Social Engineering After the Techlash

00:01 **CAROLINA BANDINELLI**

Five! Yeah, because Keith who is our technician, he goes, "five, four," but where are the "three, two, one"? So I'm perplexed all the time. How can I be sure that they count in my head is the same as the count in his head? That's the indeterminacy of translation, also when it comes to numbers.

So welcome everybody, in person, hybrid, wherever in the world, our global audience. As you can see, something must have happened in the night, because we multiplied. So the CDI-TV streaming family... That's the glitch, that's the glitch. Shall I carry on? I can hear myself, it's horrible. But anyways, the CDI family, group, society, is growing. Tonight we are quite a party, and I'm quite pleased. Let's see how it goes because we are six people and two microphones. So this is going to be also an exercise in sharing and solidarity and sharing is caring and self-control, and generosity. We are like a little football team with two microphones instead of a ball, so let's see how it goes.

The title of this episode is - let's see if I remember it - 'Reality Engineering After the Techlash'. And we have Noortje Marres here with other people that I'm going to introduce to you very soon, because this is - and Alessandro Gandini you may remember from yesterday - the usual Michael Dieter, and then you know what is my problem now? I know that you're Greta, I know that you're Matías, but I don't know how to pronounce your surname.

01:59 **GRETA TIMAITE**

That's okay. Hi, I'm Greta. My surname is Timaite. I feel like I'm in high school. What should I say?

02:11 **CAROLINA BANDINELLI**

His first name and his surname.

02:13 MATÍAS VALDERRAMA BARRAGÁN

Yes, my name is Matías Valderrama Barragán.

02:16 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Exactly. And we are going to talk about the topics of an event, a symposium that we run tomorrow at Warwick, title 'Artificial Societies', right? And as you may have gathered, I'm not entirely sure what we are talking about, so I'll hand over to Greta. Perhaps you can tell us a little bit more; what is this event? You have organized it. It is funded by the British Sociolog- No?

02:50 GRETA TIMAITE

[Laughs]

02:52 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Not that, the other one, but someone put some money on it. And there's also Edinburgh involved. Yeah, Edinburgh is there actually! Hello, Edinburgh! So, please, can you say all the things that need to be said, all the names, all the institutional acknowledgements, so then I can relax, because I'm not able to do that.

03:17 GRETA TIMAITE

Great, now I can't relax(!) So first, hi, it's Addie [McGowan] and Meenakshi [Mani], thank you. We collaborated with them to organize 'Artificial Societies'. And I think it should be Matías who is introducing it, because it was his initiative with Elif [Buse Doyuran], who is not here now, she's in Australia. We are funded by the Sociological Review Foundation. I always get confused as well [laughs].

03:48 **MATÍAS VALDERRAMA BARRAGÁN**

Yes, and you can check out their website, sociologicalreview.org.

03:53 **GRETA TIMAITE**

[Laughs] I guess you should say more about how the idea came to fruition.

03:59 **MATÍAS VALDERRAMA BARRAGÁN**

I can say a few words. This symposium was started with this idea... Well, Elif, who is not here, she studied nudges on platforms, and how the behavioural economics is increasingly getting more serious or more real in terms of reality engineering. I'm studying platform controversies, and I'm super interested in how platforms are designed to promote certain behaviours and decrease the probability of other behaviours. Greta works on AI, Meenakshi works on EdTech and the technologies in education settings, Addie works in advertising and how the AI and digital technologies are there. And we came up with this idea of Artificial Societies after a lot of discussion.

It's a very complex concept, I know, but we wanted to discuss basically the idea of how, in these digital settings, what kind of society emerged from these settings? Should we call it them societies or not? Or should we call them in a different way? What kind of associations emerge in these settings that are highly engineered? And that's why the connection with reality engineering was super important for us, because this is how we can discuss, for example, the authenticity in these environments, how people behave in these environments that are highly promoted and have

different features to incentivize likes, friends and certain behaviours. So that's one of the first topics.

05:37   CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So in a sense here we are asking, okay, how digital technologies and in this case platforms, and perhaps when it comes to your research, Greta, we are talking about AI, but how digital technologies are reshaping society or perhaps disassembling societies? But what is the relationship between these two things? At one point, there was the digital turn, or digital revolution, and this became so pervasive at the global scale, and it looks like it's here to stay. And how is this changing the way we behave with each other, the way we conceive of one another as well as of ourselves, the way we work - Alessandro, we talked about it in a seminar before - but also the way we study it. This really makes me think of your book, Noortje, Digital Sociology, right? [1] The first time I met Noortje, it was kind of a long time ago. I was at Goldsmiths, I was doing a PhD, and I was with Adam Arvidsson, who was here in a streaming episode a while ago. He said, "Let me introduce to Noortje Marres." I didn't really understand, but you were one of the first - at least, as far as I'm concerned - to really pose the question of, okay, now there is the digital, how [should] we think of society or of the two together, and how [shall] we study it? So I think perhaps if you can say something more about it, it would give us kind of a foundation for thinking about artificial reality of social engineering.

07:26   NOORTJE MARRES

Yeah, I have to say, it's for me a strange moment to be having this conversation.

07:34   CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Like in your life.

07:35 **NOORTJE MARRES**
In my life, definitely. But also because I think I'm at a point where I no longer believe that-

07:46 **CAROLINA BANDINELLI**
What you wrote.

07:47 **NOORTJE MARRES**
What I wrote. Well-

07:50 **CAROLINA BANDINELLI**
But we still believe it-

07:51 **NOORTJE MARRES**
Yes, so let's start. Let's start in the place of belief, and then we move to the place of non-belief.

07:57 **CAROLINA BANDINELLI**
Yes exactly, can you enchant and disenchant us. We want the whole story.

08:03 **NOORTJE MARRES**
Yeah, so I can also find my inner believer again,

08:08 **CAROLINA BANDINELLI**
Yes, let's go back to that moment.

08:08 NOORTJE MARRES

So the moment, I guess, that I for a long time thought was decisive, was the moment where the digital was claimed as an instrument for reordering not just society but social relations, and for representing and intervening in social relations in a new, interactive way. There are different moments that you can pinpoint as where this happened, but one surely is the moment where Facebook was massive, and where the term social media was coined-

08:57 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We were thinking about it yesterday, like that moment in which Facebook asked, 'What do you think?', and you were typing what you thought.

09:09 NOORTJE MARRES

For instance. But also where all these slogans would be all around us, to the effect that technology is now social, so it's also in a way going further back to IBM meets Apple Macintosh moment of this destruction of [inaudible]

09:20 COMPUTER

[Interrupts, technical glitch] ...like a bit of a gimmicky thing. I didn't think it was going to be what it ended up being. It started off from a couple of loaves of bread, couple of litres of milk. There it goes [inaudible - drone noise]. You wait. Waiting. Good girl. Right, let's go see what- Waiting. Kev. It was a niche thing. No one did it like I know my parents live down the road in Heritage

Park, so we'd be over mum and dad's house, and we'd see the drone come about three or four times in half an hour, just delivering stuff. We'd say, "Oh yeah, that's coming from us. Yeah." So it was really good. And you'd see drones everywhere. Now you don't see em. [Drone noise] We can make this work. We'll prove to you we can make this work, and this is how we're going to do it. That's where it sort of went pear-shaped after that, once they'd proven it, and they thought, "Okay, let's go to Coles. Let's go to DoorDash, let's go to the big guys and do it that way." So, disappointing, but, that's the way it went. We used to get sushi? [Drone noise] I'd prefer more infrastructure, more to public transport, and more to the upkeep of parks and recreation-

09:27 NOORTJE MARRES

...digital formatting is now a constitutive part of friendship.

