CHAPTER 1

Bellies and Beasts

On Critical Media Studies

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Life under climate change, the mass extinction of species, aggressive right-wing populism, dramatic social inequalities, war, genocide, and militarized geopolitics does not foster a general sense of optimism concerning the current moment or the foreseeable future. It rather feels as if regions, societies, cultures, communities, and individuals were sliding into the belly of the metaphorical beast—deeper into bad, dangerous, and unpleasant zones from where they are unlikely to return unscathed or from which there may be no return at all. In this historical conjuncture, it may be that social and cultural inquiry *not* focusing on the deadly consequences of the Anthropocene, the exploitative practices of late capitalism, or the violent operations of power may come across as simply naïve to the point of not meriting the very denominator of 'the critical'. Since such consequences, practices, and operations have long been identified and acknowledged in critical work, and hence are to a degree already known, scholarship exploring them is likely to discover new nuances and iterations, yet unlikely to be taken by surprise.

Building on queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2003) broadly read polemic on the circularity of critical work, this chapter makes an argument for framing the beast and its belly as less the main foci of critical media studies scholarship than as contexts shaping mundane interactions: in doing so, it calls for attending to different scales of events and phenomena and their unavoidable simultaneity without prioritizing the one over the other. Focusing on critiques of network culture in particular, it examines the productivity of ambiguity and simultaneity in studying lives under data capitalism. My overall purpose is not to suggest that, by including considerations of the complexity and messiness of everyday life, it is possible to ignore either the beast or the belly. Rather, my interests lie in

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questioning the expanse and all-inclusiveness of cultural analyses of macro-level developments, as well as the capacity of media studies scholarship to account for the diversities and conflicting potentialities that exist within the mundane.

The News Is Very Bad

At least since the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke in March 2018, investigations of platform power have expanded from the ability of platforms to link actors and markets—as well as to constrain the forms and financial exchanges occurring between them (Tiidenberg 2021: 383)—to the ethics involved in the harvesting and aggregation of user data, and the roles that platforms play in shaping public opinion and possible forms of sociality. Cambridge Analytica, partly owned by a billionaire with ties to Donald Trump, had harvested data from some 87 million Facebook users through a third-party app in 2016, and this data was then used to promote both the Brexit campaign and Trump's first presidential bid. Even as the factual efficiency of this social media promotion remains impossible to verify, such intrusive uses of data, combined with the success of both campaigns that they were deployed to advance, soon established the case as a staple reference as per the harms that data capitalism poses for representative democracy and user privacy alike.

In media theory, critiques of network culture have targeted the power that centralized platforms hold in organizing contemporary forms of sociality, redefining the boundaries of privacy, and impacting public discourse while monetizing the user data they extract within the loops of 'communicative capitalism' (Dean 2010), 'big data capitalism' (Fuchs and Chandler 2019), 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff 2019), and 'cognitive capitalism' (Stiegler 2013: 102). Many critiques of networked media are cut through by something akin to a sense of loss, in that it is not seen to merely transform society, culture, and the individual, but to erode their possibilities to flourish. Hence, for example, Bernard Stiegler's (2019a: 26) analysis on data giants harvesting 'a state of *generalized stupefaction*' where deliberation gives way to automation and establishes 'a new mental context (stupefaction) within which systemic stupidity undoubtedly proliferates (as functional stupidity, drive-based capitalism, and industrial populism)' (Stiegler 2019a: 34).

Much attention has further been paid to the ubiquitous use of smart devices resulting in an amputation of sociality and the erosion of attention spans and damaging people's ability to think, be, remember, and communicate (for example, Andrejevic 2013; Hassan 2012; Turkle 2012).

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Jonathan Crary (2014: 34) sees this as 'mass amnesia sustained by the culture of global capitalism', while, for Stiegler (2013; 2019b), social media are destroying pre-digital social relations within accelerated consumer capitalism, breeding disorientation, distraction, and ill-being in the process. For his part, Geert Lovink (2019: 2, 27, 32) identifies a bottomless 'techno-sadness' undercutting network cultures where social media have become essential infrastructure—and indeed ideology—feeding accelerated alienation and 'enlightened false consciousness'.

