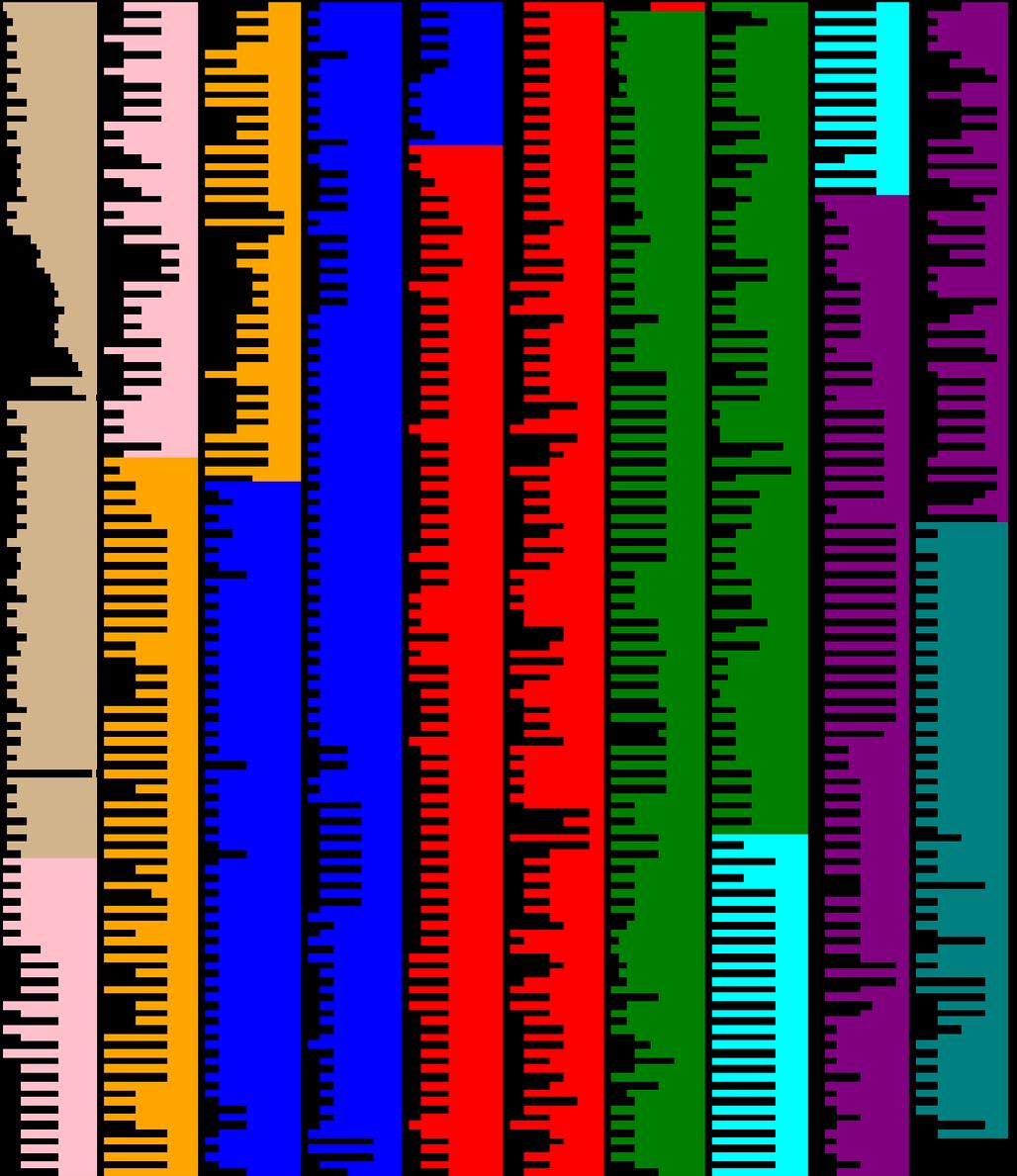


# Hybrid Encounters



CDI-TV Season One



## COLOPHON

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## What is CDI-TV?

A studio?

A seminar?

A talk show?

A workshop?

A green-screen confessional?

A message thread with cameras?

A research report with  
laughter?

A relay between nodes?

A minor broadcast?

A soft machine?

A discipline of showing up?

A practice of being-with at speed?

A glitchy archive?

A signal test?

An epistemic prototype?



# Introduction: The Future On a Green Cloth

Carolina Bandinelli, Michael Dieter and Craig Gent

“Quality is irrelevant!”

– Eric Kluitenberg, ‘Media Without An Audience.’<sup>[1]</sup>

Welcome. Witamy. Ласкаво просимо. Welkom. Benvenuti. Sveiki atvykę. Üdvözlünk. This volume contains the first field-notes from a peculiar experiment in hybrid togetherness undertaken by CDI-TV, a livestreaming project of the Centre for Digital Inquiry of Warwick University. Streamed between July 2024 and June 2025, these sessions are early attempts to test - sometimes stumbling, sometimes with a shove - the rigid formats imposed by corporate streaming platforms and academic discursive performance. If the platform wants ‘content’ and the university wants ‘seminars,’ we wanted something closer to a chance encounter, a hang: a thinking-with that is also a tuning-in and turning-up, a collectively negotiated time-space in which ideas do not arrive fully polished, but are made in public, under light, with microphones, with latency, and always the awkward, necessary beginning: “Are we live...?”

The stream is not just what appears on screen. It is the work of assembling conditions in an atmosphere of platform overproduction where streaming is neither ‘new’ nor ‘alternative,’ where legacy media exists, but is increasingly indistinguishable from influencer self-mediation, where ‘insider’ media is just another conspiracy theory, and where even ‘independent’ media depends on somebody else’s algorithm. It’s an atmosphere where toxicity, slop, outrage and constant fact-checking roll in like the weather; waves of junk and bad news, one shitstorm after another. In such a media ecology, our first question isn’t “what’s our message?”, but “how do we avoid adding to the pollution?” Hybrid streaming cannot just mean adding another sub to the feed, but carving out pockets of negentropy in a counter-economy of attention; a practice of presencing that doesn’t beg for reach and doesn’t

confuse metrics with the social. CDI-TV, in this respect, is an attempt to formulate an existential territory that is neither promotional euphoria nor cynical dismissal; neither the platform's optimized circulation nor critique's footnoted complaint. It is a return to the problem of 'sovereign media', a wager to reanimate a more autonomous approach with a focus on strong ties; an attempt to create something for ourselves, in the broadest possible sense, in the shadows of late platformism. Based on the late 1980s Amsterdam free radio stations Radio Death and Radio Patapoe, the term 'sovereign media' was introduced by the Dutch theory collective ADILKNO in the early 1990s to conceptualize the move of autonomous media makers to 'emancipate' themselves from any notion of 'broadcasting' towards an 'audience'. [2] The signal, wave or stream is just there. The message is a gift to the universe. While forerunners were still shouting at the audience, encouraging them to switch off, sovereign media makers pride themselves on their dignity. There's no more need to bow for followers, listeners, marketers. There's no more need to convince target groups with ideology or propaganda. In a media landscape of plentitude, voices can just exist. They can and will be picked up whenever, by whoever, usually the right persons.

None of us arrived at livestreaming by accident, but neither did we come by a straight line. What brought us here was a tangle of trajectories: a media-theoretical insistence that the apparatus matters; a desire for experimental aesthetics against the reductive brutalism of the Zoom talking-head; the post-lockdown normalization of remote presence; the lesson that 'digital intimacy' is never purely digital; fatigue with platform capitalism's appetite for attention; the sense that digital fiefdoms govern what can be seen and said, shaping structures of feeling and the terms of legibility; the practical idealism of federated infrastructures; and personal histories of media activism and street politics, folded into a longer conversation with social movements past and future. One of us came through Novara Media and participated in its transmutation from an experimental coalition into a fully-fledged media organisation: a concrete demonstration that livestreaming can be a durable infrastructure for progressive politics, but also a lesson in the translation of experimental formats into schedules, products and audience expectation.

A further point of confluence was the StreamArtNetwork (SAN), [3] with its winding tributaries in post-digital performance, 80s telematic art, glitch aesthetics, tactical media and other undercurrents of extra-disciplinary

practice. The story goes like this: after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there was a green-screen studio in Kraków and a webcast that wouldn't stop transmitting. UKRAiNATV went live, week after week, from StreamArtStudio as a kind of relay station; a call for solidarity, for connection and shared attention that wasn't captured by the usual platform logics of outrage-velocity and disposable influencer spectacle. Media artists, activists, theorists, AV operators, DJs, VJs and journalists soon joined the stream, amplified it and carried it forward. More responses arrived. Collaborations started. First to support artists in Kyiv, Lviv, Kharkiv, and across Ukraine under conditions of restricted mobility. But then, by early 2023, another node: THE VOID, the channel of the Institute of Network Cultures in Amsterdam, adding their algo-art textures and low-theory conversations. In 2024, we joined the mix alongside 3022 in Vilnius and the Budapest Konfluxus Collective. And then Watermelon Studio, a pop-up co-lab between UKRAiNATV and Chicks on Speed based in Munich, and the nascent nodes GNNL\_TV in Leeds and at the Academy of Fine Art in Trondheim. By 2025, something like a network came together: an archipelago of studios, each running their own low-budget, high-intensity setup, agreeing, loosely but seriously, to stream together.

The CDI-TV node began, very concretely, looking for institutional openings and surplus tech in the remnants of the pandemic infrastructure - webcams, hybrid-teaching rigs, abandoned green screens, capture cards, ring lights, mostly-working mics - equipment once purchased to ensure continuity and visibility, now gathering dust in unmarked storage. Add to this a laptop that sometimes crashes, a network connection that may or may not hold, and a curious, overburdened and variously precarious mix of guests, researchers, students, theorists, practitioners, distant streamers, artists and lurkers, all of whom choose to spend time together in an event that could glitch out at any moment (a core feature, not a bug). Throughout its first season, CDI-TV staged conversations about digital-cultural pasts, presents, futures - although perhaps 'staged' is both true and false. True, because we literally set up lights, we placed the beanbags and chairs, wrote the email invites, opened the doors, tested mics, set the countdown, poured drinks, watched the chat. False, because hybrid streaming never obeys its staging. It spills over, it interrupts itself. It becomes something other than intended, impossible to anticipate, generating new linkages and associations: the potentialities of streaming.

Our explorations in hybridity began with the refusal of academia as a place where people arrive with preset knowledge, prepared to explain things in front of a (mostly bored) audience with the main goal of pumping up their reputation or citations. Streaming live and improvised, unprepared, transdisciplinary dialogues become an *onlife* techno-discursive infrastructure to share a process of situated co-invention. Conversations, collaborations, improvisations: ideas in the making, rather than ready-made notions. Material objects: beanbags, crisps, sunglasses; discursive frequencies: humor, parody, reflexivity; positional attitudes: “What do you mean?” “I don’t understand”, have been (some of) the tactical tools with which we deconstructed the masquerade of knowledge as a fixed, austere, exclusionary product and individualistic matter. We say that to research is to create, to laugh, to fail, to learn, together.

The conversations transcribed here explore a range of topics: from liminal internet aesthetics to algorithmic management, from the neo-plebeian to neo-craft, from the severing of socio-technical to the politics of refusal. The constellation of references span social theory, philosophy, cultural sociology, media studies, art history, science and technology studies, economics, radical politics, computer sciences and counter-imaginative frameworks yet to be formulated. Such fields are traversed with an appeal to let go of their jargon and arrogance, and to diverse new languages to speak with the commons.

Together, we stream because we desire something other, yet cannot simply step outside. Such liveness meets an AI-saturated condition where synthetic media haunts perception, where every text is shadowed by doubt. If the postdigital is real, and the real is postdigital, then move not towards purity, but a further stage of hybridization: a kind of migration amid the rising tide of technics and the pressures of the polycrisis, and yet one that still opens new territories.

Beyond the grey curtain of capture, hybrid reality can mean multiplicity and connection - and, perhaps most importantly, the work of thinking, becoming, relating.

Transcription note (together-first)

The livestreams represented here were not scripted, nor originally intended for transcription into print. In a ‘together-first’ spirit, we preserve the natural crosstalk, the inquiring interruptions, and the layered in-studio and online realities as they unfolded, because it is often in those overlaps that synthesis,

clarification and critique occur. Unfinished sentences and false starts remain where they seem to open toward eventual flows: streams of consciousness, if you like. Yet transcription always negotiates a pressure toward readability, and readability is itself a regime: it draws attention to the differences between spoken conversation, livestreaming and written discourse. We have spared participants the indignity of verbal tics rendered too faithfully on the page, though traces remain in the video archive. Obvious misspeaking and intra-sentence repetition have been amended where they obscured sense rather than revealing process. Hosts, team and front-of-camera guests are attributed by name. Audience members unaware of this publication's project are attributed as Embodied Audience, though some names appear where they were spoken in-stream. After transcription, the text was further edited into paragraphs and for clarity before being formatted in this collection.

What follows, then, is another translation of voicings into another medium - one that slows time down enough to let you notice the joins, the cuts, the thresholds, the interface. The point is not to pretend that hybrid togetherness can be captured. The point is to keep building situations in which it can happen again.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Eric Kluitenberg, 'Media Without An Audience' (2000), <http://www.tacticalmediafiles.net/articles/3590/Media-Without-an-Audience>. ↑
2. Adilkno, Theory of Sovereign Media, <https://www.networkcultures.org/bilwet-archive/adilkno/SovMed.html>. ↑
3. <https://networkcultures.org/void/2024/11/14/launch-of-the-stream-art-network-san/>. See also: <https://networkcultures.org/tactical-media-room/2023/12/21/stream-art-or-the-third-avant-garde-introduction-to-hybrid-togetherness/>. ↑



**SPEAKERS**

**Voice 1**

**Voice 5 (in German)**

**Rob Batterbee**

**Alexandra Barancová**

**Voice 2**

**Eric Kluitenberg**

**David Garcia**

**Michael Dieter**

**David Garcia 1993**

**Geert Lovink 1993**

**Various Speakers**

**Keith Bloomfield**

**Copper 1**

**Glitch**

**Goran Milic circa 1993**

**Voice 6**

**Voice 4**

**Voice 3 (in Dutch)**

**Global Demonstrations**

**Copper 2**

**RECORDED**

**10 July 2024 at 17:00**

**KEYWORDS**

Tactical media

critical digital research

Center for Digital Inquiry  
University of Warwick  
hybrid media practices  
subversive practice  
pandemic reflection  
escalating crises  
artificial intelligence

climate collapse  
radical imaginaries  
autonomy  
next five minutes festival  
media activism  
low theory.

## GUESTS

Alexandra Barancová  
Eric Kluitenberg

David Garcia

00:22 KEITH BLOOMFIELD

You ready?