09:27 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

It must have been quite good to occupy that position and say, "Look, guys, your object of study, sorry about that, but [it] has changed."

09:27 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

09:27 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

To me it still sounds like a convincing argument. And I remember the whole thing about, 'okay, now the internet is social'. However, now I'm also thinking, "Well, wasn't it social before?" Like before the social media? Wasn't there like a social dimension as well, even if it

wasn't branded like that, like people on MySpace. I mean, I wasn't there, I was reading Tolstoy, but people on MySpace, people on these other... What changed?

10:14 NOORTJE MARRES

I think it was very fitting that you were reading Tolstoy, because I think one of the narratives, and it's also periodization, like a cutting up of the internet and the web and then social media into these neat periods where, you know, before social media, the web was cultural, like we primarily had a repertoire of culture, participatory culture, counter culture and all this stuff around 'being social'... Actually, even when we spoke of community in the late 90s and virtual community, you know, it was the anthropologists who gave this language of, "Oh, look how these tribes assemble around webby objects and practices." So it was also... I mean, that makes it all quite messy and and complicated, that this kind of... when the moment of social media arrives is also, in a way, the moment where social science arrives and social science says, "Oh, now we're going to map these networks, and we're going to call them social networks. We're not they're not hypertext networks anymore. Now they're social networks."

12:57 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So the social element was like embedded in the affordances, in the very structure of the technology [inaudible] a social structure...

13:05 NOORTJE MARRES

Yes.

13:06 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
...not only that people socialized through that.

13:09 NOORTJE MARRES
Yes. Which is in some ways a much too geeky way of looking at it. Because I remember, for instance, my cousin, who was very into Facebook and was writing-

13:23 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
It sounds like my cousin.

13:27 NOORTJE MARRES
She's very wonderful. But for her, this whole notion that there was a social analytic that was materialized in the platform, to her was not relevant. So there's also, I think, the story that I'm telling now, now that I've been asked to embody the believer, you know, it's a pretty geeky story. It's like a minority perspective, I think.

13:56 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
And then what happened?

13:58 MICHAEL DIETER
[Laughs]

13:59 NOORTJE MARRES
Well, then [laughs]. Well, then first we got this whole literature that ballooned-

14:09　CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Including yours.

14:10　NOORTJE MARRES

Including mine, you have to own up a bit [laughs].

14:12　CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And maybe some of yours. Who else is guilty here? You've written something about it? Okay, now I want the full disclosure. You've written something about it too? No, no. You, no. Fortunately. Maybe you were too young, okay.

14:28　NOORTJE MARRES

Actually a lot of it was work coming out of media studies around the reformatting of social life, so how platforms were reorganizing, restructuring, and they would also use the term re-engineering, social life.

14:47　CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So here, I sense there's someone that wrote something about digital labour, platform labour. Yeah, digital society, digital labour. So your turn. You can confess, what was that moment that Noortje's talking about? How you thought, or you still think that the digital - or the social media, I don't know how you want to call it, guys, but that thing - has changed, or had changed, work? And how you would see it in that moment in which sociologists were like, 'Oh, internet!'

15:27　ALESSANDRO GANDINI

No, I think my... Well, first of all, I should say that part of the learning and the journey that takes me here has also been very influenced by your work.

Carolina Bandinelli 15.39

In the end, Gandini's gonna be your foot, Noortje.

15:41 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Of course.

15:41 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

That's how it works today. You are the guest of honour...

15:43 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

That wasn't what I wanted to say but still. It's very nice that we are here to talk about this. I am really grateful. On the topic, my sort of turning point, if you want to use that expression, was - as some, not just me, have done - that changed to me, at least, my reading of what was going on there, and eventually evolved what started out as a discussion on forms of activity that may be labouring-related, but they were not necessarily able to persuade me completely of their labouring nature, starting from-

16:32 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

What is the labouring nature?

16:34 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Thinking about, for instance, content creation.

16:37 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, like you do things, and that thing is labour, the things that you do is labour.

16:41 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

And in that sense, the digital labour debate, which saw that as activities that you would need to be remunerated for, of which, as you know, I'm partially convinced of. But also, when platforms come in, they give a template for reorganizing those activities and the labouring specifically associated to some of those activities. And then further on, for the gig economy for instance, paid work, more specifically, certain types of paid work, into what I've called in a very Marxist jargon, point of production, so-

17:17 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Today, Gandini's is a Marxist, but he hasn't always been, but today-

17:20 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Well, probably I have always been I just didn't manifest it in a way-

17:24 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

That is the moment in which you manifest. No, that's beautiful to see you flourish.

17:27 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Thank you. And, well, who knows?

17:31 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

It's true.

17:32 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Thank you. So- meaning that the platform, the key aspect to me, is that it gives, essentially, a re-fencing, a spatial nature to that, so it brings under its control some of those activities, and it gives the possibility for those who run the platform to organize those activities in a way that would lead them to then be paid for that.

18:00 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Platform reorganizes work and also what you've written, and other people have written, if you work for a platform, you have a different

sort of- your employers become the platform. Your boss becomes platform,

18:16 ALESSANDRO GANDINI
Although not necessarily...

18:18 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
No, not necessarily, but-

18:19 ALESSANDRO GANDINI
Because the platforms tend to see that as a form of collaboration or some kind of pseudo entrepreneurial activity, but-

18:26 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
But it's a different infrastructure to work.

18:28 ALESSANDRO GANDINI
That was my-

18:29 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
And it's a different...

18:30 ALESSANDRO GANDINI
Yes.

18:31 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...or it looked like a different infrastructure to social relationships...

18:34 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Yes.

18:35 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...the moment in which I have even a banal Facebook group to invite people to my birthday. It's a different kind of organization than if I have to call them with the landline, and if I work for Uber, or if I use Teams all the time as I do now, it's a different kind of thing. So it's a different infrastructure. Now, thinking about the platforms and what they are I want- Do you want to add something?

19:05 NOORTJE MARRES

Yeah, because I think Alessandro is pointing to something very crucial and it's sort of implied in your exchange that in the moment that the digital becomes equated with the social, so to practice the digital is to practice sociality. That is actually a moment of economization. So, you know, if you look at all the fireworks or the bubbliness of discourse, of all this kind of narrative around all platforms, you know, 'this is the way to be social'. 'This is about augmenting social reality.' 'This is about transforming sociality.' What was going on in the background is a massive incentivization of engagement with digital technologies that actually rendered it a source of value extraction.

20:20 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

There was an industry and not be behind, within, whatever. I mean, there were some people making money out of it, basically there was an industry-

20:30 NOORTJE MARRES

Yeah, but I mean the technical term is this kind of interarticulating, of saying, we take the digital and we take social relations and now we sort of pull them together, and when you practise social media, you're practising friendship. So that kind of conflation of the digital and the social...

20:31 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

In the platform.

20:39 NOORTJE MARRES

...in the platform, wasn't a standalone event or occurrence. No, that that was the enabling condition for economizing media engagement. So it's also from that moment on, it became a kind of principle of value extraction or profit principle got inserted into there. And that was actually pretty weird when you look back, sort of historically, that all that sort of got entangled, tangled up in one moment.

21:20 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And thinking about this object or actor or whatever you want to call it, like the platform. I have a sense that you can say something about a platform. You are a platform person? What, how? You tell me what is/how a platform works?

21:43 MICHAEL DIETER

I mean-

21:44 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Because the way you describe it, I really liked it.

21:46 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah.