Despite dramatic differences in how scholars contextualize and conceptualize such developments, they seem to operate with the premise that 'things are bad and getting worse' (Sedgwick 2003: 142), be it in terms of the intrusive tactics of data extraction and its governmental ties (in the United States and China in particular), the accelerated speeds of media, the shrinking spaces of public debate and democratic deliberation, or any combinations thereof. It is not my argument that such diagnoses would be somehow misguided. Rather, this chapter is concerned with their partiality, despite the rhetorical degrees of generalization that they operate with when sketching out developments affecting everyone. Following Sedgwick, they offer strong theories less attuned to tackling the complexities of everyday life across national boundaries and social strata. I suggest this to be an analytical limitation and a potentially counter-productive one.

Originally writing in the 1990s, Sedgwick (2003: 126) argued that Paul Ricoeur's 'hermeneutics of suspicion' has become understood as 'nearly synonymous with criticism itself' within cultural theory. The ensuing 'paranoid' forms of inquiry focused on scanning, exposing, and revealing are operationalized to uncover the workings of power and ideology that have nevertheless been known and posited from the start—whether these be connected to capitalism, heterosexism, racism, or something else. Interpretation then moves in circular ways, since 'paranoia requires that bad news be always already known' in being occupied with proving 'the very same assumptions with which it began' (Sedgwick 2003: 130, 132). If we always know that things are bad, and if bad news are known beforehand, her argument goes, the ensuing analysis cannot yield much surprise. The issue then does not lie in the importance of addressing relations of power, control, and oppression within which social lives take shape, but in the overall modes that such inquiry takes.

For Sedgwick (2003: 126, 134), strong, paranoid modes of theorizing have become dominant enough as a 'uniquely sanctioned methodology' to block from view other interpretative and epistemological practices to the point of casting them as 'naïve, pious, or complaisant'. Written in the context of the

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AIDS epidemic and the social operations of power that it rendered visible, her polemic focuses on the performativity of knowledge: what knowledge does, what we think we know, how we have come to know this, and what else we might know (Sedgwick 2003: 130, 138). Advocating for more reparative avenues of thought than those steeped in popular cynicism of the kind that she saw undercutting early 1990s cultural theory, Sedgwick (2003: 141–143) called for reparative forms of reading open to surprise that do not start from the position of already knowing. While the juxtaposition of the paranoid and the reparative suggests a binary, she examined oscillations between these forms of inquiry while highlighting the tendency of the former to shrink the spaces available for the latter (Sedgwick, Barker, and Clark 2002: 247–248).

In outlining the power of paranoid inquiry, Sedgwick draws on Silvan S. Tomkins's (2008: 519) notion of strong theory as one of 'wide generality … capable of accounting for a wide spectrum of phenomena which appear to be very remote, one from the other, and from a common source'. For Tomkins (2008: 519), shame–humiliation is a strong affect theory as a connective logic that captures perception, memory, and thinking, subordinating them 'to that affect and its avoidance'. This results in over-interpretation.

> In over-interpretation, every bit of incoming information is scanned for information which is humiliation relevant. The entire cognitive apparatus is in a constant state of alert for possibilities, imminent or remote, ambiguous or clear.
>
> Like any highly organized effort at detection, as little as possible is left to chance. The radar antennae are placed wherever it seems possible the enemy may attack. Intelligence officers may monitor even unlikely conversations if there is an outside chance something relevant may be detected or if there is a chance that two independent bits of information taken together may give indication of the enemy's intentions even though each bit of information might be valueless by itself. But above all there is a highly organized way of interpreting information so that what is possibly relevant can be quickly abstracted and magnified, and the rest discarded. (Tomkins 2008: 519)

A strong theory then comes at the expense of effacing from view other dynamics and interpretations than those fitting within it. Things analysed become connected to one focus, driven by an aim to avoid and minimize negative experiences—in Tomkins's discussion, the crippling affect of humiliation; in Sedgwick's take, bad surprises in cultural theory. The strength of strong theory lies in its expansiveness that grows by ordering

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'more and more remote phenomena to a single formulation' (Tomkins 2008: 519) while also anticipating future events to further contribute to it. This actively forecloses considerations of alternative things to come, for mapping out possible futures differently, or for acknowledging discontinuities and complexities within the phenomena studied. In contrast, weaker theories are more attuned to singular phenomena without aiming at generalizations or unequivocal outcomes (Sedgwick 2003: 145–146).

