction, and my reason of referencing it here isn't to present it as akin to reality or as a cautionary tale, but rather because of the similarity to Arendt's writing in it's approach to loneliness, and the resonance it found among many of it's audience. Many felt kinship towards Dani, found her progression from a lonely life to joining the Harga inspiring, even empowering. On the one hand it's concerning that the themes of xenophobia, white supremacy and fascism in the film are conveniently ignored by a portion of the audience to frame it as a story of a white woman's emancipation, but on the other hand, it's hard to not feel for Dani, even with the awareness of these themes. It's hard to see her suffer alone, and not think of one's own memories of loneliness. And it is hard to see the way her boyfriend treats her and not cheer for his demise.

(end spoilers)

What does this have to do with social networks? These sites that people often visit with hopes to distract from loneliness, only to end up feeling more disconnected. Sites that bombard us with information on what our acquaintances are up to, and sites that present content and interactions that only confirm our biases, and never challenge us, as a substitute for open, two way communications. If loneliness can lead to buying into totalitarianism, and if the way we converse and take in content from social networks is highly reactive with our loneliness, we must dissect this interaction to understand how fascism spreads through social media.

Social networks, while in theory, are about socialization, make us feel more and more alienated. Even worse, they have facilitated dissemination of fascist ideas to people who experience loneliness and isolation. Instead of becoming a source of respite from this loneliness through meaningful interactions, social networks made it a lot easier for vulnerable people to be recruited to fascist cults.

Perhaps the most well known conversations about radicalization in online spaces concerns YouTube. The way YouTube and similar platforms recommend content to the viewer is concisely explained by YouTuber Dan Olson in his video In Search of a Flat Earth: *"[...] content algorithms trying to maximize retention and engagement by serving users suggestions for things that are, effectively, incrementally more concentrated versions of the thing they were looking at."* (2020) This is the same mechanism that motivated certain content creators to create increasingly extreme content to maximizing views. And this mechanism led to people who are more likely to believe conspiracy theories and fake news be introduced to even more conspiracy theories and fake news, and in some instances, content related to fascism and white supremacy.

In his book Media Virus, Douglas Rushkoff describes Bush administration's efforts to ensure the public opinion favors the Persian Gulf War by associating pro-war sentiment with the slogan "Support our Troops" as a technique of *"distraction and over-simplification"*

(1996, p.23). Fast forward to 2014, to the Gamergate[5] controversy, which also jump started a number of right wing public figures' careers. One of the most famous sound bytes from propagators of Gamergate was "It's about ethics in video game journalism." Then, in 2016, a right wing conspiracy theory linking US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton with child trafficking, called Pizzagate emerged. Like QAnon which gained popularity in 2020 in the midst of the pandemic, this conspiracy theory presented itself as an exposé of a cult that engages in child trafficking. Just like how "Support the Troops" was a smokescreen for pro-war ideology, "Ethics in video game journalism" and "Save the children" are smokescreens for movements that endanger women, people of color, LGBTQ communities, Jewish people and almost everyone with a progressive political belief. YouTube's recommendation algorithm effectively became an artificial public relations expert that oversimplified certain issues, and targeted people who were susceptible to believing reactionary content.

One of the efforts in controlling the spread of conspiracy theories and hateful content is the update YouTube made to it's algorithm in early 2019. YouTube announced that they are working on tweaking their recommendation algorithms to identify fake news and conspiracy theories and no longer recommend them to viewers, while keeping them accessible on searches. While less people being exposed to fake news is a good outcome, the way YouTube handled this issue, and the