00:24 MICHAEL DIETER

We're ready. Hello. Welcome to CDI-TV, 'Echoes of Tactical Media.' We're finally live, after some mishaps, a few glitches. This is our first livestream, so bear with us. I'm your host, Michael Dieter.

00:48 GLITCH

Hello, welcome to...

00:54 MICHAEL DIETER

I'm joined with Alex Barancova, with David Garcia, and then virtually in the background with Eric Kluitenberg. If this is your first time tuning into anything that we've done, or is your first time learning about the Centre for Digital Inquiry, we're based in the UK at the University of Warwick, and we're a research centre. We're interested in critical digital research from the humanities, from social sciences and from the arts. And the topic today is tactical media. Should I read the text that I prepared, maybe, for this event?

01:54 DAVID GARCIA

Why not?

01:54 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, let's do this.

01:57 DAVID GARCIA

That's a good idea.

02:00 MICHAEL DIETER

Cool. So I assume, if you're watching, you have some familiarity with tactical media, but if not, it's a concept that was first articulated in the 1990s. It's a concept that brings together a set of media, art practices and activism that is often hybrid, that contains elements of subversive practice and appropriation. It's a concept that's been influential in many different domains, but has also been declared, at times, sort of finished or historical.

The four of us that are on this stream have been involved with tactical media and interested in tactical media for some time, but at some point, we came together, shortly after the pandemic, to begin to reflect on what the status of this concept is today. And we did so with this sense that we're living in conditions of escalating and overlapping crises of increasing inequalities, the rise of new far-right movements, this dystopian threat of artificial intelligence, forever-wars, and the looming realities of climate collapse. At this moment, knowledge and non-knowledge are up for grabs at intersections of art, media and politics - something that tactical media, at the time, was very influential in framing and contextualising. So in these times, we were interested in where we find the radical new imaginaries and the sense of autonomy that was once associated with this term, and moreover, why is it that this term, despite being declared dead so many times, seems to also persist and return, and is continually still referred to. So that informed the title of this stream, 'the echoes of tactical media.'

So I think that's a kind of just very brief, sketchy intro. The way we're going to approach this stream, which is itself an

experiment, is a conversation. I'll be the host. I've prepared some sort of questions and prompts for all of us, but I think it's fair to say we'll keep things quite fluid and loose and a bit informal. If you have any questions or comments, we're monitoring the chat, so please feel free to add those and we can respond and bring them into the stream. So as a way to introduce this topic in a little bit more detail, I'm going to ask our guests to introduce themselves, but in relation to how they first encountered tactical media. So I think I'll start just by asking you, Alex, how did you first encounter this term tactical media, and what did it mean for you or to you when you first encountered it? And how do you sort of think about it today?

05 : 56 ALEXANDRA BARANCOVÁ

Okay, hi, yeah so I think my encounter with tactical media was maybe as more of a newcomer, latecomer, kind of down the waves of its existing being coined and so on. I think maybe something five years ago or so, I encountered tactical media, but really through a kind of secondary access point, being the Tactical Media Files. And so I think to begin with those kind of vague concepts in that sense, and so my engagement with it has also been kind of thinking about reverse engineering what it means, what it refers to, and also some of the questions that you already anticipated, like what relevance does it have today?

And so I guess the idea was also to kind of self-introduce through this question, so I'm currently working as a PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam, at the Informatics Institute with the Socially Intelligent Artificial Systems research group, and I think what's actually been quite interesting to me is that I've also heard and encountered this concept of tactical media being really echoed, kind of echoing, also the name of

the stream, back through lots of different channels. I think just three months ago or so, I was in a seminar where someone speaking about critical AI also referred to tactical media as a reference point for their kind of framework that they were working on. So I think it's also been very interesting hearing it come in from different directions. So yeah, that's my short intro/answer to your question.

07:40 MICHAEL DIETER

Great and the Tactical Media Files I think we can also return to in our conversation and speak about in a little bit more detail. But I invite David to maybe give us some more detail about this concept. Obviously, you've been absolutely central to first identifying this concept...

08:03 DAVID GARCIA

Yeah, that's true.

When I first came to live in Amsterdam, basically an awful long time ago in sort of 1981-82, there was an amazing setup, a technical setup, of local television that was quite unusual because it was the only country in Europe that had a totally integrated cable television setup, but there was very little use made of it at the time because it was only being used to get a better signal on your TV and also to import television from abroad. Because at the time, the Dutch had very strict media rules that prevented people operating outside of the various channels that existed, and so the possibility of making local television was completely forbidden, except, that is, for the pirates and some of the best television in the Netherlands, I think, was being generated by pirate TV in the city of

Amsterdam, where there was a big parabolic dish in the centre of Amsterdam that was importing television from the UK, from Belgium, from Germany. And what the pirates would do was that they would wait by that parabolic dish and at every possible opportunity, particularly late at night, once there wasn't much other TV going on, they would transmit their experimental, outrageous and often pornographic material onto the channels that would completely land by surprise on people's TVs at home. And I found that - as an art student who'd come to do postgraduate [studies] in the Netherlands - very exciting, and it made me completely rethink what video art could be at the time, because this was the period in the 80s when you had MTV on the one hand, with raw entertainment, and you had video art on the other, that was a sort of spectacle of piles of hardware and monitors transmitting their TV out, and this kind of experimental form of television that was mobile, that was illegal, that was subversive, seemed to introduce a whole new set of media possibilities to me.

And so I started doing experimental television, and that was for me - although I hadn't articulated it as tactical media at the time - that was my introduction to what later became formally known as tactical media, when we were forced to define and also recognise the fact that these kind of experiments were happening all across the world as the computer electronics revolution had meant that people had access to camcorders and cable and small computers, [and] for the first time were able to start making their own media, and video diaries became popular. So, suddenly I realised that these kinds of DIY, rough-and-ready forms of television that was so lively and so full of potential were happening all over the world. And so we had this idea of, you know, a group of us at the

time, the idea of doing a festival of these kinds of forms of television, and the Paradiso, which is a kind of pop temple, a pop music venue in the centre of Amsterdam, agreed to host this festival of television, and we called it, in reference to the theorist [Michel] de Certeau, tactical television, for all kinds of reasons that maybe we can go into later, but if you want to know my sense of what the origins were, that was the origins of it, rough-and-ready TV happening all over the world and challenging the sort of monolithic edifice of mainstream television.

12:13 MICHAEL DIETER

Great. And a great picture, I think, of the context that it first arose in the Netherlands, in Amsterdam. And I think we have some footage, a short video that we'll show in a little bit that documents some of those festivals, the Next 5 Minutes festivals, but I'll turn to Eric to introduce himself and give his response. I guess you must have attended the Next 5 Minutes festivals; I'm not sure actually what your entry point into that whole scene is, Eric.

12:55 ERIC KLUITENBERG

No, you know, that's very vivid for me, very clear. So I think I was, for a while, already in touch with David and also with Geert Lovink and then we're talking about '94-95 thereabouts. I was teaching up in the north in Groningen at the new media study program that was, very interestingly, mostly tied to the Art Academy, but it was kind of postgraduate education, and located exactly between the university and the art school, which was quite nice, but it was also somewhat isolated, and

at some point in '95 I was still not really aware of the Next 5 Minutes.

We did a quite large event, which I think David you attended, in Tallinn in Estonia, understanding interactivity, about the culture of interactivity, and we brought in there also a lot of political questions about this burgeoning age of networks, and particularly in the country of Estonia at that point, you know, it was out of the Soviet Union, but not yet into the European Union, and it would eventually become the most densely networked country on earth, which it is now, that was quite amazing for this very small place. So we had all these exchanges, people like Richard Barbrook presented for the first time the Californian Ideology paper there, which was a fierce critique of, you know, optimistic accounts of network cultures coming out of Silicon Valley and so on. So from that background, I heard about this Next 5 Minutes festival, and I understood, you know, this is way more than just this talk about the digital. This deals with all the media, but it deals most of all with people having an urgency and a real need to be there.

So I went there, and I was just completely blown away - this was Next 5 Minutes 2, in '96 - by the sheer energy of the event. I remember a very chaotic debate at Paradiso where the same Richard Barbrook was declaring his critique of the California Ideology, while net artist JODI were simultaneously in the same space presenting their completely incomprehensible trash web art, and Geert

Lovink was supposed to moderate, and he did not intervene. John Perry Barlow of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and one of these WIRED figures, was hanging there while his ideology was being critiqued. And Caroline Nevejan, who was very instrumental in organising also many important precursor events at Paradiso, was crying out at theatre: "Order, order!" And I was just in the middle of all this chaos and all this energy, and I just loved it. And it was just one thought: I have to be part of this. That was my introduction. And I thought, like, whoa, this is so far beyond the sterile digital, you know. And that was really cool. So it was totally clear after that, there was no question. So I moved to Amsterdam and, yeah, became involved in the Next 5 Minutes, organising it, which was always a very collective effort, that was really great.

16:48 MICHAEL DIETER

So thanks for, yeah, even more of a sense of what that period was like. I've always understood it as a real sort of threshold moment, a kind of transition from like one media era into another that we today seem even more deeply enmeshed in. But I guess I want to pick up on the sort of 'part two' of this question about like, what do we think about tactical media today, and what does it mean for all of us today, and even, why are we still speaking about it today? The period that you're describing is interesting because it's one where there's the early web and there's phenomena like net.art. It's, I guess, anachronistically, what we would think of as the Web 1.0 era, but it's also an era of, as you're saying, camcorders, of tactical television, of this kind of cable television and becoming the media in a new way, so quite diverse...

18:16 ERIC KLUITENBERG

Yeah, and radio and print zines. Let's not forget that there were all these different media genres, right?

18:23 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, so quite diverse, not just strictly digital. So keeping that in mind, I guess, like, yeah, why are we still talking about this concept today? Is it still relevant or not? It's a concept that has been declared sort of a victim of its own success, in a way. It signals a sort of participatory culture, the entry of participatory culture. So, yeah, why talk about tactical media in 2024?

19:02 DAVID GARCIA

You mean me?

19:03 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, or Alex?

19:05 ALEXANDRA BARANCOVÁ

Well, yeah, I don't know. Just briefly, I feel it captures a kind of approach that is specific, but broad at the same time. So maybe in that sense, it has some level of continuity. Just the fact that you hear it come back from different contexts, like I mentioned earlier already, like in a critical AI discussion, people referencing tactical media in Amsterdam - I think it maybe begs the question why? So that is an interesting aspect. That's not to

say that hasn't just transformed massively ever since, so...

19:46 DAVID GARCIA

Can you just say when it was referenced in relationship to AI? Can you elaborate a bit on that? In what way was it referenced, and how would you see it as a relevant fact within that discourse?

20:01 ALEXANDRA BARANCOVÁ

I think very much as inspiration. So thinking from the moment we're in today, thinking about ways in which also as a historical reference people have really tried to use media in different ways to also think about that in the context of the present.

20:22 DAVID GARCIA

A kind of DIY approach to these possibilities that are often talked about only in terms of the large corporations that are using it, to think how can we seize back those tools and repurpose them for our own ends?

20:38 ALEXANDRA BARANCOVÁ

Yeah, very much.

20:39 DAVID GARCIA

Yeah, yeah. I wanted to just, as a way into this question of what it means today, I want to go back to something much earlier, which is as a kind of route into talking about the contemporary, which was another

early experience for me, and something that led directly to the first of these festivals in Amsterdam where these ideas were articulated, and that was the AIDS movement, the ACT UP movement in New York - ACT UP AIDS, and the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power, ACT UP - and that was something that was featured, I believe, quite extensively, in an event you were involved in in Rotterdam recently, where Sarah Schulman, who's a historian of that movement, came to talk, and I was enormously impacted by that movement because, for the first time, I saw media artists fighting for their own lives, because in New York at the time it was a terrible scourge and killing hundreds and thousands or tens of thousands of people across New York, and a large population of them were artists, and they were using particularly video and local cable television as a means of addressing the silence that existed around AIDS at the time and what was so impressive to me was that you had artists who were using postmodern, neo-constructivist movements and practices and methods in the service of a campaign.

Now what I found so exciting was that although political art was a feature of a lot of the discourse at the time, it was very rarely in the service of a particular campaign. That was always thought to be too close to propaganda. But for the first time, you had artists who are often fighting for their own lives, fighting for their own survival, using all the tools and techniques of both media practice and visual art and audio art and all these tools as part of a particular specific campaign. So what you had was not simply art, but the art of campaigning, and that seems to me, at the time, something that we felt we had to somehow capture and see in the wider context from that one specific campaign. And ask ourselves, to what extent was this

notion of art as a campaign, art and media as a campaigning, political tool, something that could be spotted happening around the world. And that was one of the key ideas that drove the Next 5 Minutes festival and informed the definitions, early definitions of tactical media. And it seems to me that that is one element that hasn't gone away, the sense that art can be deployed for specific campaigns at speed, and in ways that are unpredictable and innovative. And so that's, in a way, my way into answering the question of why now and why is it still relevant?

Maybe, Eric, you've got something to add or disagree with in that respect?

24:25 ERIC KLUITENBERG

What was really puzzling about this history, I was based at De Balie, the Centre for Culture and Politics by then, so from late '98 onwards, so in '99 the third Next 5 Minutes happened. It was a brilliant event and very, very energetic still, and that created an enormous diversity of people who all came there for a very clear reason. They all had their own very particular urgency of what they wanted to address, whether they were coming from South Asia or they were coming from, you know, Eastern Europe, or even Russia and other places, or the US or Latin America, etc. So this converging of all these groups was really interesting to see.

It would be totally wrong to say that Amsterdam is somehow the hotbed of tactical media, it was simply that something that was happening all over started to coalesce in that particular place, and I think that something of the ecology that was there, and also just the

means to bring people over and institutions that were willing to host these events, that was super important. But then as we move to the final edition of this festival in 2003, we started to feel already that some of that energy was floating away, that the danger of the festival would be that it would turn into a kind of network meeting. And there were various of those, and we kind of felt like we shouldn't go in this direction.

One of the great things about Next 5 Minutes was also people who organised it, that large group of people, always said, you know, we only organise it if sufficient people feel the urgency for this to be organised. And by 2003 we started to feel, well, maybe, you know, all these things have been established, and there's such a diversity of approaches, and so many people from different places around the planet doing similar, you know, creating similar practices, but each in their own specific context and for their own specific purposes. Maybe it's just run its course, right? We've been a very fortunate to help facilitate this and now it's in the hands of so many, and we should leave it at that. So we decided at some point we are not going to organise it anymore in Amsterdam, but if people in other places want to organise this, then we will support it for and there were some ideas to do it in São Paulo, there were also some ideas to do it in New York.