21:46 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

It's like this sort of merging of these two dimensions. It's like a Kantian schema. I just said Kantian schema.

21:54 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

[Laughs]

21:54 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

A Kantian schema that connected to different dimensions and giving rise to an object that somehow is different than just the sum of both. So it's an interesting animal platform, and we use it every day. But that doesn't necessarily mean that we see what it is. Also generally, you know, the more we are immersed in something, the less you're able to see it, unless you're Michael Dieter, and then, you know-

22:25 MICHAEL DIETER

Not at all, I mean-

22:26 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

No, not even you, there's no hope.

22:27 MICHAEL DIETER

No because, you know, the amount that's now been written theorizing platforms, it's really been like one of the key concepts of the last decade. And it's been a very complex, interdisciplinary kind of theorization as well. I just wanted to add to the ballooning moment that Noortje referenced, because from where I was positioned - and I think we were all positioned with a different view of this - there was also a kind of interdisciplinary reconfiguration that I experienced, where I was coming from new media, which sort of, in a way, kind of disbanded in this ballooning moment, in a funny way, in this reconfiguration. But I definitely recall the social science scientists arriving, you know...

23:23 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Laughs] You recall the moment.

23:23 MICHAEL DIETER

...sort of en masse, into what was a smaller conversation. Yes, we were reading in new media, science and technology studies, we were reading some social theory, of course, and sociology. But at least in my kind of circle, there wasn't a lot of people who were sort of trained in science and technology studies. We were sort of reading it as

outsiders and doing that kind of interdisciplinary translation. But I do remember then meeting people who were really from that area and were looking at the digital. So that was sort of my experience of that time, of the early platformization moment.

I just wanted to make a comment about this idea that the web was cultural and then the platforms were the social because, in a funny way, it suggests as well that the platforms are like post-cultural, which also kind of rings true to me. Like, I research apps and when I think of various kinds of theorizations of the cultural, like Stuart Hall's declarative statements about how it's a space where socialism could be constituted "otherwise I don't give a damn about it." You know, could you say that about apps? Probably not. So, yeah, just a comment about this kind of post-cultural moment maybe, as well. But platforms, I think Alessandro you already gave a good working definition, at least hinted at it, that they're intermediaries. For me, the key point for the interdisciplinary definition was some of the business literature and some of the things from information science and industrial organization. There they talked about the multi-sided market, which became the multi-sided platform. But I don't know whether you want to say more. I mean it's a very well rehearsed kind of definition, but for me that was really important to understand.

23:48   ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Yeah, I wanted to say something, but it's probably past that.

23:25   CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Nah, I mean we can travel in time.

24:57   ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Adding to the exchange where the social scientists came, it made me think that now the computer scientists have come, and that's another sort of evolution in this particular story perhaps. Then I might come back at some point to the post-cultural element, which I'm not sure I agree with, but we can come back to it. The point-

25:14   MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, I'm not sure I agree with it either. [Laughs]

25:20   ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Okay, cool. [Laughs]

25:20   CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah I was also thinking is it that easy to separate the cultural and the social? But-

25:20 ALESSANDRO GANDINI
No, but just to finish the first...

25:20 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
Yeah, no, exactly.

25:20 ALESSANDRO GANDINI
...thought, then the computer scientists came. And then that's where, I guess, my question for you guys would be, this is perhaps another moment in the artificialization process that I expect, from your description, is part of your study.

26:11 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
So we are telling this story. Are we on the same page that I'm hearing a story in which there were the geeks in the 90s in the blogosphere, and they were doing some sort of cultural activities and anonymous, and then the platforms somehow arrived. They were engineered by some people that earn money by them, because this is also a thing, pretty fair enough. And then the sociologists arrive, because at that moment, they're like, "Oh, okay, this is social, hey we are sociologists."

27:19 ALESSANDRO GANDINI
This is typical. Being late to the party. It's a very sociological thing.

27:19 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, no exactly. Like the sociologists are breaking into party like, "Oh, that's something for us, actually. This is a society!" And then something happens which we still have to say. And the computer scientists arrived. But I sense that there is here the moment where something changed, at the moment when you stop agreeing with yourself, is the disbelief coming at this at this point? They are understanding the social-

27:51 NOORTJE MARRES

Well, I do want to speak up for some sociologists who were of course there lurking from the very beginning. So I think we have to be careful that the moment that [the] digital gets constituted as an object, like a knowledge object, or something that has a reality, as in digital-media-as-social-reality. Maybe that moment is like 2007 or -08. But of course the sociologists were already lurking in 1995 but their object just wasn't constituted. It was constituted as culture.

28:33 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

No. Of course, they were already there.

28:36 NOORTJE MARRES

So I just want to speak up with for them.

28:40 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

No but we are a stream. We are not, like, a keynote. So apologies-

28:55 MICHAEL DIETER

But it's not about, like, "I was there first", and then-

28:53 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

But it is and it isn't [laughs].

28:55 MICHAEL DIETER

It really isn't, I think, because hopefully as Noortje will get to, and others. I think that there are some really urgent questions now, at this current moment that we're in, or at least there are questions that have been reconfigured with new urgency to use Noortje's vocabulary. And I think that it's good for the space to be more crowded in handling these questions. But, yeah, in reality it's very messy. And it was always very interdisciplinary. And I just emphasize as well how it looked from where I was sitting. And I should say at that time I was in Amsterdam, and I was observing how the Digital Methods Initiative was also transforming during those years where you saw more and more people coming to Amsterdam to do digital methods from a social science background. So it's a very specific kind of context.

30:00 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I want now a bit of... I want the darkness.

30:05   NOORTJE MARRES

You want the other moment.

30:06   CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, I want the moment of disbelief.

30:09   NOORTJE MARRES

So the moment of disbelief. Maybe we can do [the] slightly dramatic version of the moment of disbelief, and then we can have the calm version.

30:20   CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah.

30:20   NOORTJE MARRES

So the dramatic version is... It is the techlash unleashed within this space that we're now describing, where you could say that for years we've been saying, "Oh, look how social life is being performed with the digital. Look how it's being invented with the digital." And then we find ourselves in the moment, where suddenly you go, we had it completely wrong: social life is actually being destroyed. [Notices something in room] Ooh. That's okay.

31:11   CAROLINA BANDINELLI

That's the glitch.

31:11 **NOORTJE MARRES**

That's all part of it. That's not destructive. No, that's fine. And the moment where you see the person in US government who doesn't have an appointment but who is firing people like crazy, when you read about the fact that emails written by employees are being fed to a generative AI model in order to make decisions about who will get fired, you just see a whole sort of infrastructure of solidarity, which is the social state. The social state is a lot of things, but it's also an infrastructure of solidarity. And that infrastructure of solidarity in that country, but also in other countries - now the digital has become an instrument for the destruction of those kind of infrastructures. And so this notion that, "Oh, digital technology is an instrument for the performance or the enactment or the inventing of the social", you know, might actually render us complicit in the creation of a blindspot for these super destructive effects. And a lot of people should say, "Told you so, this is what we've been saying for years and years and years."

32:50 **MATÍAS VALDERRAMA BARRAGÁN**

I just wanted to add this idea of the techlash that emerges in a highly marketised kind of setting and becomes more and more real with scandal after scandal, and we started to see that even with explicit scandals, explicit wrongdoings, there is no kind of accountability. And the only spaces of accountability are highly Western spaces of accountability. We have these kind of highly performative settings - the US Congress and looking for a kind of, I don't know, forgiveness - but we don't have proper infrastructures to actually hold them accountable. At least that's my rant.