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5 Gamergate was a harassment campaign that targeted a number of feminist game developers, critics and other content creators. It began in mid-August of 2014 when an ex-boyfriend of indie game developer Zoe Quinn published a chronicle of their relationship accusing Quinn of trading sex for press. Gamers flocked to 4chan and Reddit to rage against supposed corruption and nepotism in the industry. The games journalist Quinn was accused of having an affair with, Nathan Grayson from Kotaku, never actually wrote a review of her game, yet Quinn, who developed an indie game about mental health called Depression Quest, was smeared and threatened online. As part of the harassment campaign, critics posted nude photos of her and published her home address. Later that month, Anita Sarkeesian, a gaming critic who hosts a web video series called Feminist Frequency, received a slew of especially violent tweets and threats after she published the second part of a video series exploring the ways in which women are used as background decoration in games. Sarkeesian had no ostensible connection to the Quinn situation besides being a woman involved in the male-dominated gaming industry. While she had long caught flak for her critiques of the industry, this time, her address was also published online, and Sarkeesian became concerned for her safety and left her home. (Vineyard,2014)

kind of content they seem to prioritize suggests that their intention is to make the site more advertiser friendly and therefore appealing to investors, rather than to give a genuine response to widespread criticism. In the The New York Times podcast titled Rabbit Hole (2020), a former Google engineer who worked on YouTube's recommendation algorithm reveals that the algorithm had a potential to create echo chambers. And that when he pointed this out to his supervisors, he was told that it was not a concern, the main concern was to maximize watch time. When he started a side project, an algorithm designed to burst this recommendation bubble, he was fired due to low performance because he was not putting enough hours in YouTube's effort to keep users engaged as long as possible. YouTube addressed the concerns about its algorithm recommending "borderline content", as YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki defines it, only after a public response started to form around the issue. But this isn't a problem that can be simply solved with a tweak to an algorithm. And YouTube's reaction to racist and homophobic harassment of a then Vox reporter by a right-wing YouTube commentator is one of the indicators that they are not interested in investing in this issue beyond tweaking algorithms either.[6] There are dozens of such examples, proving that platforms who profit from ad revenue by hosting user generated content cannot be trusted with said content, because they do not approach the content with concern for quality, or safety.

When we look at actions other social media platforms take to curb the spread of misinformation, conspiracy theories and bigoted

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[6] Maza's original tweet is deleted, but Danny Nett for NPR reported: "In his Twitter thread last week, Maza posted a montage of personal attacks he's faced over the past two years, both from Crowder and his fans. In videos responding to Maza's work for Vox, Crowder has repeatedly referred to Maza in derogatory ways, including calling him a "lispy sprite," an "angry little queer" and a "gay Mexican." (Maza is Cuban American.)" (2019) The initial response from YouTube support was "Our teams spent the last few days conducting an in-depth review of the videos flagged to us, and while we found language that was clearly hurtful, the videos as posted don't violate our policies." This sparked a conversation on whether YouTube is doing enough to protect marginalized creators from harassment and hate speech." (@TeamYoutTube Twitter account, 2019)

ideas, their actions are too little too late, just like with YouTube. Twitter started marking Donald Trumps tweets as dubious information and eventually banned him from the platform, but these were done only after it was clear that he lost the 2020 US presidential election. He was spreading misinformation about COVID and often engaging in smearing campaigns against politicians such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar while he was still in office. A similar case happened more recently in Turkey; tweets by the Interior Minister of Turkey, Suleyman Soylu, where he calls LGBT students "perverts" were blocked as hate speech in France but were allowed to stay up in Turkey with a note that the tweets are in violation of Twitter's rules but were not deleted for the interest of the public. Twitter also removed a number of troll accounts that engage in manipulation of the public opinion in favor of the Turkish government in mid 2020. While the number of the accounts deleted were slightly more than seven thousand, people who had to endure doxxing, harassment and threats as reaction to their critique of the Turkish government speculate that the real number of these trolls is much higher. Additionally, Twitter recently implemented a "State Affiliated Media" indicator, and while this can be an effective way of warning users of media bias, Twitter's implementation of this function is far from impartial. While Russian and Chinese media outlets are marked as state affiliated and even hidden from search results in some cases, there is no such indicator for UK's BBC or USA's NPR. And Facebook can still exist as one of the largest tech companies in the world even after the Cambridge Analytica data sharing scandal.

uprisings

The questionable motives of companies that own social media platforms doesn't necessarily mean we must abolish the idea of social networking. The long history of internet as a tool for activism extends to social networks that we use today. Internet in the 90s was significant as a space for counterculture and as an alternative source of information. Shift towards user generated content made online broadcasting a lower effort activity. More people are able to share their experiences with others, more people are able to ask for help, and more people are able to record and immediately publish video evidence of police brutality. The owners of these platforms may be motivated by greed, but for people who genuinely care, about reaching out to others, about helping someone in need or about seeking justice, they have been very important tools.