None of that ever materialised. And we kind of felt like, well, maybe it's a bit over. And then there was an issue - was that *Third Text*? I

don't know exactly anymore - in 2004 that ran under the title of 'Whither Tactical Media?' And it seemed to suggest like, well, okay, it's over, and that's that. So we started to think more and more like tactical media had its moment, and it was incredibly productive and beautiful and interesting, intense and difficult and problematic, and all these things at the same time. But we're kind of past that stage, but it's really essential to have that reference point in the past and to know that this happened and it marked a certain territory and a certain collection of practices. That was very interesting about it. So we kind of saw it like almost as an historical thing. But what we then started to notice is that for years, people kept bugging us all the time, when are you organising a next edition of the festival? And we saw that people completely ignored the whither tactical media argument and just did stuff that was somehow in a similar direction and called it tactical media themselves. And what is really amazing about that is that this is going on until this day. There's continuously all kinds of groups, initiatives, people we've never, ever met, we have absolutely no connection and or a very faint one, and they start to label themselves/activities as tactical media. So this is really puzzling, and I wouldn't have a definite analysis of it. I would just observe it that this is happening. So there seems to be something recognised in that that early work, still today, that seems valuable to current conditions, and rather than completely explaining them - why that would be so - I think it's just interesting to note that.

30:05 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, I just want to pick up on why, at least for me, why I think it still travels as a concept. So for me, I came to it much later as well, not through Tactical Media Files, but through, I think it must have been Geert Lovink's book *Dark Fiber*, which was a collection of his essays from the '90s. And I think I must have found it in there, the co-authored piece with David. And when I first read that book, it struck me as a very weird collection of writing from what I was used to reading as a student. I think an accurate term for it might be what McKenzie Wark calls 'low theory,' in that there's a lot of the writing in that collection and in the tactical media essay 'The ABC of Tactical Media' is sort of impure, in a way. It's sort of close to, if not a sort of empirical set of conditions and a set of practices, that it comes from somewhere quite grounded. And so for me, I think part of the reason why tactical media as a concept still resonates is because within that low theoretical articulation or a set of problems that we still are grappling with today, whether that's around participation, how to link together aesthetics, politics and the technical and technology. So there's also multiple ways of thinking about tactical media. We could think about it historically, and that's part of what I think David and Eric have laid out. We could think of it as a movement with specific artists involved and festivals, but on that conceptual side, where it carries those problems into the present, I think that's how it can still resonate. So that's something I think we should just expand on a little bit more. But before we do that, we're going to play a short video that, David, I believe you made a couple of years ago. That is a compilation of footage from those earlier tactical media festivals in Amsterdam.

32:44 DAVID GARCIA

No, exactly. This is a compilation with a lot of artists other than myself contributing to leaders and bumpers

and images. It gives you some sense of that sort of rough and ready aesthetic of tactical media. It also covers a group called Vacuum TV, which is a group from Budapest in Hungary. And these were a group of journalists who were excluded from mainstream media and went into cabaret and improvised with kind of rough-and-ready artifacts to communicate a media message without necessarily traditional platforms of mainstream media. Yeah, so it's, it's about eight minutes long, and you'll see us all when we're sort of young and embarrassing instead of old and embarrassing and so, yeah, just play the movie.

33:43 MICHAEL DIETER

Okay, behind us? I'm not sure. Full screen, alright, here we go.

33:50 GLITCH

[Video 'Next 5 Minutes: International Festival of Tactical Media' begins]

35:35 DAVID GARCIA 1993

This is the basement of Paradiso. These are the offices of Paradiso, and this is the headquarters for the Next 5 Minutes conference and exhibition.

35:47 VOICE 1

The next five minutes will be a three day exhibition and conference on what we have called 'tactical television.' By this, we mean television that has no fixed relationship to the institutions and ideals of the

established media. Whether this tactical position is taken voluntarily or not, it produces its own norms and values, it's own stylistic quality. The Next 5 Minutes wants to explore this quality, evaluate it and also celebrate it. Although the concept of the Next 5 Minutes arose from the visual arts, the project has been developed by people with a variety of backgrounds. The Next 5 Minutes is considered an interdisciplinary project, a collaboration of art, social science and media activism.

36:31 VOICE 2

The next big thing that we have to do with the whole group is put the whole program together and see which workshops we're going to do by whom, yeah?

36:43 VOICE 1

Since tactical television is a broad subject, we divided it into five main topics. On each of these, there will be a series of lectures and workshops, culminating in an open panel discussion. Both groups and individuals have been invited. Most of them will bring work to show and many have unique stories to tell.

37:03 GORAN MILIC CIRCA 1993

In our case, the problem was that Yu-Tel was in the building of Television Sarajevo, and that the leaders of Serbs up in the hills, they kept phoning us, saying that we must broadcast their statements, that we must broadcast their propaganda. In case we don't do it, they're gonna shell the television.

37:25 VOICE 3 (IN DUTCH)

That thing you're holding in your hands makes it a lot easier to make television; it's a very small device, quite cheap... it seems as if it was invented for tactical television: it's a very tactical device.

37:39 COPPER 1

You've got permission to go round filming around here have you?

37:43 VOICE 4

You don't need it without a tripod, do you? You're supposed to be the law, not me.

37:57 COPPER 1  
[Inaudible]

37:57 COPPER 2  
Turn it off.

37:59 VOICE 4  
Get off.

38:00 COPPER 1  
I just want to check the  
serial number on it.

38:02 VOICE 4  
You don't even know the  
serial numbers of the  
stolen ones!

38:19 COPPER 1  
Of course we do.

38:21 VOICE 5 (IN GERMAN)  
In his flat a cameraman  
panned his amateur  
camera to the street to  
see if the disturbance was  
having an effect...

38:25 GEERT LOVINK 1993

In eastern Europe one can't really make a distinction between strategic and tactical television; they rather speak of independent TV themselves... this means independent video and TV groups who produce their own programmes... which they try to broadcast on national television... or groups who run an independent TV station in the city... these independent groups are struggling against the old power structures... meaning the old state television, where former Communists are still in charge.

39:24 GLOBAL DEMONSTRATIONS  
[Chanting]

39:24 VOICE 6

So, how important are the visual arts to tactical TV?

39:27 DAVID GARCIA 1993

Well, I think they were one of the first groups who seized the portable video equipment when it became available in the '60s. And I think consequently they played a significant role in creating the language of what has subsequently become, for us at least, tactical TV.

40:16 GEERT LOVINK 1993

Next 5 Minutes.



40:40 VARIOUS SPEAKERS

[Inaudible] Yeah it's a bit from the Iron Curtain. I don't need iron [inaudible] [laughs] I really think you're teasing me! I don't think think I... No, it's a TV test! Do you like this? Yeah I do, I mean I think it's fun [laughs] maybe it's different. Yes, nice television! Like this, or... I like you're spectacles. Here, try. [inaudible] Will you try? This is a kind of test, we are from an independent TV group in Hungary [inaudible] old spectacles [inaudible] new spectacles. Wow! Even better than it used to be? Wow. [Laughs] Beautiful, beautiful. [inaudible] [laughs] You have a nice picture? Yeah, I do! Oops. [laughs] And, er, I think you can move too. Move? Maybe try move a little. Yoohoo! Ooh! [laughs] Good! It's nice! It's a good screen yeah? Amsterdam is cool like this. [inaudible] Amsterdam. Yeah! Change the channels like this... other channels!

48:41 MICHAEL DIETER

Great, welcome back.

From that historical footage, I want to take us more up into the present, but I'll do that with reference to the ABC essay that I mentioned earlier. So when I was looking over that text again for this stream and our conversation, this moment kind of jumped out at me, this definition of tactical media, where David and Geert Lovink at the time wrote that "tactical media are what happens when cheap, do-it-yourself media, made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution, from public access cable to the internet, are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture."<sup>[1]</sup> So I thought it was interesting that from the beginning, there's a sense of the outsider, but there's also this kind of affective dimension, this sense of both exclusion and some kind of aggravement or antagonism. And I wondered whether at the time when you were writing this, you were also thinking of this scenario in relation to different forms of politics and even reactionary politics, because when I read this definition today, I think it could be a perfect definition of things like the toxic masculinity that you see in phenomena like Gamergate, or the kind of manosphere of Andrew Tate, among so many other online rightwing movements and phenomena that we've seen since the alt-right.

So I wonder, how do you make sense of these kinds of connections? Are these also 'echoes' of tactical media? What does tactical media mean now when it seems as if it refers more and more to the actions of far-right actors and influencers, ideological influencers?

50:55 DAVID GARCIA

Well, thanks for that, because I think it's very relevant. I mean, I'd love to claim that we had anticipated the rise of the new far-right forms of tactical media. Because I think at the time when we wrote that essay, I can't speak for Geert but I can speak for myself, I think we saw it as overwhelmingly a progressive movement, and we, certainly, so far as I could tell, weren't anticipating the uses that it could be put to, although, in principle, there's no reason why we shouldn't have.

I've got a few thoughts about that, which is that, you know, like all forms of media, there is no guarantee that those forms of media won't be used for progressive ends. And indeed, a lot of tactical media has been critiqued by what we're calling in the *Anthology of Tactical Media* 'tactical media and its discontents,' the people who believe that we shouldn't be believing that being busy with media is what politically active people should be doing. We should be organising; we should be thinking outside of the media and actually trying to produce concrete changes in the world around us, and if possible transforming society as a whole, and that all this media stuff is just a distraction getting in the way. And I think for a lot of people, those arguments, particularly and most articulately put by people like Jodi Dean and others, were very persuasive. And I think a lot of people who had been very involved in these experimental forms of media as a way of doing politics became disenchanted with that approach and looked elsewhere. And I think that gap was filled by the alt-right.

I think once people left that sphere for many different reasons, particularly with Anonymous that was persecuted by the US political establishment and the forces of law enforcement and, in fact, imprisoned

people from that movement. I think a lot of people decided that that space had become toxic and no longer politically progressive or useful, and I think that space opened up room for the alt-right to be able to take advantage of those possibilities and occupy that space.

And so I think this approach or these views, that the rise of the alt right and their ingenious use of 4chan and 8chan to produce new forms of tactical media for reactionary means, is a reason to stay away from it. I think far from it. I think use of those spaces demonstrate that we can't afford to abandon those spaces, because if we do those spaces will quickly be built filled by reactionary far-right forces. So that's my take on that issue. Maybe Alex or Eric have got something to add to that?

54:28 MICHAEL DIETER

Eric, do you have any any follow up thoughts?

54:31 ERIC KLUITENBERG

I can respond but I don't know if Alex wants to respond.

54:34 ALEXANDRA BARANCOVÁ

Go ahead, Eric.

54:39 ERIC KLUITENBERG

Okay, well, you know, I very much agree with this general point that David is making, that these kind of media and communication spaces, they do not have a singular politics

behind them. There is a lot of implicit politics already in the design of the technology, design of the media, the formats and so on, the political economy of networks and all of that, which sort of allows certain things in and excludes a lot of others. But there is no strict mechanism that says that this can only be exploited for progressive emancipatory purposes or for reactionary ones. So I agree with that.

But at the same time, beyond the alt-right, we saw something really interesting happening. We saw it occasionally before, but never that overt. And it happened particularly around the first Trump campaign. So then we're talking 2016 and what we saw emerging there was that things that came out of the underbelly of the internet, so to speak - 4chan, 8chan and indeed Anonymous that was anyway coming from those kind of circles - moving slowly into other, let's say, domains within the internet reaching other constituencies and so on, which was then somehow linked up with an official campaign, mostly, of course, through the work of people like Steve Bannon and so on, and linked up with a super mainstream political campaign for what is purported to be the most powerful political office on the planet. Whether it is that or not, we can debate, but you know that's usually the formula. And that was completely counterintuitive.

Tactical media always said it's not about just the alternative channels. It's about cutting across between countercultures and

mainstream cultures, and connecting to the mainstream channels. David can say all kinds of things about that, how also the BBC with Video Nation Shorts and so on, putting the camera in the hands of ordinary people so that they could film their own lives, but within a broadcast, mainstream media context. But to see that so overtly, that connection between what we now call the alt-right and the presidential campaign of Trump implied something that I think is deeply problematic, and that is an inversion, literally, of this division that always underwrote tactical media: of the tactical and the strategic. And if I may, I would like to say something more about that. Is that okay, Michael?

58:09 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, of course.

58:11 ERIC KLUITENBERG

Yeah, so I'll try to keep it brief, but you know, the notion of tactical media never came from the military context, far from it. It was always related to the thinking of Michel de Certeau, and especially his division or opposition between the tactical and the strategic, and the tactical in his understanding was basically all the operations of people who were essentially powerless, but because they managed to somehow escape the power grid that was trying to control their territories that they lived in and their lives, their operations across that territory allowed them to temporarily appropriate that territory and put

it to their own uses, and particularly so by being only slightly visible or even invisible in these operations. [2]

As a result, these operations needed to be not just temporary, but also nomadic, constantly moving from place to place, wherever there's an opportunity, and if something closes down, you move to another terrain. And that is continuous, whereas strategic power in de Certeau's understanding was all about conquering basically a territory or gaining control over it, and holding that control and controlling the territory, fencing it off, etc. And you could map that very nicely onto the media sphere, where you could say, like, okay, technical media is all these nomadic practices that try to appropriate media structures whenever there's an opportunity, and strategic media is the mainstream and mostly state and corporate media that try to basically fortify an existing power structure.

What we saw happening in the Trump campaign was that these tactics were fully appropriated, still bearing exactly the same dynamic and the same kind of appearance, but now in the service of an entirely strategic political agenda. And so there's really an inversion happening there, where you see that suddenly this division that de Certeau proposed doesn't work. And this question is, I think, still somewhat unresolved.

01:00:51 DAVID GARCIA

But that's really interesting, Eric, if I can just interrupt because...

01:00:54 ERIC KLUITENBERG

Yeah, sure.

01:00:56 DAVID GARCIA

...that inversion that you described is also persistently denied, where you have these people who are in power, but are constantly clinging to the identity of being insurgents. Trump still sees himself as an insurgent force operating against the establishment, and this notion that attempts to square the circle to resolve the dichotomy that you've identified by a kind of cunning reinversion whereby it continues to see itself as an insurgent force, even though it's as much part of the establishment as anything else.

01:01:42 ERIC KLUITENBERG

Yeah. So, concretely, the continuous reference of the Trumpists, let's say, to the 'Deep State.' That is a clear example of that, what you're describing, David.

01:01:55 DAVID GARCIA

And do you have the same thing happening in the Netherlands at the moment? Because you've got an insurgent rightwing party that has managed to seize power in some form or another. Is the same narrative of the establishment being put about by them? Is this a consistent narrative across Europe at the moment?