In identifying modes of critical inquiry as paranoid, Sedgwick is not making an argument for their delusional nature but rather pointing to the sense of suspicion that cuts through and energizes them. Strong theories set out to explain a great deal in drawing together and explaining diverse cultural and social phenomena (think data capitalism, cognitive capitalism, communicative capitalism). Through a connective logic, they help to bring clarity to the messy and the obscure: in this sense, their appeal is both understandable and tangible, for the world is certainly a complex place. As Tomkins points out, such connective generalization nevertheless breeds distortions in framing these phenomena through a circular logic that obscures other ways of seeing. In terms of scales of analysis, this means foregrounding the structural and the macro at the expense of the more ephemeral and the micro. The issue is then one of scales of inquiry but equally one of perceived scales of importance: that which is seen to matter, or what is understood as critical.

What Counts as Critical?

Critique, by definition, involves unpacking merits and faults as an evaluative practice etymologically concerned with judging. But it also involves the aspect of importance as the critical stands for what is considered pressing, crucial, and imperative. It can then be asked: What gets to qualify as acutely critical in media inquiry, how priorities and scales of importance become set, and what forms of investigation may become cast as 'naïve, pious, or complaisant' instead?

In one obvious response, the notion of critical theory remains entangled with the legacy of the Frankfurt school, building on the work of Adorno and Horkheimer in particular, to the point of being near synonymous with this paradigm of thought. Within critical theory, media—and the culture industry more generally—have after all been long identified as a site of ideological, cognitive, and affective reproduction under capitalism. Aiming to produce passive conformity, the culture industry then flattens out of forms of thought, experience, and imagination alike. This form

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of critique is interested in systems and logics within which subjects are seduced and captured while paying less attention to situational specificities or empirical detail. Rhetorically, its force, or strength, is largely based on degrees of generalization, its focus being on conditions of life enveloping and impacting us all. As Ravi Sundaram (2022: 31) points out, such an aesthetic of disenchantment becomes fully rearticulated in Stiegler's (2019a: 7) late work on the 'automatic nihilism' where datafied culture is seen to 'sterilize and destroy local culture and social life like a neutron bomb'. This is a strong theory indeed.

The notion of the culture industry as productive of sameness, passivity, and ideological docility is easily adoptable to contemporary workings of data capitalism, yet this line of thinking is less well aligned with empirical work evoking the question of ambiguity instead. Taking cue from Jacques Derrida, acknowledging ambiguities involves tackling the *pharmakon*, namely considering objects and phenomena as simultaneously both curative and toxic, as both causes for malaise and solutions for it. Conversely, framing experiences and effects of networked media through the notion of the pharmakon makes it possible to consider fundamental ambiguities cutting through it: this is 'a dynamics that constantly surprises' without being confined to circular modes of inquiry (Derrida 1981: 97).

Asking big questions or making sharp arguments in no way requires turning away from contextual nuance or generalizing at the risk of cutting some analytical corners. Yet macro-level theorizations of data capitalism, similarly to expansive analyses identifying social media, app culture, or the ubiquitous use of smartphones as agents of anxiety, especially among the young (for example, Lovink 2019; Twenge 2019: 92), turn a blind eye to how things become navigated, resisted, and lived. It may, after all, well be that a young person using a smart device can grow distressed when reading news on war crimes, environmental catastrophes brought forth by climate change, racist hate crimes, school shootings, mass deportations of migrants, or the narrowing of reproductive and voting rights—or when searching info on tuition fees to their preferred universities of choice and finding them steep enough to result in life-long debt. A gap remains between theorizations of alienated and sad subjects of contemporary platform capitalism and the ways in which lives are navigated within it. Returning to Derrida's (1981: 130) terminology, this involves the use of *pharmakos*, the positioning of a symbolic scapegoat as cause for a range of negative effects instead of attending to more complex sets of correlations; or, to rephrase, *pharmakos*—be it a smart device, a platform, or something else—does the work of paranoid inquiry as a connective object.