I had just graduated high school when the Gezi Park protests took place. It wasn't the first event that was censored and manipulated to push a narrative that favored the Turkish regime, but for me it was a turning point as I clearly saw the stark contrast between the mainstream media coverage and what was going on at the protest site. After seeing countless people, including friends tweet about being shot at with tear gas and water cannons, and after being exposed to tear gas in the protest I attended, I went home to see the Turkish branch of CNN air a documentary on penguins as if a protest of unprecedented size was not happening in the most central part of the largest city in the country. After spending a day in the camp site that was established by the protestors in the Gezi Park, which featured picnics, a volunteer run library and a soup kitchen as well as music, performances and public forums, I watched news coverage that presented protestors as

violent troublemakers. I knew some media outlets were more biased than others, but the coverage of Gezi Park protests made me realize that while some news channels try to appear impartial, almost all are willing to completely censor themselves and distort the news if their relationship with the Turkish regime is at stake. Very few independent television channels reported the events of Gezi, showed footage of police brutality, and aligned themselves with the protesters. These news channels all had a few things in common: production quality of their programming indicated that they had relatively small budgets, and barely any well known products were advertised during commercial breaks. It seemed that a lot of brands were afraid of the repercussions of supporting these news channels by buying commercial slots.

As significant as Gezi protests were in highlighting the power a social network such as Twitter can provide to the people, social networks were being used as an alternative to mainstream media way earlier, and the tragic event that really highlighted the extent of control the Turkish government has over mainstream media was the Roboski massacre, where 34 Kurds, civilians and many under-age, were killed by an airstrike. If it wasn't for a journalist who, instead of waiting for an order from the government, traveled to the region and documented the funeral, the only reporting from the region would have been the mainstream media's narrative of the airstrike being an anti terrorism operation against a group of armed rebels. Two years later, when protests erupted at the heart of Istanbul and mainstream news channels such as the Turkish branch of CNN suppressed any news about the protests, there was already a precedent. It wasn't surprising, because the experience of the news blackout of the bombing of the Kurdish village of Roboski had exposed many people

to the fact that the mass media could block out major news stories (Tufekci, 2017 p.33) The public was quick to pivot to Twitter and Facebook as alternative news sources. As more people flocked to the scene of the protest, more tweets and Facebook posts started circulating. In addition to Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, some protesters utilized live streaming apps to record police brutality and excessive tear gas and water cannon use. (most social networks did not have live stream features at the time) during nighttime, when police started taking drastic actions to corner protesters, Twitter was used by locals to communicate with protesters and opened their homes as refuge. Many injuries and deaths that otherwise would've gone unreported, or misrepresented by pro government media, were presented as what they were: casualties of a militarized police force attempting to violently suppress dissent. Pro government media outlets did not shy away from presenting Berkin Elvan, a 14 year old boy as a terrorist and a threat to the police. Just as conservative outlets in the USA did not shy away from presenting Michael Brown, a 18 year old boy who was shot by a police officer while he had his hands up to show he was unarmed, as a violent criminal, and a threat to an armed police officer. Social media gave the public the ability to challenge these misrepresentations. Through social media, people who lack institutional power to control the narrative have options other than hoping for another major media company to see the benefit in reporting their side of the story, and while this doesn't level out the playing field at all, it brings recognition of injustice, and helps to build solidarity around it. People who lost their loved ones to authoritarian violence, people who had their rights to a life of peace, freedom and dignity stripped away, no longer have to suffer alone.