01:02:00 ERIC KLUITENBERG

Yeah, but in a sort of perversely twisted way, because we have the situation that while by far there is no majority for what is called a radical right. We have now a very split-hair discussion in Dutch media about the distinction between 'radical rightwing' and 'extreme rightwing.' So extreme rightwing, that's basically neo-Nazi, fascists and so on. We cannot accept that, but the radical rightwing is very right, but it's also acceptable to the system, more or less, which is a bit weird.

So the radical right, in that division of categories, kind of won the election in the sense that they became the largest party, and normally the largest party delivers the prime minister. However, that was not acceptable to other coalition candidates, and since they didn't have a majority, they needed to form a coalition. So what has been agreed now is that all the party leaders, in the end four parties who are together in this coalition, remain in the parliament itself, and they are not part of the executive government, and basically a technocrat has been appointed as prime minister like a grey mouse that actually, interestingly, is a former head of an intelligence service of the Netherlands, the civil intelligence service of the Netherlands. Basically, the Dutch version of the CIA, to make it more clear, and the effect of this is that the party leader of this so-called radical right movement, can just freely continue to act as a rebel, indeed, say the most atrocious things in parliament, even critique the technocrat prime Minister in full public display

on the cameras, even though he himself appointed or at least found this prime minister ready to perform that role.

So you have a very twisted form of the mechanism that you are describing, David, right now in the Netherlands. Where that is going to lead, we don't know, because we've had so far only one major debate, which became immediately an enormous chaos. And chaos is also a strategy right out of the playbook of Trump-Bannon - creating chaos as a strategy. So where this is leading, nobody really knows.

01:05:27 DAVID GARCIA

And just to bring it briefly back to tactical media, one of the leading lights of the radical right was actually part of a tactical media TV programme run by artist Raul Marroquin, and his name was Martin Bosma, and in a way his media training happened in that programme where he was the host for a long time, and a lot of people thought that his pranks and his jokes were pretending to be from the far right. Well, we learnt our lesson. Better late than never.

01:06:02 ERIC KLUITENBERG

Yeah, and this person is now chairman of the parliament.

01:06:05 DAVID GARCIA

Yeah.

01:06:08 MICHAEL DIETER

I want to open things up to another strategic dimension, and keep with this problem of tactics in relation to strategy, and think about the 'platform condition' and the mainstream platforms that we all seem to be completely dependent on.

One way of introducing this is that Geert Lovink sent me a comment while we played the Next 5 Minutes video, and said, "Great video. 30-years-old stuff. Feels sad that it is so topical. Why is this not forgotten history?" We also were commenting on how so many of the practices that are in that short video, in a way, have become ubiquitous and become themselves almost normative, or at least hegemonic social practices, or even practices that are involved in ubiquitous forms of social tension, contestation, critique. And we were thinking, in particular, about the camcorders that were being used, and how that has just become completely embedded in everyday life through smartphones and apps and platforms.

I want to read a quote from Felix Stalder from back in 2006 about tactical media, where he said: "the movement as a whole began to dissolve as increasingly people were doing tactical media without thinking about tactical media. In a way, tactical media was so successful in establishing new political practices that it could no longer serve as a distinctive approach that would define a particular community."<sup>[3]</sup> And I think that there's one response to this which, Alex, you've already sort of sketched out, which is that tactical media is a kind of approach, and Eric sort of alluded to this as well, that's always nomadic. So it can always occupy another avant-garde trajectory or position. But, on the other hand, when we think of these platforms and the ubiquity of how these practices have become formalised into these strategic corporate systems, in a way, we all still have to deal with them at some point or another, even if you're, let's say, tactically subverting or aiming

to appropriate or intervene in an aspect of our political social conditions that are not about platforms. Whatever you do at some point, it seems, will end up on the platform, and will be communicated or engaged with or shared.

So I just wonder, to open things up to the problems of platforms, what does that mean that tactical media as we understand it historically is also something that has led, as Stalder put it, to being dissolved as such? Does this mean that we must think of the tactical in a new way, and that it has to be thought about now in terms of platforms? I want to just throw that open to, I don't know, Alex, whether you have any thoughts about that?

01:09:48 ALEXANDRA BARANCOVÁ

I did see David reaching for the microphone.

01:09:53 DAVID GARCIA

My reflex actually, yeah.

01:09:56 ALEXANDRA BARANCOVÁ

Okay, maybe a few points. From my perspective, as someone for whom tactical media has always been, to some extent, a historicized concept, it really is more a kind of practice that is useful to invoke by analogy, not necessarily by the concern about whether it as such, as at its height of activity in the mid-90s, is still a thing or not. So that concern kind of drops off for me as one to think about this question.

But when you were speaking, one thing I thought to link back to was something that Eric was saying earlier about this idea that the ethos of technical media was not necessarily about simply operating

within alternative spaces and hanging on the fringes, but also about cutting across the mainstream as well.

And so to bring that back to the question of platforms as well, I think a similar approach is also, as you introduce this topic, quite useful in this context, because I think that's exactly what we need, right? We need to find ways to formulate alternative approaches that can nevertheless scale, so not that they become exclusively alternative, very hard to use, very difficult to manage tools, or ways to create communities around specific issues, but also that it's something that you can practically employ, for example, in the context of education, right? So we don't have a university running on Microsoft services. Like, how could we think of alternatives in that sense that actually can work?

01:11:50 DAVID GARCIA

Just getting back briefly to de Certeau, when he was describing tactics and strategies, he went right back to plants and fishes and camouflage and all the techniques and tricks and hoaxes by which the weak turn the tables on the strong. And it feels that that is the persistent theme of the 'tactics versus strategy' idea of something which is not tied to any - like Felix talks about a 'tactical media community.' Well, instead of thinking about a community, perhaps think more as a set of practices that recur and have recurred since the dawn of life on Earth and predators versus prey, actually having to operate together in a world, and that notion of focusing on how the weak turn the tables on the strong, and the kind of guerrilla warfare approaches of people in their struggle to survive and prosper and assert themselves in a difficult world. So

that feels to me that it escapes temporary technological language or vocabularies like 'platforms', and goes into something which is much more fundamental in a way, and that's why I think a lot of these things feel as relevant today as they did yesterday, because those operational factors still apply as rigorously as they did then.

01:13:37 MICHAEL DIETER

I think if we stay with de Certeau, we stay with tactics and we forget about media, because I feel like that's where we're going, we can make that argument. But I'm just wondering as well, how would you describe that aspect of de Certeau? Because it's a primordial sort of creativity. Is that a romanticism? Is that a humanism? Because it's certainly something about power. It's something where de Certeau is speaking to conditions of alienation. Because there's something in that as well that speaks very deeply to me, that I always return to, and I just wonder how do you describe that aspect of his work?

01:14:25 DAVID GARCIA

I think it is a kind of a romanticism, and I think its limits have been ably illuminated by the triumph of the Trumpian approach, which is to actually show how electoral politics, traditional electoral politics, can be appropriated and repurposed. And so there is something which is limited, if you just stick to the tactical rather than think imaginatively about how it can be repurposed and taken away from simply momentary, temporary, nomadic appropriations and reconstituted as through a desire for power and a desire to use those techniques to attain power through the electoral process. And I think that's what has been radically innovative about the alt-right, and it's

something that those of us who are on the left need to learn those lessons of and from. Maybe Eric has got something to add to this story.

01:15:39 ERIC KLUITENBERG

Mm, not so much. You know, as always, things are never entirely clear cut. That's the problem. And maybe that's also why it's so interesting to discuss these issues. And one of the things that strikes me is that when you talk about the alt-right, and in this case the clearest example we have so far around this collusion with the Trump campaign, with that came a whole set of resources and capabilities that most activists do not have access to massive amounts of cash, connections to all kinds of mainstream channels and so on, political in-roads. Once Trump became the candidate for the Republican party, of course that completely changed the game and the rules of the game. And most activist groups and initiatives never have access to those kind of channels, resources, capabilities, and this is complicated, so you would almost have to go back to the origins of socialist and social democrat worker movements and labor unions and so on, and the kind of organising that was taking place there, and how an emancipatory political agenda, which was at the core of this, could be connected to larger scale resources and structures. But how that would work out in the current sort of media ecology as well as the wider political economy that we are immersed in is, yeah, that's a really daunting question.

01:17:48 MICHAEL DIETER

Some questions from the chat or comments. One of them was that we should use less animated spinning black cubes in the background, which I disagree with.

01:17:59 DAVID GARCIA

More spinning black cubes.

01:18:01 MICHAEL DIETER

But a question from Nate Tkacz: "Do you think the framing of politics as antagonism, weak versus strong, has run its course? Is it modern? And do you think more about things like care, reconciliation, friendship, etc.?" This is something that came up this morning a little bit. We were talking about care and the turn, especially in the pandemic moment, but that whole history of feminist thinking around care, and theorisations of care, and whether there is a relationship of some kind to tactical media. Is there a tactics of care? But also, I think other than that, I think Nate's question is really about like where we are politically at the moment, in terms of the different approaches we may adopt, the different kinds of orientations to politics.

I don't know whether you have - do you want me to read the question out again? I've basically spoken over it. Has antagonism run its course? Is it modern? Do we need to think more about care, reconciliation?

01:19:37 DAVID GARCIA

We were in a workshop this morning, and this idea of pirate care came to the fore, didn't it? Of Marcell Mars and...

Eric Kluitenberg [Refers to previous speaker]

Tomislav Medak

David Garcia [Continued]

...yes, they've [been] very involved in a project around the idea of pirate care and the possibility of intervening in institutional care models in ways that are disruptive, but in a productive and less confrontational or contestational way. So I think Nate's question is really interesting. I'm skeptical about whether antagonism is intrinsic to politics by definition, because, in a way, politics is a way of addressing the fact that there will always be conflicts of interest and the idea that they can always be resolved in ways that make everybody happy and are always something that everybody's interest can be taken care of, I think is impossible. So I think politics as a means of articulating conflict and being able to express conflict without necessarily coming to violence is one of the purposes of politics. And imbalances of power, I think, are also something which are inevitable because, simply, the world isn't static enough to be able to accommodate the possibility of the balance of power always being equal. So I think those moments when rebalance will have to happen, and the weak will really have to turn the tables on the strong, is something that I don't believe we can ever do without as long as human beings remain the way they are, without wanting to be too fatalistic.

01:21:59 ALEXANDRA BARANCOVÁ

One thing this question made me think of also to add, maybe as a dimension to what you're saying, David, but I think I've been quite interested in some people thinking about activism, climate activism,

thinking about movements, and thinking about what they need as kind of a concern for caring for one another in terms of also, for example, mental health. So I think this question of antagonism, or the position of antagonism, carries a lot of work, right? It is kind of grounded in criticism, but then that begs the need to go against that, it asks the people taking that position to do a lot of work against that. And I think recently, I've heard quite a few people thinking more from the position of, okay, if we want to get a better climate, get better living conditions and so on, at the moment the people who could do that work are, you know, burnt out or on the edge of burnout, or kind of not necessarily doing so well. So I think that dimension of care can definitely have quite an important role to even be able to do that work as a kind of necessary precondition. I think that goes hand in hand with nurturing a culture of care and kind of, yeah, taking a break sometimes as well.

01:23:23 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah. I also don't know whether, even if we think of tactical media historically, it's ever been so exclusively defined by an antagonistic politics by itself. And I don't think Nate means that with the question, but certainly it's implied that by the quote that I read out about "feeling aggrieved by the dominant culture." But I think you could return to the Tactical Media Archive, and you could probably find many examples of work that have an antagonistic aspect to it, but also other sort of affects and emotions that they also are, you know, inside or they are channeling.

Even as a way to also segue into another topic, when I think of the work of Yes Men, yes there's antagonism to their interventions, but there's also humor, and there's aspects of hope as well in some of their projects that they did around

identity correction. The project I often think about these days is their quite meta one, The New York Times Special Edition (2008), where they printed a newspaper with fictitious good news in it and distributed it in New York. It's an absolute example of fake news, and you could read it, on the one hand, as a kind of as a critique of mainstream media emphasising these negative narratives that incite anxiety and panic and that kind of reactionary dimension to news reportage. But then, on the other hand, that project had this really meta dimension of, like, what kind of world do you want to live in, and giving people an imaginary - a hopeful, utopian imaginary - about what might be possible otherwise. But also the reason I think about it often is because of this fake news aspect. So I wanted to introduce this as well, because I think this is another aspect of tactical media that was present in its historical form that is ubiquitous now and is strategic now...

01:25:49 DAVID GARCIA

The hoax.

01:25:50 MICHAEL DIETER

...the hoax and disinformation campaigns as really an aspect of mainstream political culture, and I know that that's something that you've been working on, David. You have, last month, just curated a new exhibition in Amsterdam at Framer Framed that's called...

01:26:16 DAVID GARCIA

Really?

01:26:16 MICHAEL DIETER

...Really? Art and Knowledge in Time of Crisis. So I think one response to this kind of fake news environment has been the

development of things like OSINT - open source intelligence - and new forms of CivicTech, and then also, of course, the work of Forensic Architecture and this idea of a kind of collective, participatory and aesthetic assembling of facts and truth, something that Paolo Cirio called a movement of 'evidentiary realism.' But I think also what interests me in the Really? exhibition is that it seems to present a break with that trend, of the radical politics of truth, at least in terms of facts. And there's also something of a recognition of reappropriating fiction. So I wonder whether you could speak a little bit about that - the thinking behind that exhibition, and whether there's a trajectory you see from that earlier tactical media moment that is still relevant when it comes to disinformation and ignorance, and the politics of knowledge and the aesthetics of knowledge.

01:27:48 DAVID GARCIA

Well, the Really? exhibition had a progenitor, which was called As If, and that was an exhibition that was also done at the gallery Framer Framed in Amsterdam. And the idea behind As If was that there might be a way of thinking that instead of 'what if,' instead of asking the question 'what if,' or demanding change, you might actually act as if change had already taken place. One of the inspirations for that was the project, I think it was in Hamburg, which was called Park Fiction, where a group of residents, working-class residents, in sort of an area on the edge of the docklands, were subject to a power grab from a corporation that was trying to build luxury apartments on the edge of the water because dockland architecture is often used as a way of creating very pleasant living conditions for very wealthy people. And this group of residents, working-class residents, decided to oppose this project by creating something that they said, "you can't build there because it's a park, and you're not

allowed to build over a park.” There was no park there, but they decided to imagine and act as though a park already existed, and they held festivals and they also made a connection with Gezi Park in Turkey, in Istanbul, which had been occupied. And so this whole idea of acting as if change had already taken place proved to be a very effective political strategy.