33:38 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

This is my chance to finally ask, can you tell me? Maybe Greta, you can tell me - you look like someone that can be nice enough to tell me. So, when we say the techlash? What is the techlash? Because it's not necessarily- am I the only one who doesn't know what the techlash is? No, you don't know, true. Okay, sure. Okay, if João [Ruy Faustino, in audience] doesn't know, then I feel completely fine not knowing. So, what is that?

34:07 GRETA TIMAITE

It's actually Matías's expertise, so I feel like passing it over.

34:12 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

You start, and then Matías follow on.

34:15 GRETA TIMAITE

Yeah, so when we were thinking about the title for this symposium, we posed this question. Like, okay, how do we define [whether] is there a moment that we could identify as [a] techlash, and pre-, post- and during. And I think it kind of goes back to your PhD work and the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and mid-2010s - like 2016 - that we identified as some kind of a destructive point, perhaps.

34:51 MATÍAS VALDERRAMA BARRAGÁN

Or even before, with the Snowden leaks.

34:53 GRETA TIMAITE

Oh, yes.

34:54 MATÍAS VALDERRAMA BARRAGÁN
So, yeah.

34:56 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
Matías, what is the techlash? Is the techlash the moment in which you are like, "Fuck technology!", or "This kind of technology sucks!"?

35:04 MICHAEL DIETER
[Laughs]

35:05 MATÍAS VALDERRAMA BARRAGÁN
Yeah, I mean, this is the backlash against Big Tech, right?

35:08 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
Okay.

35:09 MATÍAS VALDERRAMA BARRAGÁN
Specific companies, like US companies, are promoting this platformization of everything, right?

35:14 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
So it's also the moment in which this kind of 'Maya Veil' of, "Oh, nice, that's Facebook, this kind of ingenuity", or the idea that technology or another platform could reassemble the social, transforming it, kind of crumbles, revealing that perhaps, in fact, they are actively contributing to destroying the social, at least if by social we mean some sort of, you know, the condition for democracy and solidarity and community. So is that it?

35:40 NOORTJE MARRES
Yes, that's exactly it.

35:59 EMBODIED AUDIENCE
[Laughs]

35:39 NOORTJE MARRES
But it's really brilliant, I think, the way Matías, Greta, and the organizers brought the techlash into this discussion of 'how does the digital transform a society?' Because, at least in the debates that I am familiar with, it hasn't received the attention that it really needs. And I think there, there are two things. Maybe first-

36:35 GLITCH
[Feedback]

36:35 NOORTJE MARRES
Techlash!

36:36 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
Music!

36:41 MICHAEL DIETER
The glitches are all part of it.

36:45 MATÍAS VALDERRAMA BARRAGÁN
Manifesting...

36:46 NOORTJE MARRES
It was very glitchy. You could see it was glitchy.

36:49 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
Yeah, it's part of the aesthetic.

36:51 NOORTJE MARRES
Yeah [laughs]

36:53 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
The aesthetic of the stream. The glitches are part of the experience. We are very hybrid, after all.

37:01 NOORTJE MARRES
But we just keep going, and talk about these... you know, the plastic skeletons when there's an impact crash test, where they crash a car into a wall, and then you see these skeletons. First they go violently forward and then they go violently backwards. That is, I think, the whiplash. That is how you get a whiplash. And I think it's entirely appropriate in that performativity - so the belief that technology somehow performs its object - and in the case of social media, it enacts social relations - now that's this kind of projective- It's a projective logic. Somehow technology projects society. But it's also projective in the sense that you

need to somehow go along with the projection. You need to go along with the performance. It requires a kind of suspension of disbelief. And then the backlash is like the opposite.

38:13 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And also the backlash happens because you hit something.

38:17 NOORTJE MARRES

Yes, but also the backlash - so [Elon] Musk feeding the emails into Grok to make hiring decisions - why is that such a violent backlash? What were the conditions of possibility for that? It is only because of that performative projection that so many of us have gone along with, right?

38:44 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We were all doing it.

38:45 NOORTJE MARRES

We were all moving forward, so we were ready. In a way, that performative investment in the digital as what was going to transform society conclusively creates the conditions where that extent of the perversion and the corruption becomes possible, I think.

39:03 MICHAEL DIETER

I just want to comment quickly that - and I think, Matías, when you introduced this term, you did very quickly state that - it's

not an academic term at all. It's out there in public discourse. It has its origins, I think the first reference is *The Economist* that uses this term, [2] but also it's interesting to see how it's appropriated, and maybe also give it these new definitions, like yours, Noortje, which I appreciate. But there is something about that term. Certainly, there are people that speak about these problems that don't use it, and may not use it. So there are questions [such as] should we use a term like techlash? How do we use it? Why do we use it? It has a certain currency, I suppose. So it's about engaging with that currency.

40:07 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Now I want to use it because I very much like the bodily- No, because it really gives a sense, first of all, of how these sort of processes require an action on the side of everybody, right? It's not something that happens. It's something that you make happen. It's not something that happens while you're doing something else. And also because it points at the body. And there is somehow an idea - and partially true, perhaps - that what happens in the digital is disembodied, and somehow, if it is disembodied, it is less personal. Hence more removed. Whereas the hit of the whiplash/backlash, it's something that hit the body, and the body also as the social body and society as a body in that you know your organs really need to collaborate, otherwise we're fucked. And it looks like we're fucked. Are we fucked, Gandini?

41:08 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

33

41:08 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

It certainly looks like we are, at least from the picture that you just painted. It's a apposite as a question. So perhaps a counter-argument could be whether the dismantling is not just another phase of social transformation that perhaps we didn't see coming to that extent, but it's sort of inevitably there because at some point society changes, and it always transforms. That's something that I am struggling to come to terms with myself, especially looking at, or trying to look at, the digital as I always did with a non-deterministic eye. That is, let's see what happens here without thinking, "Oh, it's this platform or the digital that has done this and done that", trying to sort of see it in a bigger picture. Perhaps, is this a process of societal changes? What we're seeing - a process of societal change away from democracy, for instance, and a sort of order of principles that we commonly agree in society - that maybe would have happened anyway. Of course, it's speculative, but I don't know what you think about that.

42:35 NOORTJE MARRES

Well, yeah, I think it is a really good moment to ask again: what was social about the digital, or about the

computational? Which is why the symposium that you are organizing is so timely in its framing. On the one hand, when we talk about social engineering or engineering societies, I would now say that in many projects of computational transformation, that definition actually isn't met. Insofar as when you look at the sort of technological operationalization - say we look at automated vehicles, or we look at behavioural governance, smart you-name-the-system - what you find is that collectives are constituted as a target of intervention. Collectives aren't operationalized as self-constituting. If you look at what is the social - you know, what is specific to being a social body - what is specific to being a social body is processes of iterative, reflexive coordination, of I look at you, you look at Matías, Matías looks at Alessandro. And in this way we come to coordinate who will speak next. So those sort of iterative-

42:35 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We move together in a way...

43:21 NOORTJE MARRES

Yes, attunement...

43:26 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...kind of a choreography that we improvise without being even fully aware that we are doing it.

43:22 NOORTJE MARRES

Yeah. And it is-

43:26 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

This is what you mean with "collectives are reflexively constituted", is that what you said?

43:26 NOORTJE MARRES

Yeah, yeah. And, you know, pull the whole library over ourselves here, and pull out all the books and compare different definitions. Is the social being able to see yourself from the standpoint of another, for instance, is one definition. We could talk about that for a long time...

43:26 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

But we aren't.