While it's easy to dismiss Internet, social networks and everything that happens in this environment as irrelevant to the real world, the opposite was proven true time and again in Arab Spring, in Gezi, and, in the Black Lives Matter protests in the US, both in 2015 and 2020. Zeynep Tufekci interviewed activists from Egypt and Tunisia in Twitter and Tear Gas. One activist from Egypt recounts experiences of frustration with the apathy of people around her towards the political situation in Egypt, and that this frustration led her to seek out communities on Twitter. And through these online communities, she ended up taking part in the Tahrir square protests. (Tufekci, 2017, p.9) Social media is a very effective way of fighting against marginalization. In an environment where people with dissenting ideas are presented as a few outsiders, social media gives them a way to realize that they are neither alone, nor are outsiders.

Uprisings and protests are dramatic, but the effect social media has on politics can be observed on a much smaller scale as well. We are in part shaped by the media we consume, and while this isn't always true, internet gives us an opportunity to have conversations with a huge variety of people. This is invaluable in environments where political discourse is polarizing and violent. As mentioned earlier, it's a depressing reality that certain parts of internet can lead to right-wing radicalization and adoption of fascist beliefs, and those parts aren't the fringe corners of internet either. But there are plenty of accounts from people who managed to abandon the conspiracy theories and fascist ideologies they were lured into. Caleb Cain, who recounts his experience of right wing radicalization and subsequent de-radicalization, credits content creators such as Destiny and ContraPoints for exposing major right-wing commentators such as Lauren Southern as liars, prompting him to scrutinize content of

people he had previously idolized. In Turkey, the number of religious vocational[7] high schools has tripled over the years as part of Mr. Erdogan's efforts towards a more pious youth, but younger people, including those who received a religion focused education, are less likely to be devout Muslims than the rest of the population (Konda, 2018). When asked about the factors that affect their outlook, many young people cite social media. “I would see all the opposing views coming from different people,” said a 25-year-old journalist for an opposition news outlet. “I started questioning, and asking: what side do I belong on?” (Pitel and Kirac, 2020) A lot of the propaganda material published on Twitter are met with backlash, in large part from younger Twitter users. A recent attempt at playing at nationalist and militarist sentiments in the form of a high budget video commemorating historic figures such as Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II was received with a lot of contempt. Many young people have responded to the video with anger and sarcasm, showing that the AKP’s vision does not speak to their everyday concerns. On Twitter alone, the video has been quoted over 30,000 times with alternative responses to the question “Who are you?” Some have answered with the names of youth killed during anti-government protests. Others have named victims of femicide, mining disasters or terrorist attacks. Many young people responded that they are not martyrs or heroes but broke and hopeless. (Sharpe, 2020) On top of the colossal amounts of money and effort spent for propaganda material, a closer look on the comments section of this material reveals the almost equally drastic effort to drown out the backlash. A lot of the positive replies to propaganda come from sock puppet accounts. But these accounts can’t

[7] Vocational high schools are secondary education institutions that provide technical education for specific fields of work along with the standard high school curriculum. In Turkey there are various vocational high schools with ranging from arts to healthcare. Religious vocational high schools, also called Imam Hatips, provide Islamic religious education and aim to train Muslim religious officials.

seem to keep up with the genuine feelings of frustration young people have towards the government. Through internet, younger people have easier access to anti racist, anti fascist, progressive literature; something older generations in Turkey did not have due to widespread censorship throughout the politically turbulent, conflict and coup d'état scarred history of the country. They're more likely to denounce nationalism and militarism, either out of an ideological stance, or because they are too busy trying to survive.

Internet's, and especially social media's role in politics was dismissed for a long time. A lot of people, especially those who don't interact with activists online thought engaging in politics on the internet meant signing petitions, or sharing Facebook posts that claimed the amount of shares will translate into money being donated to a worthy cause. Until 2013, social media was not taken very seriously by Turkish authorities. Websites were, and still are, often censored and blocked in Turkey. YouTube was blocked in Turkey between 2008 and 2010, Twitter was blocked for a short period in 2014 and very recently, Wikipedia was blocked from 2017 to early 2020. For a long time, the Turkish government's method of dealing with dissenters posting their opinions online was to simply block access to sites, which was usually easily bypassed by changing DNS settings or using a VPN. This is partially why the government was blindsided by Gezi protests, the authorities probably only expected some people to write mean things about the government online and then lose interest. But instead what happened was nationwide anti authoritarian protests. The cyberspace is not as separate from the physical world as the Turkish government, and the rest of us, thought it was.