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While strong modes of theorization are generally not attuned to the contradictions that everyday lives are composed of, empirical inquiry into networked lives has for well over two decades chronicled their situational specificities. When experiences of datafication are perceived of as plural by default, they cannot be reduced to broad narratives of erosion, loss, and exploitation. This does not mean that such experiences comprise a particularly peppy picture as such; rather, they entail fundamental ambiguity.

Ambiguities

A sense of apprehension cuts through the findings of our large-scale mixed-methods research project, 'Intimacy in Data-Driven Culture' (2019–2025), the main rationale of which was to examine vulnerabilities connected to data culture among different groups of people and their different roles as workers and non-workers, citizens and non-citizens, family members and sexual partners in contemporary Finland, where network connectivity is very much a matter of mundane infrastructure. To this end, we conducted interviews, collected media diaries, and held workshops with social media influencers, the long-term unemployed, politicians, performing artists, users of sexual platforms, undocumented migrants and asylum seekers, designers and game industry professionals, members of gender minorities, therapy work professionals, public officials, educators, the elderly and the young, and other groups beyond.

While the concerns voiced self-evidently vary among the people participating in our study, they are also connected by a certain sense of apprehension and balancing as to the perceived cost and gains of participating in data culture. Performing artists, for example, make use of social media in the creation of professional belonging while struggling with the degrees of disclosure necessary and with how algorithms govern the visibility of such disclosures in ways impossible for them to influence or let alone control, all this adding to the felt toll of connective labour (Soronen and Koivunen 2022). Mothers are attached to the communicative dynamics of social media that deeply irritate and frustrate them, describing tactics of 'force-liking' posts and using 'wonderfully passive-aggressive' reaction options, such as Facebook likes or wows (Lehto and Paasonen 2021: 816, 820). People in vulnerable positions—unemployed people, undocumented migrants, and the elderly—engage in 'tactics of invisibility' resistant to social media's conventions of self-representation while also addressing their interconnected sense of being bystanders in the society at large (Talvitie-Lamberg et al. 2024). Users of a sexual platform, again, discuss

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loving it, despite hating 'basically everything about' it—administrators, users, interface design, and communication vernaculars included—since the possibilities for sexual self-expression it offers hold great importance (Sundén, Paasonen, and Tiidenberg 2026: 161). Across their differences, our participants describe their lives within data culture as involving friction and apprehension, diverse tactics of use and disuse, and a very concrete sense of balancing wants and necessities; 'what matters to people, what they are attached to, and what they simply need to live with' (Paasonen et al. 2023: 285; see also Koivunen et al. 2024).

Apprehensions grow particularly acute in the context of social media, yet misgivings are equally present in more infrastructural engagements with online banks, tax offices, and public health services in a situation where one would prefer in-person interaction but where services are increasingly digital only. Following Elija Cassidy (2016: 2614), these can be seen as examples of 'participatory reluctance'—engagement with platforms 'when we would actually prefer not to or would rather do so under altered circumstances'. Such apprehension extends beyond the uses of social media to virtually all aspects of networked lives where constant uses of smartphones have become a prerequisite for smooth operability. *Need a bus ticket? Download an app first. Interested in ordering lunch? Read the QR code. Want a loyalty discount? Sure, if you have our app. Need to verify your identity for the tax office? Use your bank's ID app. Want info on the big party? Check your TikTok. Need to log into the university's online services? Use the compulsory authenticator app*.

As networked media have grown infrastructural to how everyday lives are lived and in how social connections are nurtured, the issue is seldom simply one of use versus non-use—as in just opting in or out—but rather one of tactical attachments, distances, and disconnections where tensions refuse to be resolved (see also Light 2014; Burgess et al. 2022). Within this, something akin to that which Lauren Berlant (2022: 36) identifies as 'the inconvenience paradox of dependency' of 'needing people or a situation and hating to have that need' is at play so that the affective dynamic involved encompasses both positive and negative registers, as well as fundamentally muddled configurations of feeling (Paasonen 2023).