44:08 NOORTJE MARRES

...but maybe not, because I think intuitively, the fact that to be part of a social collective is different from being a behavioural subject who gets incentivized to pursue certain behaviours or patterns of action - these are different things. And I think we're now at a point where it's really important again that we say no to engineer behaviour, no matter how interactive the system is that you use to engineer behaviour. That's not the same as using technology to be social, to do sociality. I think even though we're in a moment where a lot of spells are being broken and a lot of balloons are being burst, it's also the moment where maybe that kind of understanding of self-mobilizing, self-initiating coordination - which is paradoxically, maybe, where going back to an earlier time of independent media practice... Yeah.

CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, so just one second, because I need to understand. When you say collectives are reflexively constituted - which I didn't understand - but then when you said, it's me looking at you, looking at Michael, then I started getting it. This sort of choreography or co-composition, it's something that you do immanently. It's [in-the-making?] and it's [in-the-making?] only with others at the same time, without a plan, without a script. I really like this definition. And so what you're saying, or we are saying - I mean, I'm not saying anything - is that the ways in which platforms or the digital industry - for how it is operationalized, and the products and services that become pervasive in our life - the way they act is to actually break this choreography? Or do not imply a definition or a recognition of the social as this thing, but rather address us as individuals that do things as individuals and behave in a certain way. So is this what we are saying? That this kind of definition of the social is not implied, we are not addressed as such, or even that these sort of technologies are actively breaking, they're posing something between me and you, and then now we don't understand each other anymore? Whereas I think we are understanding each other, I'm enjoying it(!)

46:31 NOORTJE MARRES

[Laughs] Well then maybe we can just leave it at that, but at the same time I can't help throwing in one other ingredient, which is that I have the strong impression that we have moved into a period where the notion of a social contract, the notion that somehow big tech companies will play the game of societal transformation discursively, in terms of policy initiatives, ethics, all those kind of repertoires that have been put in place in the last 10, 15 years, to enact Big Tech as an agent of societal change, and therefore acting in good faith - that we did move, I think maybe

a few months ago [to] the moment where it's like, "Oh, let's just switch off all those moderation features." "Let's just send the fact-checkers home." All those kind of moments. And it will be, I think, quite important to document it. Where this notion of the social interface, it was- in Dutch, you say: you "put it [out] by the rubbish". [In] the work I've done with colleagues here at Warwick, but also working with people with arts backgrounds on 'AI in the Street', it's really hard to locate a social interface for AI when you step out of particular app ecologies. So there's also something like that, where if we're saying, "Oh, we've got the social back", it's not just a story about "how is it being reformatted by the latest e-commerce initiative?" "Oh, we can now speak again of the social [as] self-constituted." It's also because it was thrown back into our laps, like: "You can have it back - Big Tech doesn't, doesn't need it anymore."

49:11 MICHAEL DIETER

I think we probably will go a bit over on this stream, which is fine, because it's a great conversation. I think we need to open it up for discussion and also hopefully comments online or questions from the online stream. But just before we get there, I want to ask- it's a two-part question and you can choose, Noortje, which side you want to emphasize, or both. I'm just wondering, the way you're now talking about the digital doesn't sound like how STS researchers/theorists would have talked about the digital before.

50:20 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Let's say what are STS?

49:34 MICHAEL DIETER

Science and Technology [Studies] researchers. It's a bit of an inside-baseball question, but I think it can be opened up. I'm just wondering: how are you now thinking about the digital? And then the second part of that is: when I read your work, I read a lot about the social and the history of the social and these different understandings of the social. But I don't always read you talk about the digital in the same way. So I wonder also, what do you mean by the digital?

52:42 NOORTJE MARRES

Well, I wish I could just pass this one on to Alessandro.

52:45 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Let's do it!

52:46 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

[Laughs; inaudible]

52:48 NOORTJE MARRES

No, he should have at least some minutes [laughs. I think the moment where... I think there's someone here

who has 'digital societies' on his T-shirt. Yes.

53:09 EMBODIED AUDIENCE
[Inaudible]

53:12 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
We can imagine. It's a very nice blue T-shirt.

53:18 NOORTJE MARRES
Digital Media Research Centre, Q-U-T, so this is Queensland. And then it has a slogan around digital societies.

53:21 EMBODIED AUDIENCE
"Supporting flourishing digital society."

53:32 NOORTJE MARRES
Yeah, "supporting flourishing digital societies." And I think it's very helpful as a phrase, because it is a kind of a not-technocracy. What is a digital society? A digital society is one that is not held captive by the nightmare of technocracy, where technocracy is basically rule by technical reason - the whole 20th century idea of bureaucracy as the 'iron cage', the way in which systems of formalization, of information management, sort of render impossible the type of creativity and improvisation that makes societies flourish. So, there's a promise. The digital, in that sense, is I think very much a promise of doing technology differently. That's, in a way, the digital. And I think we're totally in the age of the computational now. We are in an age where

engineering-as-power politics is on display, where the notion that society is an object of governance which does not require its members to be constituted as subjects of governance in order for technology to be able to do its thing. We're in an age where those kind of propositions have gained far more legitimacy than I think they they've had.

55:28 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So it's also the relationship that this kind of power has vis a vis the "citizens"?

55:36 NOORTJE MARRES

Yeah, I mean, to be too geeky I think digital implies a specific relation between states, society and engineering.

55:48 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

This is not geeky!

55:49 NOORTJE MARRES

No? Okay, so when there's generative underdeterminacy, generative uncertainty, in those relations, where it's always possible that one ends up assuming the position of the other - like that kind of circulating standpoint - that is what's possible in a digital society. Under a regime of computational governance, positions are fixed, right? These are the subjects. These are the decision-makers. These are the systems of governance.

56:31 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
Okay, yeah.

56:32 NOORTJE MARRES
So that could be one way.

56:32 ALESSANDRO GANDINI
What do I have to say?

56:32 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
What is the digital?

56:32 ALESSANDRO GANDINI
Oh, I thought you answered that.

56:33 NOORTJE MARRES
[Laughs]

56:33 CAROLINA BANDINELLI
But how do you see this thing? We are saying we are not anymore in the digital society. We are in the computational...

56:53 NOORTJE MARRES
We're being governed through computation.

56:55 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We are being governed through computer [laughs].

56:59 NOORTJE MARRES
[Laughs]

56:59 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And that is a specific relationship between engineers, or the engineering, the social, and I suppose the political, or you said something else? The state. Almost. Palo, we say in Italian. How do you see these, Ale? Do you recognize this kind of shift or setting in your research when it comes to work? Yesterday we were talking about digital disconnection, the fact that people want to disconnect, and I think when people disconnect - as in taking time off social media or just quitting their job, or explicitly kind of boycotting a certain platform, say X. Isn't there also the perception of this computer power that makes us feel that we are not left the generative space.

58:12 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

I would say so, although the instinctive reaction to this conversation is I feel Shoshana Zuboff vibes here, meaning that-

58:22 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

What are Shoshana Zuboff's vibes, in case...

58:26 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

I like the reference to the constituting of the subjects through the metaphor of the body, and I kept thinking about

how we moved from a body of subject, a body of cells and human flesh to a body of data.

58:46 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Interesting!

58:46 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

That's very much my entry point, perhaps, to this answer, to this conversation. Definitely the phenomena that you mentioned are somewhat related to the sense that there has been a takeover of these particular technologies into our social lives to an extent that it feels discomforting. To an extent that it feels unsettling. Then perhaps the question is, who feels this discomfort? Who feels this unsettlement? Some people are more comfortable with this particular state of things. Others are probably less comfortable. Then we go back to society, though, and so we go back to a point of observation that is more centred on the actor, as opposed to the technology, to an extent. I quote a book that is called Digital Sociology. I'm not sure if you read that?