After Gezi, the Turkish government acknowledged the role social networks can play on grassroots movements, and started to utilize social networks in more creative ways to both spread propaganda and stifle dissent. Immediately after the Gezi Protests, AKP recruited 6,000 people to shape public opinion and counter government critics on social media. The group, called AK trolls, has systematically harassed journalists, politicians, and government critics, and compromised their social media accounts. (Grossman et al., 2020) Arrests over social media posts criticizing government policies are worryingly commonplace. Stockholm Center for Freedom reported that In the February of 2021, amidst student protests in Bogazici University, Authorities detained 39 people for their social media posts (2021). Detaining or arresting a few dozen dissenters over social media activity is enough to turn the entire social network environment into a panopticon. There is always a chance that a Tweet or a Facebook post will derail one's life. Those who make the decision to publicly criticize government policies take a calculated risk in doing so.

One of the prevailing myths of an information society is a borderless world where nation states succumb to the (benign) power of technology freeing the individual and thereby society at large. (Aouragh & Chakravartty, 2016) Companies like Facebook, Google, and Twitter rely on the existing power structures for their existence. They show tacid support for social justice causes because failing to do so will alienate a large portion of their userbase and affect their ad revenue. But they do not shy away from suppressing and misrepresenting any critique of power structures that allow them to exist. Intervening on the President of the United States' Twitter account is a risky move for Twitter, and that's why the intervention came after Donald Trump no longer held that title. It's not realistic to

expect Twitter or Facebook to adopt policies that protect their oppressed and marginalized users from their oppressors. And we don't have to.

connections

Before I discovered social media, I rarely used internet for communication with people around the world, because I was a child. And by the time I gained a little bit of online literacy and started to use the internet for things other than games, most online discussions had moved to mainstream social networks that we use today. For internet users who are younger, social media is ubiquitous, and it can be hard to imagine internet as a space that exists outside of the mainstream, out of the reach of commercial interests. Like comic books and punk aesthetics, internet is hyper-commercialized today, but it has been a home for counterculture, activism and grassroots movements. Rushoff defines internet as *"an ever-expanding new territory, and it is growing faster than our ability to document or civilize it."* (1996) Tufekci Points out that activists and journalists are among the earliest internet users. (2017, p.13) And it makes sense that internet was quickly adopted by activists considering how different it was from other methods of receiving information available at the time. *"Internet is a social anarchy. There is no governing body for the system. Scientists share the network with hobbyists and hackers who share the system with writers, artists, researchers, corporations, and, of course, activists. The internet is inherently threatening to anyone in a position of power because no one -at least not yet- can regulate the tremendous flow of information."* (Rushkoff, 1996) People who used USENET, a discussion network that was developed on the 80s, was actively against advertising. *"Where else in our society has the commercial element been so clearly separated from any entity? Forums of discussion and communication become clogged and congested when advertisements use space."* (Hauben, 1997)

While I was doing research on various social networks and online spaces, I came across news about an open letter, addressed to the Reddit CEO, Steve Huffman. The letter, titled *"Open Letter to Steve Huffman and the Board of Directors of Reddit, Inc– If you believe in standing up to hate and supporting black lives, you need to act"* (u/DubTeeDub, 2020) was co-signed by 800 Reddit communities, representing over 200 million subscribers. The letter was followed by video conference calls between the moderators who signed it and Reddit's administrators. The sessions were presented as part of the company's outreach to moderators fighting hate, Black users and other marginalized groups. (Hussain, 2020) This was interesting to me, an open letter from the users of a platform being acknowledged, and the platform engaging in direct conversation with it's users as a response. Most of the time, social networks addressed institutions that held significant power, like their investors or governments.