Ambiguity stands for the multiplicity of meanings and diverging interpretations yet goes beyond simple relativism in allowing for things to mean and effect more than one thing. Seen through this analytical lens, things can be *both/and*. Examining the ambiguities of network culture means following John Law's (2004: 3–4) invitation to hold on to untidy, messy, and contingent realities that social and cultural theory often fail to

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grasp. For Law (2004: 2), 'simple clear descriptions don't work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent' when 'much of the world is vague, diffuse, or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct' and 'changes like a kaleidoscope'. In ways both similar and dissimilar to Sedgwick, Law calls for situated forms of inquiry over generalized vistas.

The lens of ambiguity further allows for exploring both social operations of power and phenomena irreducible to them, so as to speak of their coexistence. This is of importance since ambiguities and multiplicities do not necessarily get to enter the realm of theory. Rather, they risk remaining variously cast as sociological, ethnographical, descriptive, or anecdotal—and hence as weak in the sense of being feeble, or even trivial. If one understands theorization as an attempt to generalize in order to account for phenomena in the world, their conditions, impact, and meanings, it is nevertheless crucial that theory speaks to such phenomena in their multiplicity. It is my argument that if theory does not meet or grasp the experiences and realities explored in empirical work, it cannot hold much analytical force in explaining these.

Beasts!

Moving the metaphor of beasts and bellies to the level of data capitalism, it is easy to position large social media platforms (such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok), their owners (Alphabet, Meta, ByteDance), or chief executive officers (CEOs) in critiques of network culture as 'beasts' in the sense of representing centralized power overriding governmental control, delimiting individual agency, and obscuring their own practices of operation (Pasquale 2015; Zuboff 2019). Framed through a strong, connective theory, such beasts can be both jointly and individually seen as a force comprised of multiple actors (both human and not) while still connected by the same exploitative logic. Following this line of thought, the multi-billionaire Elon Musk, having acquired Twitter in 2022, requiring employees to switch to 'goblin mode' of hardly any rest and much uncompensated extra labour can be seen as a logical consequence, and illustration, of the overall beastly logic at play. Musk's aggressive control and dismantling of Twitter's (since renamed as X) policies against hate speech were certainly noteworthy moves, also making it possible to cast him as a beast and Twitter/X as its belly. Yet, bearing in mind Jean Burgess's and Nancy Baym's (2020) biographical account of Twitter, the platform has been steeped in ambiguity in its experimentational and explorative uses throughout its history—and some of this remains despite X increasingly becoming an algorithmically driven

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soapbox (or, depending on interpretation, trash fire) for radical right-wing advocacy.

Writing on Facebook, Taina Bucher similarly foregrounds the necessity of accounting for complexity, framing platforms in terms of tensions and transitions: 'we have to get rid of thinking of Facebook as one thing, with a stable and invariant core. In this sense, Facebook is multiple, coming together in various ways as a result of different configurations' without these coming easy together or cohering (Bucher 2021: 21–22). What a social media platform means is then a matter of assemblage, so that boardroom decisions over patents, profit margins, or data stacks produce one idea of what the company is or does. Meanwhile, the platform's uses for activism, flirtation, or advocacy ends assemble altogether different actors and concerns. Building on Law's (2004: 91) insistence that 'coherence can only be achieved in theory and not in practice', so that a platform can appear as an analytically singular object without really being one, Bucher argues:

> The trouble is not that the world is multiple and ambiguous but the fact that it seems singular because much work and politics have gone into making it appear this way. If we begin from the assumption that the world is already vague and indefinite, what should be of concern is explaining why many versions seem to hang together and overlap to begin with. (Bucher 2021: 24)

This is a critical point to make. Social media do, after all, play diverse roles in and for social organization, collective and personal identity work, and the formation of affective publics. For people resistant to governmental control in countries such as Iran or China, X—despite Musk's policies and the platform's toxic commenting cultures—is likely to represent a much lesser evil, or perhaps not an evil at all. During the exodus of (some) users and (many) advertisers from X following Musk's acquisition of the platform, much of the (US) Black Twitter remained. Commenting on the dilemma of sticking with it, André Brock pointed out: 'The fact that somebody racist takes charge of a space that we inhabit, doesn't necessarily mean that we'll flee. We don't do white flight' (in Ibrahim 2022).