And that exhibition that we mounted there, one of the best examples was an installation from the artist Ian Allen Paul, where he created, imagined that the Guantánamo Bay place where people were being held in the so-called War on Terror were released, and that space was turned into a museum of art and culture. And it was even occupied on Google Maps. And I believe it still exists, that there’s this museum of art and history in Guantánamo Bay, which doesn’t actually exist. And he created the orange jumpsuits and posters and acted as if such an environment existed. And this exhibition that we mounted in Amsterdam and went later went to Basel and to Liverpool, was all around this idea of acting as if change had already existed. And so this picture you paint of hope being a tactic and getting away from the antagonistic notion of tactics versus strategy is something, yes, that is part of that development of exhibitions that was there. But maybe Eric, who’s been left out of this conversation, needs to come out a bit. It’s the penalty of being a virtual presence is sometimes you are forgotten.

01:31:15 ERIC KLUITENBERG

It’s fine. I was listening as I love the story about the background from which that particular project was developed. But if I may, I would like to sort of link a little bit back to the care question, because I think it’s quite interesting,

and also the question of hope. The only area really where I see hope in terms of politics at the moment is in what is usually referred to as the commons, the movement of the commons, or whatever, the practices of the commons better. Let's not call it a movement. Let's talk about practices. Which is being done by, you know, a multitude of people around the globe in very, very different contexts, agriculture, water, fisheries, even air, cleaning, police services, community services, knowledge production of different kinds, as well as sharing productive infrastructures and all these kinds of things. And within that, and sort of linking to the field of tactical media, there was always a very clear recognition that the digital commons and using the internet infrastructures to distribute expressions, media, documents and so on, information, but also knowledge and ways of working, and communication infrastructures to begin with, that this could be, and in many cases, is very productive.

However, I think that a lot of people have started to realise that this 'lock-in' that we see, particularly through the platformisation of internet culture, on the one hand, and the internalising mechanisms - so what Jodi Dean has been theorising very early on, that it creates insular networks of circulation, that even contestational expressions, expressions of outrage, rage, critique, continue to circulate within the insular networks and structures that are maintained by large capital, where this capital is basically not interested in the content at all, but only

interested in the circulation, and the circulation being increased through controversy only means that the structure, and the power structure behind it, is reinforced, rather than weakened. So the large players, Meta and so on, basically are saying, 'yeah, critique me, come up with your critique', because it means more circulation, which just starts to increasingly strengthen their strategic position, to use those terms again, and Dean has described this whole process as the decline of symbolic efficiency. So whatever kind of statement you make, whether it's contestational or caring or so, it gets absorbed into this power structure when it circulates in the digital networks.

Nobody will deny that these digital networks can have certain emancipatory potentials, but ultimately, through these kinds of mechanisms, they may end up just reinforcing those large-scale power structures. And the inevitable conclusion that quite a few people have taken from this is that if we want to build networks of care - care, first of all for us as human beings, but of course, also care for all these other residents of the planets - and if we want to develop that further, we need to step outside. Also we need to step outside, not to leave the network, but to really create operations outside of this network and create non-digital, non-electronic, therefore very local, and maybe trans-local - so from local to local - networks that produce care. Care for the weak, but also care for all these other living entities.

So typically within new ecological thinking and practice, a lot of that is moving offline, and what I think is this figure of the commons, of the sharing of resources, which is not shared just out in the open, no, there is a community that takes responsibility for the resources that are being shared in a commons. That's a very distinctive characteristic of the commons that that taking of responsibility, the community structure that is behind it, that is one of the few hopeful areas, because it's very productive in many situations, particularly in situations where government and corporate structures are not functioning properly, are not delivering what people need. And then people create this third space, which is just among each other, and a lot of that activity is offline in local communities and so on, and in local initiatives. It reveals, in relation to tactical media, also the limits of the network and the media system, and that is interesting from our perspective, I think.

01:37:51 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, I was going to say everything you're describing sounds so far away from the tactical. It sounds more like taking up the strategic question, and certainly there's also a postdigital aspect to it.

I want to introduce yet another troubling topic for tactical media, if we think about it in the present, which is in relation to artificial intelligence. Part of that, to link back to what Eric is saying, we could mean thinking about the problems when it comes to the extractivism of artificial intelligence technologies, when it comes to the commons and the digital commons, and there's a whole set of, I think, quite difficult questions there. But also it seems as if AI, at the moment, the

trouble that it seems to be creating is also very tactical, and I noticed last week that Google DeepMind researchers published this paper that's a taxonomy of GenAI misuse tactics, and the whole framing of this article is really about, you know, thinking of the social challenges of AI, not in terms of 'Will AI replace us?' 'Will the singularity come and create all of this havoc?' but more on this tactical use of the existing systems to produce misinformation, to generate scams, to flood platforms with all kinds of toxic and reactionary content.

So I wonder, is there a space for progressive tactics when it comes to AI, when it seems as if the technology is already so dominated by the tactical and so associated with this kind of toxicity? And I want to ask Alex whether you have a response to this, because I know that this is something that you've worked on, at least in terms of thinking through what are some of the challenges that AI introduces for knowledge, subjectivity, intelligence. What are the bigger social, cultural questions?

01:40:26 ALEXANDRA BARANCOVÁ

Yeah, big question. But I think maybe to start from the kind of the innate tactical nature of, let's say, AI research as a field, I think that that's quite an interesting way to think about it, that then you're caught in this kind of... you'd be caught in this kind of tug of war situation where, I guess, in the process of development of new models, you have very much, from the mainstream AI researcher approach, you're also doing a very tactical kind of practice of trying to beat the benchmark, to get the better model, get it out there, get better accuracy, and so on. So in some sense, it feels like to counter that, you almost need to step away and think not just [how to] counter that with other tactics, but then kind of stay in this stalemate back and forth, but more to take a step back and think about how, amongst all this hum and models

being trained on models, outputs on generated content, this kind of feedback loop, how can you step out of that? So maybe a level-up insurgent tactic, like how can you be heard or discerned among the feedback loop that exists within these systems? I think that that's a space where maybe also some of the things that you're also speaking about in the context of an 'As If ethos', or even the more media-artistic practices. How can we think a bit otherwise about how we might define a system, how we might define intelligence, and really propose alternatives from that level that maybe undercut this race of better models and so on? That's one space where we can move. I'm not sure whether that's the tactical; it becomes, kind of...

01:42:27 MICHAEL DIETER

...at times what you were saying sounded like accelerationist, like critical accelerationism, if that could even be a thing, but then as well, you're saying, okay, but it's about sort of precisely undercutting that accelerationist drive for optimisation and leveraging tactics to just game the next model. Yeah, it is a big question.

01:42:52 ALEXANDRA BARANCOVÁ

No, no. I think that that is kind of the default of the field. But then the challenge is how not to get caught up in that, right?

01:43:01 MICHAEL DIETER

I don't know whether either Eric or David have any thoughts about this.

01:43:06 DAVID GARCIA

I'm way out of my depth.

01:43:08 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, I feel I'm out of my depth too! But we're also getting towards the end of our session. I was alerted to a question in the comments, but I don't have access to the comments here. Maybe one of our helpers can load that up.

01:43:34 ROB BATTERBEE

There's a question about the temporality of tactical media in the algorithmic flow of streaming media. What is the equivalent of interventions and cuts in this slow medium and infrastructure?

01:43:50 MICHAEL DIETER

I don't know whether that all came onto the stream, but the question is, if I could rephrase it, what difference do algorithmic streaming media make to the tactical in terms of temporality. So where and how do you cut across? How do you intervene in this reorganised flow of temporality that's based on algorithms?

01:44:19 DAVID GARCIA

Hm. Well, certainly seeing this streaming initiative where these forms of communication, and these forms

of the appropriation of telematics, of communications technology, to re-imagine what television is, and an era when we no longer know what television is, it's completely reinventing itself as we speak, seems to be... and the fact that they can be extended to a two-hour session where we can be talking to each other without caring or being interested in whether or not we have a huge or a tiny audience... the temporality of media experience and consumption seems to be in continual transformation, and I think we can embrace that. And I think processes like this, or like UKRAiNATV, are embracing and exploring these new forms of temporality, which I think are extraordinary and in some ways kind of hopeful.

01:45:28 MICHAEL DIETER

I think in there, as well, is a question about, I mean, the platforms, a lot of them, are built for 'trending,' the algorithms are designed around trending topics. So I guess that's a starting point. Do you lean into that and aim to go viral? Or is the challenge for tactics to try to build something more long-term within conditions that prioritise, you know, the viral hit and the constant churn of trending topics? So I think there's a tension there, but once you start introducing the media ecology that we deal with now - which is increasingly also quite fractured, I think, with lots of back channels with multiple platforms, all with their own different algorithmic behaviors - I think it becomes quite a serious question if you're invested in a certain form of tactical media that aims to become visible, that aims to have that kind of classic subversive impact.

01:46:52 DAVID GARCIA

Well, that's the question of visibility, isn't it? Because I remember one of the first essays that Eric wrote that really grabbed my attention was 'Media without an

...

Audience.’<sup>14]</sup> The idea of just using media to talk to yourself and maybe a few close friends and not worry about it, not be always searching for maximum impact, but to treat it more like a kind of fine art environment, where maybe you do at some point scale up, but it’s not something that you’re obsessed with or care about from the outset. And maybe that’s one of the most important lessons of tactical media, that scale and large-scale interventions aren’t the be all and end all.

01:47:38 MICHAEL DIETER

I’m thinking of a way of sort of rounding things out. And one way to do it would be to do it would be to think about both the commons and this approach to, let’s say, fostering longer-term initiatives and maybe even some of the comments that were made around friendship or care, solidarity would be another term. And I wonder whether we can talk, just to finish up, a little bit about the role of archives, which has been central to the work Eric’s done on tactical media, and also that Alex you’ve been involved with, so just to bring things towards a conclusion, can we talk a little bit about the Tactical Media Files? Maybe I’ll ask Eric just to give us a quick kind of introduction to the origins of the Tactical Media Files, because I’m not sure I actually know this, like when did you first develop this initiative, and why? And then maybe both you and Alex can speak a little bit about some of the research you’ve done on living archives and the challenges and opportunities and potentials of archiving this kind of material that’s based on hybrid media activist practices. So Eric, the Tactical Media Files?

01:49:11 ERIC KLUITENBERG

The Tactical Media Files, we see it as a documentation resource, and we called it a living archive, though it doesn’t satisfy all the

criteria that would be needed to literally call it a living archive.

For us, it was important that this is connected to practices and to meetings like this one, but also physical meetings, of course, and so around these exhibitions that David mentioned, we also organise discussions, conference-like discussions with Alexandra. We did a really nice double event called 'Strategies for Tactical Archives,' discussing literally these kinds of archiving questions and the Tactical Media Files was pretty clear how it came about. There was still a team at De Balie where I was based working on streaming media in the context of that political cultural centre and on development of content management systems and archiving systems and so on. And we kept on getting, as I referenced already earlier, these nagging questions very regularly, when are you going to organise another edition of the Next 5 Minutes, and so on. And we got a bit annoyed by those questions, but we also felt like more and more is disappearing of this material, and it's really not visible anywhere. There's a physical archive at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, but it's not very accessible, because first of all you would physically need to go there. And secondly, it's not catalogued, what is there. Thousands of tapes without any catalogue, so you would have to go by hand through all the tapes later on. And the print work is also not catalogued. So that is an issue.

And so we decided, well, we can use these opportunities that are in De Balie and create a basic web archive. And so we asked David to make a really good selection of video tapes from this unsorted archive at the International Institute of Social History, digitised that, and we collected writings from readers and from all kinds of sources, and put that together, which was quite a nice overview of what we so far understood tactical media to be, and then over the years we kept on updating this material, but very irregularly, because I am convinced that it's a long term operation, exactly because it doesn't have an institution behind it now, and it doesn't have a budget. It's a zero-budget operation, and I think that exactly created its resilience. There's nobody depending for their income on this edifice. It's just there to give you access to materials. And yes, it's very incomplete, and it could be much better, but it is important that it's there. It's been there since November 2008 so by now it's sixteen years old. For an online archive that's very old, and I hear from people every now and then that they are using it, or they are referring it to their students, and so on. And that's enough. That's really enough.

Now in terms of the temporality of that, I think it is very important, because tactical media was always tied to this urgency, and I already expressed my initial enthusiasm, you know, being introduced in '96 to this whole universe of tactical media, so to speak, that this enormous energy and urgency was constantly there. But tied to that was also an incredible focus on the right here, right now. You know,

no sense of extended time. It's all about 'we have to act, there is a problem, we need to come up with, with something, a response, an intervention.' It's all about the event...

01:54:01 MICHAEL DIETER

'The next five minutes'...

01:54:03 ERIC KLUITENBERG

...at some point, we termed it trapped in the eternal now, and there's always now, now, now, the next five minutes. Actually, five minutes is way too long. The next five seconds, no, the next half second, no, even faster.

So that is a problem; you need, if you want to have a critical reflection, a little bit like what we're doing in this discussion here, you need time. You need to stretch time. So the temporality needs to be stretched. But then what we noticed over the last years, and that's a really interesting sort of opposite movement, is that, particularly with all these algorithmic systems, and the way in which, you know, design is really tested on test subjects to measure their effective responses to interfaces, to flows, new posts coming in. How do you create a maximum production of endorphins, and so on, through your flexible and real-time design? It has created this sense that you also need to understand how this micro time that is exploited there, how that actually works. Only if you understand both things, both dimensions of time, can you really develop a critical perspective on where to go

in response to these systems. And this becomes all the more urgent now with the current wave of what is then called generative AI. And so the temporality is, on the one hand, yes, these kind of documentation systems can help to extend our understanding of time and our temporal awareness and consciousness and our sense of what we might call some kind of history here - super contentious concept, of course, history - but on the other hand, we also need to understand the shrinking of the time horizon. It's really complicated. So this question about temporality, I think, is one of the crucial ones that we're up against now.

01:54:42 MICHAEL DIETER

Speaking of time, we are almost at the end of our two hours, and it's been an epic session, but I do want to give Alex also your opportunity to speak a little bit about your work on strategies for tactical archives, because I feel like that's another entry point for you to tactical media as just maybe some final thoughts to bring things to an end.

01:56:56 ALEXANDRA BARANCOVÁ

Okay, well, final thoughts sounds pretty daunting, but I think, more as a continuation of what Eric was just saying, because that's very much the kind of departure point that we took for this event that we organised in Rotterdam, 'Strategies for Tactical Archives,' in which we looked at possibilities, the potential of using documentation in a broader sense, which can be archived, doesn't have to be, but what role documentation can play to exactly, like Eric was saying, expand this temporality and the different timelines that we're

working on as well, which I think resonates very well with the previous question that you posed, how do we exist in this context of, or what does it mean to be in a context of kind of algorithmic temporality? I guess time in an algorithmic system spans the system's existence or lifetime. So how do we find other ways to also understand what is going on? How can we aggregate and share knowledge with community organisers, for example? This is one of the things during this event that we're now talking about that we spoke about, how can we make it so that event-based or practice-driven organisations don't necessarily have to start all over again every time, but are there means for exchange of experience, for connecting, that can help make these processes a little bit more efficient, or just a bit more easy, a bit more easygoing. So that's a bit the context. I don't know if there was something specific that you were also...