Among the popular social networks that exist today, Reddit is an interesting case. It's notorious for harboring some of the most toxic groups of people on the internet. Southern Poverty Law Center pointed out that the severity of the racist content on Reddit, one of the most popular websites on the web, is even worse than the content on websites owned by neo-nazis and klan members, saying "*The most violently racist internet content isn't found on sites like Stormfront and VNN any more.*" (Hankes, 2015) But unlike these sites, Reddit is home to a number of progressive communities (or subreddits) as well, and a lot of subreddits that focus on specific topics and interests. It's almost upsetting that this extremely varied content has a tainted reputation thanks to the overwhelmingly loud racist communities.[8] To say that

[8] *But to be clear, the racist content on the site is much more upsetting in and of itself, and the harm it causes to people of color is much more serious.*

these groups of people “coexist” would be inaccurate, since members of the alt-right subreddits often harass and sabotage subreddits run by people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and women. But despite the abhorrent groups of people on the site, marginalized people still managed to make use of Reddit. This is mainly thanks to the resourcefulness of these communities, but also, as a space for facilitating debates, discussions, information sharing and various forms of support, it has a number of advantages over other social media platforms. It’s structured around communities instead of singular users and this makes it much easier for the user to find content that is actually interesting to them. On Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, the content we see is determined by the platform while on Reddit, it is determined by the topics we want to see. Twitter bombards us with content we did not sign up for in the form of suggested tweets and trending topics. Reddit can be a way to find others who share interests like r/knitting; a way to learn about others' experiences with a health condition and share one's own like r/ehlersdanlos; a way for marginalized people to connect with others around the world like r/lgbt, or find funny images of badly made food like r/shittyfoodporn.

Another aspect of user agency on Reddit is moderation. While Reddit as a company is lenient towards toxicity to a dangerous degree, it's users don't necessarily have to follow suit. Subreddits are started and maintained by users, who also define the rules, and these users who have moderator status can delete posts or ban other users from the subreddit they moderate. When rules are clearly defined and moderators are fair and responsible, subredddits have the potential to be enjoyable, healthy communities. And if a user feels like they are unfairly penalized, they can contact moderators directly and contest

the decision, as their names are listed. And the fact that each community is moderated by people who are involved in them is an important advantage. This is a much more transparent approach to moderation than that of Twitter. And in a situation where Reddit users addressed Reddit Inc, moderators took up the role of representatives. The hierarchy between moderators and regular users and the way the user base is organized into smaller communities made an effective open letter with clear demands possible on Reddit, unlike Twitter or Facebook. Tufekci (2017, p. 71) highlights some weaknesses of leaderless movements that grow through social media. "*First, these new movements find it difficult to make tactical shifts because they lack both the culture and the infrastructure for making collective decisions. (...) Second, although their ability to operate without defined leadership protects them from co-optation or 'decapitation', it also makes them unable to negotiate with adversaries or even inside the movement itself. Third, the ease with which current social movements form often fails to signal an organizing capacity powerful enough to threathen those in authority.*" A site like Reddit has the potential to be a powerful community building tool but unfortunately, it gained reputation for rampant hate speech instead. The biggest reason for this is the Reddit founders' and admins' belief that almost all moderation is an infringement on the right to freedom of speech. And that belief is rooted in a part of online culture that predates Reddit.

On September 1993, AOL started offering USENET access to it's customers, which led to inception of the term "Eternal September". What had been an exclusive community consisting of college students, academics and Unix enthusiasts was suddenly accessible to anyone who had an AOL subscription, and USENET's "original" users were not

happy with it. USENET had it's own culture, etiquette and slang. To early users, it felt like the sudden influx of "n00bs" overwhelmed the network's culture. MIT student Christopher R. Vincent (1995) wrote:

> *"As accessing the Internet continues to grow easier for the novice user, it is inevitable that many of these social guidelines will fall to the wayside. This is not to say that new users should be denied access to Internet resources. It has been the first reflex in many newsgroups to flame any user who posted from an online service provider. Some of the larger providers, such as America Online have not received a very warm welcome to the network (note the formation of the alt.aol-sucks newsgroup.) This reaction does not necessarily stem from elitism, but from a genuine fear that as more and more users appear, Usenet will fall apart. Indeed, this is a valid concern. The current system is not designed for the commercial-oriented direction the Internet is now taking."*