In his research on Black Twitter, Brock (2020: 5, 212) has explored the platform as a space for distributed Black joy, vitality, and linguistic expression in a society where these are much denigrated: these precede the platform yet find a particular expression within its architecture. As Brock (2020: 214) points out, Black Twitter has taken shape in a context where Black users broadly lack 'material (and financial) control over digital infrastructure' to the point of being invisible in discussions concerning them. In addition,

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when applied to studies of platforms, abstracted and macro-level political economy and cultural theory approaches to exploitation, domination, and hegemony 'fall short for Blackness and Black digital practice' in not leaving room for considerations of the libidinal economies that Brock explores as 'linkages between desire and activity' irreducible to the simple dynamics of resistance in the face of oppression (Brock 2020: 29, 31). That is, the meanings of Black Twitter exceed and are also distinct from the dynamics of data capitalism.

On the one hand, under Musk, X has drastically cut down its safety measures intended to curb racist, homophobic, and misogynistic speech and reinstated user accounts once removed for spewing such content while suspending accounts of journalists observing these developments—or otherwise critiquing the owner. On the other hand, none of this cancels out the importance of the libidinal online economy that Brock examines—of X being a 'life-giving space', possibly against all odds (Pearson 2023). The issue is that of *both/and*: the coexistence and simultaneity of mutually contrasting elements and actors result in dense complexity, the elements of which cannot be positioned in a hierarchy of analytical importance or primacy without degrees of violence. On metaphorical terms, Black culture exists in the belly of the beast (in Brock's analysis, US society), while X represents a specific kind of belly, the overall operations of which Black Twitter can scarcely impact. This was the case before Musk and is currently even more so. Brock's argument is for resilience: 'We're going to live wherever we are, even if the circumstances aren't perfect for us, but when have they ever (been)?' (in Mores-Gerbi 2022).

Following Jodi Dean's (2010: 2–4) critique of communicative capitalism, the libidinal economy of Black Twitter could be seen as part and parcel of its repetitive, extractive loops that capture critique and resistance and where participation, independent of its intent or content, becomes incorporated in data streams. For Dean, circulation is an end in itself, while the affective intensities that drive and enthral users also entrap them in an exploitative, accelerated dynamic. This means that the political edge of social media participation is very much illusory: 'Affective networks capture users in circuits of drive. The more we contribute, the more extensive our submission' (Dean 2010; 124). Within this perspective, social media (as the beast) assimilates users (gulps them up to its belly) so that whatever their activities might be, their meaning—or meaninglessness—is dictated by the extractive logic of communicative capitalism. The jouissance that Brock identifies in Black Twitter would then translate as the drive—'loss as a force or the force loss exerts on the field of desire' (Dean 2010: 59)—which,

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rather than offering any outlet from the belly of the beast, in fact operates as the force binding users ever more tightly to it.

Dean's is a strong theory building on the tradition of critical theory that is unable (and arguably unwilling) to leave room for insights such as those posed by Brock on the importance of platformed sociality. The same applies to other strong theorizations of networked media. Consider, for example, the im/possibilities of mapping Brock's analysis of the potential for Black pleasure and catharsis onto Stiegler's (2013, 2019a) analyses of digital networks as disruptive forms of psychopower destructive of people's ability to act in the world in meaningful ways, or to Byung-Chul Han's (2017) critique of neoliberal data capitalism as a machine of ill-being that people subject to in loops of (self) exploitation and governance. Much of Black Twitter takes shape through mobile connectivity, making it part of app culture. And if the app economy, according to Lovink, is designed to render users unhappy so that participation therein is characterized by 'blankness, joylessness, the fear of accelerating boredom, the feeling of nothingness, plain self-hatred while trying to get off drug dependency' (Lovink 2019: 13), then the pleasures and joys of Black Twitter do not have much analytical room to thrive or even become registered as things that matter.