## FOOTNOTES

1. David Garcia and Geert Lovink, 'The ABC of Tactical Media,' *Nettime* (1997), <https://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9705/msg00096.html> ↑
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3. Felix Stalder, '30 Years of Tactical Media', in Public Netbase: Non Stop Future New Practices in Art and Media, Novi-Sad and Vienna: New Media Center\_kuda.org and World-Information Institute / t0, 2009. Available at: <http://future-nonstop.org/c/e16b26b29c7f48f115390ac507917892>; and: [www.tacticalmediafiles.net/article.jsp?objectnumber=42801](http://www.tacticalmediafiles.net/article.jsp?objectnumber=42801) ↑
4. Eric Kluitenberg, 'Media Without An Audience' (2000), [http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol\\_2/contributors0/kluitenbergtext.html](http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors0/kluitenbergtext.html) ↑



SPEAKERS

**Cecilia Ghidotti**  
**Embodied Audience**  
**Carolina Bandinelli**  
**Embodied Audience**  
**Michael Dieter**  
**Adam Arvidsson**

RECORDED

**30 October 2024 at 17:00**

KEYWORDS

Neoplebeian condition  
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class composition

informal economies  
counterfeit trade  
tourism  
livestream selling  
algorithmic platforms  
digital participation  
cultural representation.

GUESTS

Adam Arvidsson

00:06 MICHAEL DIETER  
Welcome to CDI-TV.

00:08 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
Welcome to CDI-TV. How do you start the stream?

00:13 MICHAEL DIETER  
Well, welcoming people to the show.

00:15 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
Welcoming people to the show. Welcoming our global audience, our diverse and global audience from all over the world. Thank you, everybody for tuning in.

00:24 MICHAEL DIETER  
We have people here at the Warwick Media Lab, and I think there's a few people tuning in on YouTube

00:27 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
Because we are a hybrid event.

00:28 MICHAEL DIETER  
We are hybrid.

00:28 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
We are so hybrid.

00:28 MICHAEL DIETER

And if you're online, use the comments. We'll be watching for any questions, any input. So feel free to comment away on our YouTube and Carolina, do you want to..?

00:51 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, before starting, I want to share with our billions of viewers around the world what I just said to our audience, embodied audience, because we do have also an embodied audience. The fact that I'm realising my childhood dream of being a TV presenter, this is the closest I'm getting, and also my more adult dream of drinking while I am on duty, while I'm doing my job as an Associate Professor at Warwick University. And last but not least, in terms of introduction, we have here, Professor Adam Arvidsson, woo!

01:30 MICHAEL DIETER

Wooo!

01:31 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Applause, cheers]

01:33 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Professor Adam Arvidsson, finally here, all the way from Naples, born and bred in Sweden, travelled the world, worked in Copenhagen, worked in California, did research in Thailand, India, China, to end up finally in Naples. Adam. Why Naples?

01:57 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Well Carolina. It's a long story.

01:59 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Start!

02:01 ADAM ARVIDSSON

It's too long to tell, I think, but let's put it this way. It's an interesting place. It's a bit of a factory of the future, I think.

02:10 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, it's gonna be difficult if you are that hermetic. Anyhow, Adam has written about brands. He has written about the industrial society, and recently he's working on a new project on the neoplebeian condition, TikTok and the neoplebeian condition. So I know - because I know because you told me, so don't pretend you didn't tell me - that Naples had a role in kind of identifying this new alley of research. So what is it about the city of Naples that inspired this idea of 'the neoplebeian condition'? And also, because, you know, our audience is from everywhere in the world, they might not have been to Naples, so maybe you want to tell us something more. Let's see if formulating like this I will get an answer.

03:06 ADAM ARVIDSSON

[Laughs] Okay, so well, in Italy, Naples exploded on TikTok in the pandemic years. And there was a shift, in a certain sense, from Milan to Naples as the epicentre, the cultural sort of epicentre of the country, and the country started somehow to identify itself much more with Naples than with Milan, right? And, in a certain sense, this represented an epochal shift that was articulated across a whole series of different levels

and events. On the one hand, a shift from a more elitist social media economy centred around Instagram, its more curated aesthetics and its legacy of celebrity culture and self branding etc., to a more popular, or as I call it, *plebeian*, social media economy, which invited a much wider popular participation, but also shift in a wider sense, in a certain sense, I think, on the self representation, or at least at the level of the political unconscious, to use like a norm of the country, from being centred on the dream of sort of middle-class modernity, financial capital, development, real estate, etc., incarnated in Milano, particularly in the after-Expo years, to recognising its truly sort of plebeian nature as a country, en route to perpetual underdevelopment, precarity and underdevelopment, so to say, so that was, in a bit, the shift represented also by that. And why Naples, then? Well, because Naples is a very particular city. It's a city that's often been represented as not fully northern, not fully European, not fully modern, etc. And there's some truth to that because it's a city that has sort of undergone only an incomplete process of industrial modernisation, which has retained a lot of the type of plebeian characteristics which were common to European metropolis in the 17th and 18th century, before the period of industrialisation, and that has sort of remained parts of the city being dominated by a very solid plebeian social block, which has remained, not unaltered of course, but in force, so to say, up until today. And in a certain sense, the arrival of this new social media economy of TikTok, which allows for this much wider participation, has given this type of plebeian economic and cultural practices a new window of expression, and has, in a certain sense, turbo-charged them, both at the local level, but also to the point that Italian popular culture is becoming increasingly dominated by this imaginary of

Neopolitan street sellers on TikTok or or restaurants creating Baroque concoctions of hot dogs with pizza on top, etc.

06:20 MICHAEL DIETER

Can I ask you just a point of clarification, why this term plebeian exactly? I think you offered some explanation now, but when I read the title of your talk, I wondered is this an offensive term? I'm familiar with it as an insult, but it has some history. There's some more going on with the use of this term. Why did you use this one?

06:42 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And being offensive, do you want to be cancelled or not?

06:45 ADAM ARVIDSSON

[Laughs] Well, there is an offensive term to it, of course, right? But the reason I chose to use it was that I was playing around a lot with attempts to sort of distinguish between popular, bourgeois, middle class, etc., but I found most of these terms are like monikers that don't really have a lot of theoretical content. So I was experimenting with different terms, and then I got fascinated by this term plebeian, because, of course, it's a term that, you're right, it's a term that has a history of being offensive, but it's also term that is very much rooted in the political theory of early modernity, and the plebeian and the plebs was a fundamental problem for political theory, but also for the practice of what Michel Foucault calls governmentality, starting in the 16th century and onwards, and a period also which has a lot of parallels with our times, in the sense of a period being of a transition towards a fairly unexpected future, but also being marked by what a lot of people now refer to as processes of 're-

feudalization'; that is, a strengthening of inequalities and the strengthening of sort of irrational types of political forms, etc.

So I started to study the history of this term a little bit and found it quite fascinating, because apart from sort of referring to a group of people that you could also refer to in terms of popular classes or underclass, or these sorts of things, it also has a very particular meaning, because the plebeian throughout early modern political history, and perhaps culminating with Hegel and Hegel's notion of the Pöbel, etc, has this combination of an outside that is inside society, right? Something that is inside society, but that can never be fully included. For Hegel, the Pöbel is a group that is marked by its fundamental negativity and refusal of the state. And I thought that was interesting, because I think our times are marked very much by a tendency towards the general generalization of these types of new forms of marginality, in the sense that, contrary to the 17th century plebs, the neoplebeian is not a residual from a sort of a pre-modern past, but it's something that's generated by modernity itself, in the sense that a lot of people who have been sucked into modernity and to the promise of wage labor and consumer society and so on are now being, or their children are now being, spit out again in a certain sense, right? And find themselves in conditions of precarity, but also, in a certain sense, in a condition of adversity towards what they understand to be the established notions of contemporary modernity. So I thought maybe the concept was fruitful in that sense and I hope to be able to develop it and see if it works, essentially.

10:06 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, I mean when I read it, and as you explain it now, I guess the more official concept would be that it's an intervention in or you're in dialogue with something like class composition. In terms of the history of Naples, you were saying that it's always been a bit of a plebeian kind of condition there for some, but then now you're saying it's turbo-charged, and these platforms have a role. So if we're thinking about it like the class composition, what happens in that transition? I think you said a few things like, okay, there's precarity, you know, but also it goes digital in a way. Can you talk a little bit about the class composition of the *neo*-plebeian? Is it different from Naples previously? Are the practices different, the aesthetics and so on?

11:02 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And also, I think that, yeah, when you're talking about the neoplebeian condition, you are referring to Naples, but not only to Naples. So perhaps you can tell us something more about the class composition and also the geography, because it seems like Naples is a case study of a condition and of a phenomenon that is wider.

11:29 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Sure, and I'll start with that question. Yeah, I mean, I see Naples in a certain sense as a privileged observatory, so the title of this paper that I sent, 'Sohn-Rethel in Naples' is like a pun on, you know, 'Marx in Detroit' and 'Adam Smith in Beijing' and all these sorts of things.<sup>[1]</sup> Like a bit of a pretentious pun, but nevertheless. So to see this city as a privileged observatory of a lot of tendencies that are now underway globally and are being theorised in terms of the surrounds or under-globalisation, or the South and Global South and all these sorts of things.

There are a number of these types of tendencies that tend to focus on, maybe starting with the Comaroffs in the early 2000s, their work on *Millennial Capitalism* that focuses, in a certain sense, on this type of tendency towards renewed exclusion and ejection in a certain sense of a large mass of people, right? [2] So I want to sort of latch on to that type of tendency, and of course, speak about something that is affirming itself globally, and not just in the Global South. I think if you look at my home country, Sweden, you can see very, very strong tendencies towards the this process of neoplebeisation in the terms of the growth of peripheries, the growth of criminal economies, and the growth of populations that are considered, at least in official discourses, to be sort of irredeemably outside any sort of project of modernity, etc. Another point with the term plebeian is that it's not about class. I mean, the plebe is not class, right? That's the fundamental thing of the way in which plebe has become lumpenproletariat, at least in the Marxist tradition. It's something that, within the Marxist tradition, has been understood to be, in a certain sense, almost antithetical to class, right? Something that is, and that's been - the plebeian is, in a way, that group of people which are hopeless from a political point of view, that cannot recompose themselves, so to say. And in that sense, I think there's some novelty going on because, on the one hand, of course, the neoplebeian is an aggregate of people who are from sort of a traditional underclass background, but their ranks are now being joined by a lot of people who come from both the old working classes and increasingly also the downwardly mobile middle classes, right? So that, of course, opens up the question of can this be understood as a new type of class, and can there be some sort of movement of recomposition going on here? And that, of course, in a

certain sense, is the big question to which I don't really have any answer, but I'm trying a little bit to look for these types of tendencies, right? And I think one of the areas in which this is being articulated right now, at least at the cultural more than the political level, is through the global spread of media and consumer culture.

14:34 MICHAEL DIETER

Just another context question. Can you talk a little bit about who do you work with on this topic, and how do you do this research? Because when I read the blurb that you sent us, I thought, oh, this is kind of fieldwork that you're doing. But then you did share, I think you just referenced a piece of writing that I guess will be coming out soon, you shared it with Carolina and I, that was in a - and I should say I thoroughly enjoyed reading it - but it was more theoretical kind of contribution. So can you talk a little bit about how you do this research and who you work with?

15:11 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Well, I mean, the idea came out of we've been doing now about a year of fieldwork on the digitalisation of popular economies in Naples, and 'we' meaning we have a research group of almost almost ten people who are working on this, some PhD students and some postdocs, and also some Masters students who are working with us, who've been doing a lot of digital ethnography and a lot of interviews, etc. And we've been focusing a lot on how different sectors are being redefined through the impact of primarily TikTok, but also other platforms of this sort of second generation: Temu and so on. So we've been looking at the tourist economy. We'll also be looking at street vendors. A lot of these street vendors have been able to use TikTok to create brands which makes them locally or even

nationally popular, and then they receive investments, and then they start their own chain stores. And usually it doesn't work very well because this stuff is also very temporary, so it's probably better synced with like a logic of pop-up than brands of longer duration. And we've been looking at the counterfeit economy, which always been very active in the city Naples, together in Marseille and Istanbul, being one of the centres of the global counterfeit, and how this is now locking into 'dupe culture' and street fashion that is being defunded on TikTok, and how TikTok is being used by the sellers of counterfeit merchandise to sell things beyond the markets and nationally or even at the European level. And we've been looking a lot about family business and restaurants and so on, and how they are using this type of thing. So we've been doing a lot of fieldwork, and in a sense, the theoretical paper that I sent you is something that sort of came out of the fieldwork, because that's something that's often happened to me, that you do like a very empirically driven work, and you also, you know, write things about that, which is very data-driven, but then at a certain point you get, like, an idea from that, in a sense. So that's probably how it developed.

17:20 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Staying a bit on the empirical side of it. When you started telling me about this research, and also recently I went to Naples, so I had the chance to talk also to some of Adam's collaborators, PhD[s], postdocs and colleagues like Vincenzo Luise and others, I think one of the most fascinating things about this research is really this gallery of characters. A gallery of characters that we all can meet, indeed, on TikTok and it's a very diverse humanity at stake. So can you introduce us to some of these characters? Who are these people? What are they doing on TikTok?

18:22 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Okay. [Laughs] Well, there's people who are livestreaming stolen Rolex watches, for example...

18:39 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Inaudible]

18:39 ADAM ARVIDSSON

...buy something. There's a former employee of a salumeria - sandwich or gastronomy store - who sort of became famous on TikTok by his particular way of making sandwiches, and then sort of quit his job and launched his own brand of sandwich stores, which has now opened up throughout Italy, including Dubai, which was where everybody needs to open up, in Dubai.

19:09 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

This is Antico Vinaio, right?

19:10 ADAM ARVIDSSON

No, Antico Vinaio is from Florence.

19:13 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah.

19:14 ADAM ARVIDSSON

No, this is called Mollica o Senza. And then there's this phenomenon of couples quarreling, which is really, really big,

19:22 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

What is that?

19:23 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Couples quarreling, young couples quarreling, which is really big. [Malesere?] which is my PhD student, Roberto, is working on, and which is quite interesting, because it's this sort of staged performances of very violent intimacy, right? It's people refusing any type of discursivity and then just sort of screaming at each other and also reinforcing old, sort of rooted stereotypes of masculinity and in a certain sense, fairly chauvinist behaviours. Although the women are also quite active, they're not like mere victims in any way. But it's in a certain sense, a sort of- almost like a plebeian counter-narrative about intimacy, right? As if all these feminists have told us that we have to be in a certain way, but we are like this. So there are a lot of these different things.