It's hard to disagree with the points made by Vincent, especially as someone who is overwhelmed with commercialization of online spaces on a daily basis. However, I disagree with his rejection of elitism. USENET was initially only accessible to college students and programmers. It was *"for nerds, early adopters, and the rich. In the early days, you needed a fair bit of technical knowledge and, most importantly, an internet connection just to get on."* (Koebler, 2015) and what got the most traction regarding Eternal September was concerns over newbies ruining the internet. Dave Fischer, who arguably coined the term Eternal September with the statement *"September 1993 will go down in*

net.history as the September that never ended." (1994) later talked about the underlying tribalism of Eternal September. He said in an interview *"My memories of early 90s Usenet are of a vibrant, enlightened world of serious discourse. But I was a confused arrogant geek in my early 20s, so that's mostly heavy rose-tinting and confirmation bias,(...) When you're deeply immersed in an elitist clique, it often feels like you're in an open welcoming community. From your perspective, everything's great."* (Koebler, 2015). Eternal September is one of the earliest cases of online gatekeeping, and unfortunately it was followed by many other cases that impacted marginalized groups the most. *"There's a vicious backlash against women and minorities who ask for a seat at the table that is The Internet. GamerGate, the Reddit reaction to former CEO Ellen Pao, and the general harassment that women on social media receive every day show that it's very much still September on the internet. In smaller communities and on social media, women who speak their mind are harassed, threatened, and generally made to feel unwelcome. Changes made to make a community like Reddit feel more inclusive are disparaged as attacks on free speech."* (Koebler, 2015)

As internet use became more and more widespread, Regulation of online spaces and communication quickly became a much debated topic. Anonymity that internet granted made it easier to get away with harassment and bullying and the legal system of most countries were not equipped to deal with the issue. In 2006 when an adult's bullying of a Missouri teenager through MySpace allegedly drove the teen to committing suicide, Missouri prosecutors could not charge the adult with a crime, because there was no federal statute against cyber bullying. (Zetter, 2009) Laws making revenge pornography a criminal offense have always been widely debated, one of the main reasons for their divisiveness being concerns surrounding freedom of speech.

(Citron & Franks) Additionally, researchers and psychologists started to notice that social interactions often play out in dramatically different ways on online spaces. Called the online disinhibition effect, this was attributed to a number of factors related to online communication. (Suler, 2004) Anonymity, lack of accountability, and the idea that internet is not a "real" environment made the cyberspace very hostile, especially for marginalized groups. My personal experience on the internet in the 2000s is filled with wonder and exploration, but also traumatizing material and offensive "jokes" where the punchline was bigotry. Twitter user @gobloid3 summarizes the experience concisely with a Tweet: "*i loved growing up with the internet in the early 2000s! i played flash games, i took care of neopets, i saw a beheading video when i was 12, i made friends on myspace,*" (2021)

For those who are frustrated with the online landscape of 2020s, it can be comforting to romanticize a point in the past when internet was much more anonymous and much less commercialized. But there is not a point in the internet's history that we can revert back to in order to fix the issues we are currently dealing with. There is one aspect of networks and online spaces from pre-commercial internet that I find inspiring: their resilience. 40 years after it's inception, USENET is still active. Internet Relay Chat, a 1988 precursor to popular chat applications such as Discord and Slack, is still alive. The WELL, a virtual community started in 1985 is still active. These networks aren't the most popular, they can't compete with Facebook or Twitter, or even with their versions from 80s and 90s in terms of how many users they have, but they aren't haunted by corporations who decide whether to pull the plug on them or not based on revenue. I think this resilience, combined with today's accessibility to

programming knowledge and emergence of decentralized social networks should empower us to find new ways to connect, rather than dwell on the ubiquity of commercial social networks.

conclusion

When we are bombarded with bad opinions, advertisements and consent forms to collect and sell our data, it can be easy to lose sight of the internet's potential as a tool of connection and community building. When a large portion of our online experience is dictated by a handful of large social networks, it feels like their hold is inescapable, we become overwhelmed. But it's important to remember that they don't own all of the internet. Through exploring and demystifying these territories we can make spaces for ourselves, our communities, and our loved ones.

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