One of Brock's (2020: 218) key arguments goes against understanding Black online sociality only 'through its commodification, capacity for surveillance, and economic potential'. Another concerns the effacement of Black practices from conceptualizations of online cultures and the paradigmatic, abstract (yet white, yet male) users that they evoke and operate with instead—and, more expansively, with a blindness towards differences and social hierarchies as critical questions in their own right. Casting the cultural specificity explored by Brock against the generalized 'us' that theorizations of data capitalism operate with makes evident not merely the self-evident incompatibilities between these modes of inquiry but also the failure of generalized accounts to think alongside, or even acknowledge, analyses that do not comply with their own firm logic. This selective attention brings to the fore the question of the subjects of theory—the 'I' or the 'we' evoked in them—and the particularity of perspectives from which these actors are imagined and coined. This concern is no less pressing given the dominance of white male scholars within media theory to date.

If strong theories are positioned as the ones that matter in critical inquiry (Sedgwick, Barber, and Clark 2002: 247), this by default casts analyses such as Brock's as ones of lesser importance, hence contributing to the effacement of Black digital cultures as sociotechnological assemblages that matter. This, again, would not be an issue of blindness but one of

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effacement. This observation, I suggest, scales to virtually any form of social, cultural, or subcultural organization, the meanings of which remain irreducible to the logics of any singular platform, the principles of capitalist accumulation, or the operations of the app economy, as accounted for from an abstract 'everyplace' from where it is possible to see everything without being grounded in any specific embodied position (Haraway 1988: 582). The crux of the issue lies in how data capitalism becomes lived out so that its shapes or consequences are never uniform—let alone possible to foresee or easy to make sense of on collective scales. Or, as Sundaram (2022: 48) puts it, 'Even in the context of a rising platform capitalism and aggressive right-wing populism, we witness sites of micropolitical action, minor intimacies, and new mobilities. These different scales of intensity and situational encounters sit uneasily with the model of a hegemonic platform economy lulling media-addicted populations into distraction or consensus.'

While promising to cover much ground in explaining and predicting the shapes and consequences of data capitalism, strong forms of theorizing remain partial in their analytical force when it comes to divergent lived realities, whether these be ones within any singular region or globally dispersed. At the same time, they risk being politically unproductive in stripping internet users of agency (Burgess et al. 2023: 14). The rhetorical question then remains as to how imperative critical inquiry can be if it does not tap into the mess of it all.

Weak, Not Limp

My insistence is on modes of theorization that tap onto and work through the messy stuff that everyday lives are composed of on levels both individual and collective. This means resisting the casting of theoretical and empirical inquiry as separate spheres where the first tops the second in scales of value, importance, or critical insight. I see this as a false binary in that critical thinking capacious and generative enough to make a difference happens across and between scales—the macro and the micro, the structural and the specific. Such an approach also remains open to the suggestion that 'because there can be terrible surprises, … there can also be good ones' (Sedgwick 2003: 146). That is, unlike the predictive logic of paranoid inquiry presumes, we cannot know beforehand what may happen, or everything that there may be.

Sedgwick's call for weaker forms of theorization should not be confused with intellectual limpness. Rather, it promotes a mode of inquiry premised on 'meticulous curiosity' (Berlant 2002: 73). This involves taking seriously

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the ambiguity of things instead of considering mundane experiences and routines as shaped from the top down by the operations of platform capitalism, or any other logic of power, for this comes at the cost of reducing things to corporate logics and ideological strategies. As Ramzi Fawaz (2019: 17) points out, Sedgwick's mode of thought accounts for multiple things within a logic of potential addition respectful of their mutual separateness, making it possible to 'elicit the deployment of multiple frames of reference to comprehend' the phenomena studied.

Considered in terms of rhetoric, the allure of strong theory has to do with the imperatives of academic delivery: a good argument is, after all, a clear one, void of buts, ifs, and howevers. Critical takes on networked media and late capitalism further hold appeal for the palpable reason that there is much to critique in the invasive operations of data giants, the relentless monetization that underpins them, and the ways in which their operations tie into politics at scales both local and not. Since such beasts and their bellies are embedded in a somewhat dystopian reality of collapsing biospheres, violent conflict, and the cutting back of equal rights, paranoid forms of inquiry may come across as just reasonable enough.