20:19 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Can you tell the one about the housewives? What are they doing?

20:28 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Well, I mean, these are also activities that are fairly much inscribed within what I, but also Melinda Cooper, calls the industrious family, right? <sup>[3]</sup> So, a sort of a family that is ever more opening up to a diversified

economy of small and often marginal revenue streams, which are also opening up quite a lot to the opportunities given now by TikTok and Temu, etc. So you have all these types of characters that are, I mean, it's a sort of a continuation of the Tupperware party, it's just that it's being mediated in this new way, so you have people who are maybe ordering large amounts of cheap cosmetics from Temu, and then they have these livestreaming on TikTok when they're sort of selling it, speaking dialect, and, you know, maybe dressed up in their house dress and standing in their living room and answering to the comments that are coming out, etc. I guess this is a quite global phenomenon in the sense that I think it's also happening a lot in - there's been some articles about people like this in Indonesia, as well in Thailand, and I think also China. It's a place where - so in a certain sense, TikTok is opening up these types of possibilities for participation in [an] industrious market economy, also for people who don't have a store or don't have the classical qualities of salesmanship, etc, right?

21 : 55 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So to kind of retrace a bit the journey that we've done so far, we are talking about this neoplebeian condition. And with plebeian we mean those who have been, as you said, ejected from the main structures of modernity, that haven't had access to talk about the present, to the neoliberal pillars of what is a good life, and that somehow, you are saying, that they are retaking - that the plebeian culture is retaking kind of centre-stage, both in terms of the practices and the economic practices, what you call industriousness, which is also related to your previous book, *Changemakers: The Industrious Future of the Digital Economy*, or something like that. <sup>[4]</sup>

22:56 ADAM ARVIDSSON

[Laughs]

22:57 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So these are the informal economies, the sort of unstructured forms of entrepreneurship that kind of make things do, or make ends meet, or whatever you say in English, *arrabattarse* [snatch] for our Italian audience. So the trickery, the sort of bricolage economies, and on the other hand, coupled to that, also the culture, the discursive aspect, the aesthetic. So we are talking about an economic phenomenon. We are talking about an aesthetic phenomenon. You've briefly mentioned the style - counterfeit sneakers are very important to the neoplebeian condition and the aesthetic of the industriousness. So if the good old Georg Simmel would be with us, he would surely write a pamphlet on the counterfeit sneakers and their meaning. And we are saying this is kind of *platformized* - I know I said platformized, this should be like the P-word of media scholars - so this has been platformized, remediated by TikTok, so we can see these characters, so we can see this culture, these practices, really getting viral or mainstream on TikTok. And so my question is, why do you think TikTok? What is there in the TikTok aesthetic and affordance that make this possible? Why TikTok and not Instagram, Facebook or, well LinkedIn probably we all know why, but you know, for the sake of rhetoric, let's put LinkedIn into the picture.

24:54 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Well, I mean, there was a little bit on Instagram and Facebook also, I mean, it's more of a continuum, but of course TikTok did change things a lot because the TikTok platform has a number of characteristics - I

didn't say affordances, do you notice that, characteristics? [Laughs]

25:10 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Well done, the A-word.

25:11 ADAM ARVIDSSON

- that lowers the barriers to participation a lot, right? I mean, first of all, the short video format, which developed also in the trajectory of development of TikTok in a Chinese context where there was a need, both economic and political, to platformize a number of sort of predominantly rural but less digitally literate users, and TikTok has been traditionally aimed at minor, like second- and third-tier cities, as it's known, etc, but also political pressure to do that. And secondly also its algorithms, which are different from that of Instagram and Facebook, because they're not based on the social graph logic, they're based on a much wider combination of things. So it means that even though you don't have a large number of followers, you can still 'make it' in a sense, because Instagram is structured in such a way that the winner takes all logic of people who have a large number of followers will be much more easily viral. So there's a number of characteristics of the platform which has made it conducive to wider popular participation and also to the favouring of local and localised content, right? So then TikTok tend[s] to create these sort of bubbles of local economies around it. And at the same time, it also has this very institutionalised insecurity or precarity, everybody we talk to agree[d] on this, that Instagram is a very unstable environment - you don't know when you're going to get cancelled or shut down, and you don't really understand why, etc. So it's, in a

certain sense, it's very despotic, in this sense, right, in terms of its opaque, impenetrable algorithm, etc. But that's, you know, also something that is a bit - it resonates, in a certain sense, with this type of plebeian or neoplebeian structure of feeling where the idea of improbability and insecurity, and also this type of unpredictability of gains, in a certain sense, is quite rooted in everyday life. And of course, what happens is also that you get a social media economy which is only partly platformized in the sense that it's also very rooted in neighbourhood and family and community, etc, and re-embedded in a Polanyian sense, right? So the family and the neighbourhood operates and creates like both economic and perhaps, above all, ideological safeguards against this constant precarity. There is a sort of a moral economy rooted in the family that sort of enables people to endure this type of precarity without experiencing it as much as an existential threat, right? So in a certain sense, it's a type of social media economy where people are not so much 'selling themselves' in the idea of Ilana Gershon and others,<sup>[5]</sup> but selling a performance while their real selves, in a certain sense, are anchored elsewhere, right?

28:17 MICHAEL DIETER

I think I just want to take a minute to see whether there's any comments from online, or questions. If not, I'll just invite anybody tuned in online to feel free to post any comments or questions. But then, for the people here with us in the Media Lab, just open things up - I think at this point now, we've covered, I think, some aspects of your research and raised a number of different topics and angles - whether there's any comments or contributions people would like to make.

28:54 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

That is the awkward moment in which people are there and people from this side are like, is the audience gonna engage or not? And if not, why? Have we sucked that much?

29:09 ADAM ARVIDSSON

[Laughs]

29:11 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

People can wave, do you want to ask a question?

29:14 MICHAEL DIETER

It's an invitation to wave.

29:16 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, well, while you might find inspiration for a question, I do have one though. So one of the ways in which I relate to this idea of the neoplebeian condition, or in which I understood it kind of immediately, is related to my experience of sitting on the sofa, and my partner looks at TikTok, and I see people cleaning carpets, and people filling sandwiches, and people, you know, cleaning very dirty dishes and doing other things which I don't understand. At some point, there were people in a Japanese canteen cooking like kilos and kilos, an enormous quantity of noodles, and so on the one hand, we've been talking now about the people who do these - who perform these tasks or activities, and who produce these discourses or this aesthetic. What about the audience? What is [it] that we find as an audience in this kind of content that is very different from the content of social networks such as Facebook or Twitter or

former Twitter, rest in peace, and Instagram for sure. So Instagram had this aspirational, I think, aspect, at least in its mainstream content, like: *ah, this is the life that I would like to live; this is the pair of shoes that I would like to wear.* And Facebook had this idea of kind of a pseudo-Habermasian public sphere in which we discuss issues and will deliberate and the best argument will win. Turns out, spoiler: doesn't. And then now we seem to be attracted by very different kind of content, what you call the neoplebeian content, the neoplebeian aesthetic. Why? What is there for the audience who do not necessarily live, would not necessarily have, the embodied experience of the plebeian condition?

31:57 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Well, I mean, first of all, I think TikTok has a very wide variety of different types of content, and not all of it can be sort of subsumed under this term 'the neoplebeian', right? What I mean by that is something quite specific. It's rather the other way around; it's that TikTok has offered a platform for these plebeian actors to participate actively in the production of cultural content, right? A platform that wasn't really there or not to the same extent, at least. I mean, of course, there were some channels, etc, and there were some some aspects that allowed for this, right? So I wouldn't sort of subsume everything on TikTok under this idea, right? I mean, there's also, like, political activism, and there's a whole series of different things. But it has given a significant boost to this type of neoplebeian aesthetic, and it's also made it very attractive. It's made it very attractive. I mean, if you think about the Italian situation then, of course, in a certain sense, the symbolic victory of the neoplebeian is the informal sort of plebiscite victory of Geolier at Sanremo, right, which is sort of a triumph of this new idea of an Italy...

33:18 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...maybe you should say what is Sanremo?

33:20 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Sanremo is the famous Eurovision Song Contest festival in Italy, which has always been dominated by the idea of Milano and the Milanese aesthetic of modernity and refinement and fashion and design, etc. And last year, the popular vote favoured this Neapolitan rapper who walks around in these type of Adidas track suits and sneakers, which you can then buy high quality fakes of on the street or on livestreams on TikTok, and was very, very inserted into this type of neoplebeian aesthetic and became, you know, a fundamental reference for the self-representation of the country in the sense that also the Neapolitan dialect, for example, has become very influential now even [in] northern Italy, people in the suburbs are trying to use these terms and are being inspired. People are listening to neomelodico, which was a very local type of music, even in Milan's suburbs right now. So it's as if the centre of cultural gravity has moved, in a certain sense, from Milan and...

34:25 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

But why?

34:25 ADAM ARVIDSSON

But why? Well, probably it's a sort of an unconscious recognition of the general direction of the development of the country, right? I think, I mean, this is the way in which the economic and demographic

indicators are all pointing in that direction, and not only for Italy, but I think for most of Europe in general, right? So I think this is... it's got something to do with TikTok, in the sense that TikTok provides a forum for this, but it's also something that I think reflects a general structural and cultural development all across the industrialised north, so to say, right, and not just there.

35:15 MICHAEL DIETER

Oh, yep, we have a question.

35:17 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Shall I bring the microphone? Yes.

35:21 MICHAEL DIETER

Yep.

35:22 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I'm very happy to be able to do this.

35:25 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Thank you so much. Really interesting concept, and I'm curious if there's a relationship between closing public space on the streets and the expansion of this kind of expression on social media. And I'm just wondering about this because of a conversation I had with a young person in the US who said, you know, one of the reasons why we're all on Discord in these other online spaces is we, as young people, cannot be outside anymore. There is no space we're allowed to gather. And I think of Naples as having this

very vibrant street life, and I'm curious whether that has changed and whether there's a dialectical relationship. Thanks.

36:05 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Well, no, I think there's no contradiction here, right? At least for this type of neoplebeian culture, there is no contradiction, really, between the digital spaces and the street life, in a sense. And I think that's also true for... I mean, if you look at a country like Sweden, which also had a very strong sort of process of neoplebeisation, but what you get is new spaces: the spaces that are in the suburbs and the peripheries, right? While you might have a process of securitisation of the more inner-city spaces, that also have higher real estate values, but then you get like these new peripheral spaces which are not really surveilled, and which are linked also to, you know, street markets and underground economies and criminal economies, etc., and creating, and maybe interlinked also, with these new type of media spaces. So I think it's a question of the construction of a different type of spatiality, right? And I don't know enough about the United States, but I would imagine, I mean, there's a really good book called *Hinterland*, which discusses this in relation to, I think it's Seattle, right? <sup>[6]</sup> And the contradiction between, on the one hand, you might have like the inner-city spaces and the middle-class spaces being emptied out and you have all these statistics, right? People showing that they're spending less time with friends, and they're socialising less, and they're more on social media. But then you have like these other spaces of what he calls the hinterlands, like the suburbs, the warehouses, the the places where the French *gilets jaunes* were demonstrating were the roundabouts, which is another type of space which is

coming out. So I think there is probably a reconstruction of spatiality around this, rather than just simple substitution.

38:20 MICHAEL DIETER

Another question.

38:20 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Another question, wow! One sec.

38:25 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Hi, you make a distinction between Instagram and TikTok in terms of digital spaces now, as opposed to physical spaces, and I see a lot of the same content on - that Carolina was describing as TikTok, like the, you know, the smashing bottles and red hot ball experiments and extremely satisfying cleaning - on Instagram reels as well. So they kind of blur together a little bit. Maybe this is too much about my personal viewing history. But do you think that there is something different about the way that those two platforms operate in terms of algorithms? Because you've argued, I think that Instagram is more self-branding, is more celebrity, is more individuals, and TikTok is more ephemeral, random content and people who are posting are having to kind of go with the flow and jump on whatever's trendy at the moment rather than trying to build some consistent self-brand. Is that in the algorithms? Does that mean TikTok tends to push you towards content rather than towards people?

39:35 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Well, I should say Instagram was because Instagram started out as being more centered on self-branding

and celebrity culture, and these types of social graph-based algorithms. But of course, also as a response to the popularity of TikTok, Instagram has incorporated a lot of features, both things like Reels and aesthetic features, but also it's tweaked its algorithm to make it work more like TikTok. So I think there's a convergence now. So what you could say is, maybe you can think about a shift in hegemony in the social media economy, from the Instagram model to the TikTok model, meaning that Instagram is also becoming more like TikTok in a sense, right?

40:17 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, I have a question about what happens to money in these peoplebeian conditions? Because, you know, we live in...

40:27 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

What happens to money in general, I would say. If you have [inaudible] you can, let me know!

40:32 MICHAEL DIETER

...well, I think like money, you know, we understand it as media. It's been thoroughly digitised. There's so many new ways to engage in transaction. There's so many new kinds of value produced from these platforms, not just crypto, of course, but all of these other new platforms. The plebeian condition, I suppose, always had its informal economies, but now they're transformed, I assume, through these platforms. In some situations, in some conditions, this is sort of described as a formalisation of informal economies. That's how I've read about it being analysed and thought about in India, for example, or in China. In your research, though, what do you see happening to the way money is exchanged, [the] way value is produced? What kind of platforms are relevant? Is this a

formalisation of that informal economy, or are there new kinds of things emerging that are also kind of informal, unruly?

41:45 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Well, I mean, there's definitely a growth of these, let's call them plebeian economies. Like economies that are rooted in neighbourhoods, and that are sort of living at the margin between the formal and the informal in a certain sense. And they're also very much linked to family economies, in the sense that these types of TikTok practices are often understood as a 'side hustle' that contributes to the family as the place where income streams are pooled, etc. There's a definite boost of these economies in terms of the turnover, but also the geographical reach, in the sense that they're able to sell a lot of things that are not just at the local level, but also on the national, region, European level. And that's probably most relevant for the downright illegal economies, like the counterfeit trade, for example. It's linked, of course, to tourism as well, because at the same time as TikTok and this thing has come, then Naples also has had an enormous boost in the tourism presence, going from 3 to 12 million tourists a year, from 2019 until now.

So, of course, there's a lot more money going around and a lot more possibilities of accumulating. And it's interesting to see, I think it will be interesting to see the types of sort of capital accumulation that are emerging with this, right? To which extent these type of popular economies will translate into investments in the tourist sector, and who is doing these investments, and if there's going to be a consolidation of large actors in that, right? And there's already a very strong presence of organised crime in the tourist sector, because that's a way of laundering money, etc. And it seems to be now that there are some investments

from global chains, like Starbucks has been opening up, for example.