59:42 NOORTJE MARRES

[Laughs]

59:43　ALESSANDRO GANDINI
Yeah, I learned this in that book.

59:58　CAROLINA BANDINELLI
I'm coming to the floor to collect questions, I am the question person. Michael, sorry, you're not gonna replace me.

1:00:06　MICHAEL DIETER
No problem(!)

1:00:08　CAROLINA BANDINELLI
But when we talk about this computational power, what it triggers in me is the cultural imaginaries about robots or computers taking over. So it seems to me that it is a fantasy, maybe even 'the singularity' that is quite present and has been present for a while. I'm thinking Robocop. But today it seems to have an iteration that is getting very pervasive and I'm thinking about AI as in this computational super-subject, this computational master-signifier. How do you see the role of AI in the techlash? I'm sorry, but you decided to title an event 'Artificial Societies' and of course it evokes artificial intelligence, right? So how do you see that? Tell me something, because I don't know what to say but it rings some sort of bell. What is the role of AI in this computational power?

1:01:27　GRETA TIMAITE
I feel I'll need another hour.

1:01:28　CAROLINA BANDINELLI
Do you want a glass of wine?

1:01:30 **GRETA TIMAITE**

I'm good [laughs]. I guess just to be brief. I think there are a few points that I've been thinking about. One is, I feel AI researchers are making a lot of claims about society. I was thinking about this recent blog post by Google DeepMind, [in which] they talked about pluralistic societies. What is it about? It's that weird moment when they try to say something about social relations and take it into account, but they do it in a very - I don't want to say tokenistic way - but it's very individual way, right? There are different individuals who have different views, and that's it, and we want to somehow represent them. But it still does not think about that interactivity or interpretative dimension, coordination of situations. I think that's something that maybe links to [Alessandro's] point about these computer scientists and coming-into-view as well. We need to ask questions about that and engage quite critically. About techlash and AI - it's quite tricky, because I feel there's different discourses going on. We have a lot of AI hype around 'AI agents', for example, and claims about AGI (artificial general intelligence). There is this positive narrative, but when you look where it comes from, it is from Big Tech. So we have a clash, for example, [between] generative AI and copyright, right? But then there's this other discourse, and I feel it's very hard to disentangle and make actual claims about it. I don't know if anyone wants to respond. I can go to artificial societies or maybe some questions?

1:02:16 **GRETA TIMAITE**

We have some questions from both our online audience and [embodied audience].

01:02:46 **EMBODIED AUDIENCE**

Thank you all very much. It's all been really interesting. I almost wonder if there's an overly sharp distinction being drawn between the sort of pre- and post-social. Isn't one way of thinking about this just the fact that you had a bunch of this investment, information technology stuff, then there was dot-com bubble, and it really took investors about 10 years to find a way to essentially monetize and have this enclosure. Capitalism makes everything into enclosure - enclose all of these self-organizing discussions and social discourses going on. So now you have a situation where all these things are still going on, but to a certain extent they're more under the profit motive. Maybe they're being directed in certain ways. But is it true that we can say, well, there was the social internet and now there's the totally commoditized internet, or was there always some commoditization there and sociality- I mean, I'm thinking in 2018 there was 'Red for Ed'. It was this education union movement that was organized on social media as this working-class thing. And, maybe more provocatively, a lot of the Silicon Valley stuff we're seeing right now, a lot of that was organized in the dog days of the pandemic. You had a bunch of these Silicon Valley entrepreneurs themselves getting together on these various social media apps like Clubhouse and being like, "This is outrageous, we want to essentially overturn trust and safety." And they end up taking over the White House that way. They self-organized in their own platforms.

01:04:24 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Thank you.

01:04:25 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

I'm moderating the chat. We have people at home! And we are really grateful for the questions. It was a similar question on strategies of resistance, but also on the [Michel] de Certeau notion of tactics, and if this can [be] brought about to read some social types of micro-engineering of resistance in this context. I thought that that went well in terms of agency of users or society, or not-society anymore.

01:05:05 NOORTJE MARRES

Yeah, some really great comments. It's definitely a kind of tactical simplification, or maybe a kind of a dramatization. How can we narrate these moments in order to identify the energy or what can be generative about it? I think I'm emphasizing these things partly because there's something lurking in the corner that we haven't yet touched upon but I care a lot about, which is for a long time the debate around the social and sociality - away from the digital - was about the more-than-human. It was this insight that, actually, if you have five talking heads, that's not the social.

In order for sociality to happen, practices of craft, of being in the world, of making stuff, of being in place - all these more-than-human, material, ecological constituents. A lot of this, for some time, happens in parallel to debates about platform societies, platform economies. And I think when you come in a moment where you're like, "wait a minute, all these computational fireworks", no matter how powerful the infrastructure, it's actually not capable anymore of producing this fiction of, "oh, our society is digital now." I think that can also be the moment where that more-than-human envisioning of the social becomes totally part of the story of digital culture. I think that's why I'm trying to go with these simplifications, because I think it can open up different kind of imaginaries of what comes after AI. This maybe also connects in relation to tactics. And I'm also curious what Michael Dieter would have to say on this point, because a lot of the 1990s visions of what was transformative about the digital had a lot to do with tactical media, of shifting power dynamics outside of the domain of the strategic into the domain of improvisation, of play, of creative ritual. And I, frankly, have been terrified myself by the ease with which the tactical media agenda was taken up by the racist right. And so it feels somehow, even for me, too simplistic, to be like, "Oh, now we can reclaim tactical media." But clearly there's a lot of really interesting questions also in relation to that. Because I think this bifurcation, this split between ecological/more-than-human practice, digital culture, techno cultures - those kind of separations, at least I experienced them as separations - maybe they will become less marked because of the shared understanding that this computational engineering paradigm is just too destructive on both sides.

01:09:08 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, now we want to hear from Michael Dieter. One of his hits is called 'Tactical Media'.

01:09:14 MICHAEL DIETER

Well, just quickly, I think even back in the 90s, when tactical media was emerging and was being discussed, Mckenzie Wark made a contribution to this discussion where she pointed out that, okay, tactics are usually opposed to strategy, and we could simplify that as bottom-up versus top-down, but there is an in-between, and that's the space of the logistical. And for Wark at that time, there was a lack of thought to the logistical. Platforms, in a way, control the logistical. [3] They step into that space that was also an unthought space of tactical media. I think there's obviously many people that work on these kinds of questions, either the infrastructural or the logistical, and focus on that as sort of counterpoints or other views on platformization - among other questions to do with labour or social organization. But I would suspect, Noortje, that this kind of move might also resonate with what you're suggesting, not just "what is to be done?" but how does our work transform at this moment? What do we do differently?

01:10:45 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We have a question here.

01:10:47 **EMBODIED AUDIENCE**

Yeah, I think Carolina is absolutely right by bringing Kant to the fore, because-

01:10:53 **CAROLINA BANDINELLI**

I knew. I knew he was an ally, the only one.

01:11:02 **EMBODIED AUDIENCE**

Not only society itself, but also these social relations. You gotta see what's the noumena and what's the phenomena, you know? You gotta have some metaphysics, or like Kant's question: What is nature? What is exactly real or not? I just want to say about [something that] was said in passing, this breakdown of solidarity. Which is related to the breakdown of social bonds. But I think that is the thing that is not dependent [on] digitalization. It was said that the digital is an instrument of destruction of solidarity. And Nietzsche in the 19th century was already talking about a spiritual crisis. Simone Vale was saying that the nation is the only thing that exists; family, everything else, was completely reduced so every type of social bond was put into the aether. You can also bring [in] Marx and say that everything that is solid melts into air. But talking about the techlash and also relating this to the breakdown of social bonds, the most recent critique of the breakdown of social bonds was actually in an interview [by] The New York Times columnist Russ Douthat

[..]