And yet generalizing accounts of datafied conditions of life are partial in their critical scope, blind to contextual nuance and distinctions between diverse users, and often oddly ahistorical in their approach to social and cultural transformation. There is the further question of which modes of thinking, as well as which scholars, are turned towards to make sense of the present in its myriad actualizations—what perspectives become cast as general, or 'go-to', independent of their analytical limitations. For example, I remain uncertain as to the degree of insight that Adorno's post-war critiques of the culture industry hold in explaining contemporary developments, just as I remain wary of positioning any other scholar as holder of generalizable insight separable from the historical and contextual conditions within which their work took shape.

To do critical work, media scholarship needs to engage with what Stuart Hall (2002: 264, 268, 272), in reference to Edward Said, once discussed as the 'worldliness' and 'dirtiness' of cultural studies scholarship stemming both from its engagement with real-world issues, circumstance, and phenomena and from developing 'theoretical work as a political practice' while holding 'theoretical and political questions in an ever irresolvable but permanent tension'. These tensions stem partly, albeit not uniquely, from the messiness of culture meeting the work of theoretical abstraction where social power, in the early 1990s context, risked becoming 'as an easy floating signifier which just leaves the crude exercise and connections of power and culture

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altogether emptied of any signification' (Hall 2002: 274). Hall's polemic is certainly different from Sedgwick's, yet they are both calling for weaker forms of theory 'open to that which it does not yet know, to that which it can't yet name' (Hall 2002: 263)—or to that which it may never be able to quite name. It is further akin to Law's (2004: 151) query into quiet and generous methods 'less caught up in a logic of means and ends'.

As I have argued at length elsewhere, to be critical, cultural inquiry needs to be able to hold onto seemingly contradictory things to understand that which it studies with sufficient degrees of granularity—after all, things appearing to be diametrically opposed can be both intertwined and co-constitutive (Paasonen 2021: 5). Or, as Fawaz (2019: 29, 31) similarly advocating a logic of *both/and* puts it, the complexity of 'world's messiness' makes it necessary to see concepts as 'productively co-extensive, so that my own positions are endlessly subject to change'. To approach networked media through the lens of ambiguity allows for considering the same objects and phenomena as meaning and effecting distinctly different things, possibly at the very same moment, so that their potentialities can be generalized only at the risk of ignoring some others. Furthermore, as Fawaz reminds us, it remains necessary to hold one's account open and subject to change since things never hold still, nor are they possible to capture into a singular perspective. Ultimately, the issue is that of critical inquiry zooming in on complexities, tensions, and incongruent scales, rather than attempting to resolve and flatten these out in neat analytical closures.

First and foremost, this simply means acknowledging the complexity of things, and the value of scholarship digging into this messiness to show how things can mean and matter differently, and what things may emerge from the analytically murkier waters as diverse investments, attachments, and aims intermesh and clash. Methodologically, it means embracing diverse scales at one go so that, for example, theoretical generalization not only meets but also takes seriously contextual care necessary for qualitative inquiry, and where more abstract or structural considerations of societies, economies, and politics become faced with the acuteness of the particular—and vice versa (Paasonen 2023).

Critical inquiry capable of bearing 'the weight of ambivalence and contradiction' (Berlant 2011: 690) is needed in tackling the pushes and pulls of platform capitalism playing out at different speeds and with different, unequal consequences. Within these, exploitative data practices are as much a fact as is subcultural organization through social media platforms. These do not cancel each other out, calling for approaches capable of

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considering them in tandem. Modes of knowing are affective in aiming at certain kinds of impact. Or, as Fawaz (2019: 27) asks, 'how our own desires, aspirations, fears, and anxieties might provide a key to new ways to read the culture we make and that, in turn, makes us'? Given the dire realities that we are—very differently, yet also collectively—encountering, scholarship reaffirming the sad state of affairs while failing to make room for other developments, interpretations, and future avenues is certainly critical in the sense of questioning and evaluating the state of affairs. At the same time, also performs a stultifying effect by implying that we are stuck in the belly of the beast—that we are, so to speak, fucked. To argue for the need to think alongside such analyses in order to account for the multiplicity of things at play is, then, neither Pollyannaish naivety nor complaisance but a call for theory to do affective labour enabling—if not necessarily constitutive of—something akin to glimmers of much-needed hope.

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