[with] Marc Andreessen. [4] He was saying that many people in Silicon Valley/Big Tech were themselves worried about the effect of Big Tech and platforms on their children. For example, [Elon] Musk was is supposedly traumatized by one of his 12 children becoming transgender, right? Something like that happened. And Marc Andreessen also had something with his children or with his employees. But then they also mentioned DOGE and [Donald] Trump. And these are people who, in their discourse, in their rhetoric, already cement this breakdown of solidarity. Their discourse is completely exclusionary - the migrants or the deep state or this. I mean, to be completely honest, every populist discourse is already exclusionary. "For the many, not a few" is a bit exclusionary. There's gradations of how bad it is. So these people are coming into the state, and Musk's destruction of the state through DOGE is already trying to break down that social bond which is the state, the welfare state, etc, all these agencies. But I don't think they realize that the state is not merely a thing, but a collection of social relations - that's the thing said by Brett Christopher who wrote about asset capital. So how do you think that Big Tech will act as they also recognize the techlash? And there's this thing that social bonds in our societies are already breaking down. And do you think that they're merely accelerating that? Do you think that that was already something that was going to happen? What is the role of things like DOGE, or here in Britain Dominic Cummings? That was my question.

01:14:33 **NOORTJE MARRES**

Thank you, João. No, it's great. It's great. And we're gonna have to have Carolina stop me.

01:14:41 **CAROLINA BANDINELLI**

I'm ready.

01:14:43 **NOORTJE MARRES**

Yes, good. I think it's very important what you say that this tragedy of the destruction of community, if you want to call it that - we're on repeat here. It's a historical repeat. And it has many versions and comes in many variations. And I think I'm just learning to appreciate the importance of it. That's part of what's going on. But there's also something quite specific, I think, where I'm not sure that it has been sufficiently appreciated up till now, which is [that] now there's a very specific architecture of solidarity that was put in place in the 20th century. The invention of the administrative state. And this occurred in many different periods, sectors, countries, contexts. I can't do justice to it, but just to name, you know, the invention of social security. The invention of the principle that we can collectivize risk through a tax like a national insurance system. That was actually a technical invention. And that technical invention took a political issue - how can we have solidarity in an industrial age? - and turned it into social policy. Now this is how it's going to be rolled out. Now, there are many other moments where that invention of the administrative state as the sort of operationalization of solidarity happened. Public health is another space where that occurred with great consequences. We can

think of contraception. Managing reproduction was another one where we can talk about it in those terms. It was like, "Oh, this is how we get some solidarity between men and women." Now, the fact [is] that a lot of the scandals involving the digital in the last 10 years or so had those very systems as their object, right? Those scandals that happened in the Netherlands around the fraud around benefits, where algorithms would detect benefit fraud and penalize people turned out wrongly. That had the social state as the site where algorithmic governance destroyed or damaged these mechanisms. And we can also talk about the roll-out of direct-to-consumer testing during Covid, which was a way of sidelining public health, which was another moment where an established institutionalization of solidarity in public health - primary care institutions administering Covid testing - no, we're going to have - what was it? - Serco and TalkTalk and these companies who were put in charge of rolling out Covid testing. So there are a lot of moments where digital innovation got mobilized to basically really affect the capacity of these state institutions to deliver solidarity. That moment, a lot of people have done good work about it. But have we really grasped the impact of that? Because that does affect the very question of whether the state is still governing society. Or is the state now governing something else that's not called society, it's called something else? It's called the innovation economy, or... So, it's partly the working-through of that. In relation to Kant, it would be very interesting to talk in much more detail, but I can't help thinking that we're now talking a lot of the time about conditions of existence and not conditions of possibility. And so when we talk about critique, we're talking a lot of the time about which beings are able to endure. It's a very ontological, existential thing.

01:19:45 **CAROLINA BANDINELLI**

And then, of course, when it comes to Kant, it's a perfect topic also for the drinks.

01:19:54 **NOORTJE MARRES**

[Laughs]

01:19:56 **CAROLINA BANDINELLI**

I'm in this part of the table, and you are involved in tomorrow's symposium, so I don't know what you're going to say, but I want to hear it. Also how your research relates or whatever you want to share.

01:20:15 **EMBODIED AUDIENCE**

Sure. Thank you. Thank you all. This has been fantastic. My name is Addie McGowan. This is Meenakshi Mani, and we've come down from Edinburgh to be a part of this conversation, and we're really grateful to be here. I'll just pick up quickly, and maybe it's a provocation for tomorrow, as a hook for you all to come to our symposium.

01:20:16 **CAROLINA BANDINELLI**

You're giving us the cliffhanger.

01:20:37 **EMBODIED AUDIENCE**

Yes, or, let it hang in the air so we can all think about it. But, Noortje, I loved what you said at

the beginning of this, when you said first there was the web, which was culture, and then we have social and platforms/multi-sided markets, whatever you want to call it, and now we're kind of in this economic framework. I'm a postdoc at Edinburgh, but my PhD looked at Airbnb as a case study for understanding the dimensions of platformization beyond the digital, and in ordering and these platform processes and how they shape our sense of the world. And I really think that the economic motives and economization at different levels - I guess [Koray] Caliskan and [Michel] Callon would call it stack economization - is the underlying thing with all of this. When we're talking about generative AI, it's now this geopolitical, economic stage where power is playing out. And so I'm just curious what you all think about the underbelly of all of this being financial. It's economic. And when you bring power into- I mean, in the platform society, I would think power is synonymous with economic domination, really. Just something to think about.

01:22:04 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

I had a comment in a different angle. My research is primarily with- To introduce myself, I'm a third-year PhD student in the Education Department. I work in the Centre for Research and Digital Education, primarily. And my research is mostly focused on the engineering side of things in an Indian context, and primarily looking at how engineers go about conceptualizing education and this idea of like sociality. Like how do they conceive of

that? And, in many ways, destroy that? I love this [phrase] 'how collectives are reflexively constituted', like [engineers] almost don't see that as being the case. And I was wondering if any of you had thoughts on how we bridge that divide in the sense that- So my training actually as a software engineer and, for them, this entire story of this evening, of how the digital played out, and the way it's affected sociality and social platforms, and how we conceive of artificial societies - they're not thinking of those things. For them, it's very compartmentalized and very logical and bounded. My question is, how do we bring them into this conversation and help them understand the impacts of what they are doing, or actively engaging with them? Because, from my research, a lot of them don't see that. They go by very simplistic notions of efficiency and access - like all the discourses that AI is bringing, that it's going to bring access and improvements, when especially in resource-constrained situations...

01:24:00 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I like the idea of us just going together to the engineers to say, "Guys, collectives are reflexively constituted." [Laughs] Thank you so much for your contributions. Who wants to take it? Maybe you want to say something.

01:24:18 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

No, I don't know about that. I'll try. Maybe I say something about the last bit, the last question. How do we do that? Well, I think one thing that might

help is also at our latitudes to try to minimize the reification of data in what we do and in everyday lives in general, which we also are guilty of somehow with our research that needs to be funded by grant applications and big projects - I'm very guilty of that in order for career progression and promotion. So perhaps starting to approach this a little bit more ingrained into an activist discourse, as opposed to a purely instrumental discourse about how data fit into several types of logics around research and society, and the relationship between research and society certainly is one of those aspects that might improve that particular situation. Companies - platform companies, social media companies - are now completely legitimized in keeping researchers away from scrutiny. That's wrong. That shouldn't happen, and we should work at a political level to change that. And in general - and again, it will be political work to do - to allow the way in which this becomes economic. The moment it becomes economic changes a bit of the nature of that, and if we keep it into the realm of... this reminds me of the early conversation about digital citizenship and all of the rest of it, which [is] left in the background now a little bit, but maybe some of that is what I have in mind. I'm not sure what you think.

NOORTJE MARRES

Well, I think it is really important to remember and grasp how lot of people in engineering are actually... I think we're all totally on the same side. Today I read about this Turing Prize, and these architects of reinforcement learning who received a Turing Prize, and they used that moment to go public with these statements like the way in which untested software is now being unleashed on millions of people, it's not good engineering practice. Actually here at the University of Warwick, which has quite strong engineering departments and traditions, the whole notion of how you give back to society, how engineering is a way of giving back to society, or solving society's problems. A lot of engineers are really serious about that, right? That is a tradition in engineering and sometimes colleagues of mine say with all this critiquing of Big Tech, you're actually rendering invisible all these engineering traditions who have totally been critical in realizing a social contract between innovation and society. And I think, yes, they're right. So I think what you raise is really, really important. What I hope, but it's really hard to do, is that rather than 'engineer-blaming', what it really is about [is] how can we put our methodological beef where our mouth is? As in, if we really dig it, that the social is a body and it's reflexively constituted [laughs], how is that actually put into practice? What does that mean in terms of design principles? I think that's really important. And on the geopolitics and the economization, it's super important what you're pointing out. And at the same time, I just have this historical flashback where this moment of the invention of the social state in early 20th century... a lot of that was because of the political danger, the

political risk that was posed by organized society to industrial capitalism. So, yeah, it is also this super daunting problematic around... you know, we've had such massive protests, for instance, in the UK in the last 15 years. Why were they not dangerous? What was it about them..? And maybe they were. Maybe actually they were far more dangerous than I'm implying. But I think there's something around that counter-power that is really critical.

01:30:12 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Do you want to say something? We need an answer.

01:30:20 MICHAEL DIETER

I'm on board. This economization/financialization aspect - I think there's a lot of work still we that we would need to do to understand what the digital is when we're mentioning this word 'digital'. I feel like it's in scare quotes whenever it's mentioned. But I feel that there's a need to create forms of value that are collective, common, that are not reducible to the digital, and I think that also means rethinking the economy and maybe in a similar spirit [to how] platforms have forced a rethinking of the economy. And I think within that space, I wonder whether the term 'breathing room', the concept that you were responding to, is relevant here. It's also, I think, about spaces where people experience agency in new ways, and where people can experiment with democracy, actually. Which I also think is

something we need to take an experimental spirit to because it's also a term used very generally, but it exists in very specific ways, and some of those specific ways that it currently exists are under threat, in crisis, have been for a long time, but now I think - as, Noortje, you've been emphasizing - these things are absolutely apparent. They're kind of undeniable. So that would be my addition to those comments.

CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I suppose that the conversation will continue in a different format tomorrow. Can you say, Greta and Matías, just give a reminder of what it is going to be about tomorrow? When, where? How do we engage with it?

01:30:21 MATÍAS VALDERRAMA BARRAGÁN

The symposium is tomorrow at the Oculus. We will start at half nine. And we will have presentations on literacy, digital skills and education. So it's interesting talking about the tactics. I think it's interesting how the connection of how these engineers are trained is also part of the question, right? This is not a separate ssue. We have presentations on social media and content moderation, how the engineer is applied in this kind of context. We have presentations on labour and practices. It is very heterogeneous in terms of topics and in terms of disciplines, so I'm very happy with that. Also we have presentations on addiction and well-being and how that topic is also always lurking or present in these debates, but on the discussion of how engineering and these kind of topics are connected or not, and how we can move. And maybe I will connect with some of the questions, but I think it's important that in the title we

decided very deliberately to define what comes next after the techlash? We don't need to stay in this kind of constant techlash. We need to think about how new alternatives, in terms of new...

01:32:30 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Life after techlash.

01:32:34 MATÍAS VALDERRAMA BARRAGÁN

...forms of engineering that might be good, and how that will look, and how social scientists could contribute to those processes.

01:33:59 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Greta, what are you looking forward to about tomorrow?

01:34:05 GRETA TIMAITE

I'm excited about it all, to be honest. I'm really pleased to have interdisciplinary presenters coming from different backgrounds. We really wanted to have that. And to some extent that's the logic [behind] some of our choices in the titles, such as 'social engineering', 'artificial societies'. We wanted to create shared objects of exchange, if I can put it this way. We'll have a keynote speech by Noortje as well. Think it's 10.30am. Also Mona Sloane. If you can't join us in person, you can always join us online. It's a hybrid event. We're working hard to accommodate everyone. That's my excitement.

01:35:04 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So.

01:35:06 NOORTJE MARRES

I want to say one thing.

01:35:08 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, I want to hear it.

01:35:09 NOORTJE MARRES

Which is that the Centre for Digital Inquiry...

01:35:16 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

It's very beautiful.

01:35:16 NOORTJE MARRES

It's so alive and kicking, and it's wonderful to see, and you and Michael and everyone, you're doing a really amazing job.

01:35:27 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Thank you, I like that final moment in which we do this love declaration about how beautiful we are. I mean, all of us!

01:35:36 NOORTJE MARRES

But it's also labour, and it's also dedication, having a commitment to being in this lab, and it's just really inspiring.

01:35:52 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Thank you, Noortje, it was very good to have you here. And I wish we could go on and on. Next time we organize a rave, how about that?

01:36:03 **EMBODIED AUDIENCE**
[Laughs]

01:36:04 **CAROLINA BANDINELLI**
And we dope the wine and we just go on and on, because the truth is...

01:36:11 **EMBODIED AUDIENCE**
[Laughs]

01:36:11 **CAROLINA BANDINELLI**
...time flies when you talk about techlash, the end of democracy, computational power, reality engineering and techlash.

01:36:22 **EMBODIED AUDIENCE**
[Laughs]

01:36:22 **CAROLINA BANDINELLI**
I mean, it's almost two hours, and I didn't even realize. Now go and reflexively constitute yourself with a glass of wine. Thank you very much again to everybody and, yes, see you soon. What should we say? That was so beautiful. Okay, let's do it again. Yeah, yeah, thanks, everyone. Thanks.

01:36:49 **EMBODIED AUDIENCE**

[Applause]

CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Now we are gonna do- I think, Michael, next stage is the merch. So we are gonna have the T-shirts with, like, reflexively constituted, the whole, you know, the hits that come up.

FOOTNOTES

1. Noortje Marres, *Digital Sociology: The Reinvention of Social Research*. Cambridge: Polity, 2017. ↑

2. Adrian Wooldridge, *The Economist*, 'The Coming Tech-Lash'. Accessed 27 January 2026. https://www.economist.com/news/2013/11/18/the-coming-tech-lash. ↑

3. See McKenzie Wark, 'Strategies for Tactical Media' (2002); http://www.tacticalmediafiles.net/articles/3358/Strategies-for-Tactical-Media ↑

4. Ross Douthat, 'Opinion: How Democrats Drove Silicon Valley Into Trump's Arms,' *The New York Times*, January 17, 2025: https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/17/opinion/marc-andreessen-trump-silicon-valley.html. ↑