But I don't know if they're going to be a turnover to sort of corporate valuations of this type of plebeian mass creativity or not. Whether it's a matter of formalisation or not? I don't think so, because I don't think there is much of an... I mean, there's never been much of an effort on the part of the authorities in the Neapolitan context to bring these type of plebeian economies into the formal sector, because they're also understood to be, in a certain sense, there's a sort of sustenance for people who don't have a job, in a sense. Like, for example, the smuggled cigarette sectors, which has been active ever since the Second World War, has never really been seriously repressed by the authorities, because they understood that if they did that, they would get a popular revolt on their hands. There's also sort of a feature of the neoplebeian in the certain sense is that they riot, right, in also many very violent ways, in a sense, so you don't have a- and I think the same thing here. I don't think there is much of an interest in going in and sort of see if these housewives that are drop-shipping are actually paying taxes on what they're doing or not, right? I think that's not on the agenda so much at all. So, hm.

45:08 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Oh, wow.

45:09 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

I don't know if I can go in the frame, somehow. There was a tangent question from the chat, which probably it comes from some connection sparkling from your talk, which is, if you ever seen

the movie *La classe operaia va in Paradiso*, which would be an Elio Petri movie from the 70s, roughly translated into like 'The Working Class Goes to Heaven,' which is like a brutal and beautiful depiction of the working class, Italian working class of the 70s, and what do you think about that?

45:42 ADAM ARVIDSSON

What I think about that movie? Well, I think Gian Maria Volonté is probably one of the greatest actors of the 20th century, and he makes a great role performance in that, and it's a great film. What do I think about the Italian working class in the 70s is that the question, or...? [Laughs]

45:43 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Yeah, in the chat, they were asking about your opinion on this movie. [It] will remain a mystery, so you are free to give your own take on this.

46:02 ADAM ARVIDSSON

[Laughs]

46:03 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

A bit of anarchy in the livestream.

46:12 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I know there's another question from the audience, so I'm coming there. But maybe one way of looking at this question is, is there a continuity between the Italian working class of the

70s and neoplebeian? And this actually leads to a question that I had, so I'm sort of jumping on the viewer question, but can we talk of an ideology of the neoplebeian? And with ideology, I mean a kind of political system of idea. So if the working class had been like politicised and associated to leftwing politics, workerism, and so on. Can we think along analogous lines for the neoplebeian? A more down-to-earth way of putting the question would be, is the neoplebeian from the left or the right, or something else?

47:27 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Yeah, that's a really interesting question, right? I mean, on the one hand, of course there is a sort of an anti-ideological attachment. In the sense that there is a certain embrace of immediacy, right? In a certain sense, the neoplebeian condition is also a condition without the future. It's the condition of the present, in a sense. I remember when we had our undergraduate students reading Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, then they said, well, what's strange with this? <sup>[7]</sup> That's how it's always been, right? Because, I mean, the idea that you would somehow, that your activities would somehow be pointing towards an ideologically envisioned future is just not the case in these circumstances, right? It's always been like, it's a matter of sort of making do and surviving and going on for another.

But of course, there is presently a political articulation, in a sense, I think, of the neoplebeian, which tends to be very much linked to what we probably would call 'the right,' even though those distinctions maybe matter less than what we think. But I mean, of course, if you take something like Trumpism or a lot of the *gilets jaunes* or also some of the movements against COVID restrictions, etc., that happened a couple of years ago, they probably wouldn't frame themselves

to be at the right all of the time, but most people do call them that. But what they do have, I think usually, and I've been looking at that a little bit, and what they seem to have is like a combination of, on the one hand, a sometimes very astute capacity to understand how things work on the basis of facts, combined with the most absurd interpretations at the level of overall analysis, right? So you can have these people who are completely competent in detailing the roles of the armaments industry in prolonging the war in Ukraine, but at the same time claim that aliens are governing the United States. So you can have the combination of, like, two levels of analysis.

And I don't really know why that is. I mean, I can guess why it is. It's probably because, on the one hand, there's been very little attempt at genuine Gramscian approaches on the part of people at the left. People on the left just don't want to talk to these people usually, right? I mean, the United States now you have an enormous cleavage between the two and there's very little in terms of reaching out. Secondly, I think that there's also sort of nostalgia. I mean, one of the political ontologies that you often meet when you talk to people who I would describe as neoplebeian in the sense, is the overall presence of a conspiracy, right? Everything is a conspiracy. There's always someone who has been doing- you know, global warming is not global warming. It's they, they're doing geo-engineering or something like that. And I think the conspiracy is, it's a nostalgic theory of power, right? Because it's, in a certain sense, as if things worked as they used to work in the family firm. The Illuminati tells Bill Gates what to do, and he tells someone else, and it's sort of power goes down the line, and it's sort of, it's reassuring, in a sense, but then at the same time, the conspiracy is also a certain degree-zero of politics,

right? It's something that always pops up in periods when there are no other types of solutions. I mean, if you also see the period of, if you go back to the 17th century, the transition to modernity, is also a period of conspiracies, of witch trials, of the presence of Satan everywhere. So there is a certain way it's almost as if it was a lack of an overall politics, in a sense, and I don't really know if that, how that can be transformed, or if it can be built on, or if it [can] have a progressive potential or not. I really have no idea.

51:31 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, we'll stay tuned to understand if the neoplebeian can sort of articulate a new political scenario beyond aliens governing the UK. Although, you know, sometimes when I talk to people that agree with conspiracy theories - it happens to me recently in Naples, but also elsewhere, like everywhere in the world - sometimes I get this feeling and I think, what if they're right? What if aliens are governing the UK? Because, you're right, there is this... the US. Oh, yeah, that was an interesting lapsus. Well, I wouldn't necessarily exclude that aliens are governing also the UK, but we have a question from the audience, but you already have a microphone, so.

52:24 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Yes, I have to apologise, my question may be a little bit long, and my explanation may not be good, so maybe it's wasting your time. But I'm Leah from China, and this is where TikTok was born, so I observed some interesting phenomena that I want to share with you, and know your opinion of it. Firstly, is that I see that social media on the internet during these years has undertaken some very interesting changes. Firstly, a long time ago, it was forums [where] everyone had an equal chance to share their opinion, and they had an equal chance to be seen. But all

these things, like opinions to be shared, are in text, and this is why I think they have a smaller audience. Less use of these forums is not only because we don't have these digital devices, but also text has high barriers, especially long text, has high barriers for the audience to understand what the author wants to express. But then we have all digital devices. Everyone has smartphones, personal computers. We have Facebook, we have Instagram, that we can use images. We use pictures to share our feelings, to share our opinions, so that we have a lot more users, and now we have TikTok. TikTok is for showing videos. Maybe someone may think taking a video is more difficult than taking pictures, but I don't think so, because to share something in a short, but not that high requirement for your technical skills, is lowering the barrier for people, for all these people who do not have high skills to be seen by their production of content. These kinds of apps may create more chances for people to share their own feelings. So at least that's why I think TikTok may become very popular these years, because we have a lot of people that are not professionals sharing their own feelings. And this is my feeling to these apps, and maybe this can answer your question, gentlemen.

But this caused another question, another issue is like a lot of people, especially who are not familiar with these kinds of sharing pattern, a lot of their contents of TikTok are vulgar, are of low taste, but I have an experience in a training section which tells people how to sell their products on TikTok, especially on livestream, livestream selling. The teacher told us that you don't have to create things that are meaningful. You just have to attract others' attention, especially those who are not that familiar with those high quality contents. This is what I found very interesting on TikTok. And you talked about the livestream selling, and this is very popular in China nowadays. And [what] I want to talk about is that this kind of pattern is

always blamed for the low quality, for the loud streaming, for the not very good products. They are blamed for that. But they have very high sales, and they create a lot of job opportunities for the people who jump into this industry. And this is a very interesting phenomenon, I think. So I want to know your opinion about this. And one last thing I want to talk about is the comments on TikTok.

56:59 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

You have a lot to say now!

57:02 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Yeah, because I am very familiar with TikTok. It's the comments on TikTok. Maybe you can observe that everyone can see different comments on the same shots of TikTok because the app will present the thing that you want to see, not only the video, but also the comments only on it. The comments on it are the things that you are interested in. So that I think this is kind of echo chamber. And do you think it is a good thing for all of us to see the thing that I we want to see, or do you think we should see the thing that is not, what always we want to see, but it has more diversity. Okay?

57:59 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Italian]

58:02 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Yeah, no, I mean it's obvious that you know much more [about] TikTok than we do. So I'm sure we can develop this further. I mean, I don't think I have much to add. I mean, I think one of the things that we tend to forget, is that, you know, there've been these periods of

different types of enthusiasm for the digital media, or the Internet, as we used to call it in the 1990s, but in the 1990s a lot of people thought that digital media could revitalise the public sphere in a sense, but we have to remember that in the 1990s the Internet was populated by 50 million intellectuals, right? There were mostly people in universities that were on the Internet.

58:45 MICHAEL DIETER

Those were the days(!)

58:46 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Laughs]

58:47 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Now it's 5 billion people from all types of different structures, right?

58:51 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Much better now.

58:52 ADAM ARVIDSSON

So is that good or bad? I have no idea, but I'm sure we can talk more about it in the break afterwards. So thank you very much for your comments. It was very insightful.

59:04 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I think it's six, so it's time to give our guests a glass.

59:10 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Applause]

59:14 MICHAEL DIETER

Thank you so much. Thank you so much for joining us on this stream. And for anybody who's tuned in, thank you for tuning in, and everybody that came to the Media Lab for the session today. We'll have another stream in one month. So pay attention to...

59:32 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Do you remember the exact date?

59:34 MICHAEL DIETER

I think it's December 4th.

59:36 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

December 4th exactly.

59:37 MICHAEL DIETER

On the Wednesday as well, and it will be Craig Gent, and he'll be discussing his new book with Verso, called Cyberboss, about algorithmic management. So yeah, keep an eye out for that. And yeah, thanks again.

59:52 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Thank you!

59:54 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Good night and good luck.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Published as Adam Arvidsson, Vincenzo Luise and Luca Recano, 'Sohn-Rethel in Naples. On Plebeian Creativity,' *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, May 2, 2025, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/13675494251336604> †
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4. Adam Arvidsson, *Changemakers: The Industrious Future of the Digital Economy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019. †
5. Ilana Gershon, 'Selling Your Self in the United States,' *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 37.2 (2014): 281-95. †
6. Phil A. Neel, *Hinterland: America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020. †
7. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* London: Zero Books, 2012. †



SPEAKERS

**Craig Gent**  
**Embodied Audience**  
**Carolina Bandinelli**  
**Cecilia Ghidotti**  
**Keith Bloomfield**  
**Michael Dieter**  
**Embodied Audience**

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labour process  
management reorganization  
social factory  
political phenomenology.

GUESTS

Craig Gent

00:00 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Two, one...

00:03 KEITH BLOOMFIELD

You're live.

00:04 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Oh we are live! Ah, finally! So, cheers everybody! Welcome to the CDI-TV, Centre for Digital Inquiry at Warwick, in collaboration with the Media Lab at the Centre for Cultural and Media Policy Studies. So this is our second episode, and the first episode, I realised that I started without introducing anything, so I didn't say who we were, I didn't say where we were, so a huge cliffhanger for our audience. So now finally there is this big name reveal! So I am Carolina Bandinelli, and here there's the gorgeous Michael Dieter, and we are the Centre for Digital Inquiry, the kids of the Centre for Digital Inquiry. Michael is the more- you are a bit the geek of this aren't you? Like Michael is the one finding new screen arts and sort of media tricks, whereas I'm more of a cultural studies person, and so yes, this is the CDI team, and then we have Keith Bloomfield in the back, so if this is happening, it's because of Keith and also Rob Batterbee and then we have Cecilia Ghidotti. I mean, there's a big team. Maybe one day there will also be you from this side of the screen. And before presenting the guest of today, let's leave a bit of suspense. Let's not reveal who you are yet. Michael told me to say that we are part of the StreamArtNetwork. So we are part of the StreamArtNetwork, and also Michael told me say that we are exploring this hybrid space together. So, just so you know, we are exploring this hybrid space together, aren't we?

02:18 MICHAEL DIETER

Yes.

02:20 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Laughs]

02:20 MICHAEL DIETER

So shout out to UKRAiNATV. Shout out to Konfluxus, to The Void in Amsterdam, to our friends [3022] in Lithuania. We're part of a network that spans UK, across central and eastern Europe. We're very proud to be part of that network. The premise is all space is mediated, and all mediation is real space. And we are living in hybrid conditions. And in these streams, we explore it together through hybrid togetherness. So this is the aesthetic premise of our stream initiative at CDI, and this is episode two. For our series, we've invited people in our network who are producing interesting research, who are publishing books, who are writing theory, we're a bit of the theory wing at the moment of the StreamArtNetwork, and evolving in different directions, but episode two, we have brought a friend, a colleague now as well, to join us and discuss a new book that he's just published. Introduction, Carolina?

03:44 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yes! Craig Gent here. Can we have some fake applause from the-

03:50 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Applause, cheers]

03:51 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Woah yes, exactly!

03:55 CRAIG GENT

Who needs to fake it, baby!

03:55 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And you know, I was thinking next time when we have the guests, the guests should come from like a red carpet or a green screen carpet. You know, we should step up eventually. One step at a time, we are exploring this hybrid space together. So Craig, you're an author, a researcher, in my perception you're also one of those, like cool people of Novara Media, those cool people publishing with Verso. And you know, I say Verso for a reason, because this is your book published by Verso, *Cyberboss: The Rise of Algorithmic Management and the New Struggle for Control at Work*. So I can see some technology, a clear political stance, a nice retro cover, and also a nice palette kind of matched with your style. So in my eyes, you are one of those kind of cutting edge, a bit political, a bit theoretical, kind of an engagé intellectual, but with a techie, geeky twist. Am I right?

05:19 CRAIG GENT

I wouldn't say I'm very techie.

05:21 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

You're not techie.

05:22 CRAIG GENT

I would say, I mean, I am about as cutting edge as, like, a Marxist Luddite can ever be, which is coming around again, right? So, yeah, I'm increasingly cutting edge, I guess. But I mean, really, I'm

interested in power. It just so happens that you can't talk about power without talking about technology right now.

05:41 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, fair enough. And I think we'll talk about power and technology and new ways in which technologies are changing the way power is exercised. But before getting there, how are you today?

05:53 CRAIG GENT

I'm very well, I'm very happy to be in this hybrid space.

05:55 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Are you exploring this hybridness?

05:58 CRAIG GENT

I'm exploring this hybridness.

06:00 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

How does it feel, so far?

06:04 CRAIG GENT

Celestial.

06:05 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Celestial - yeah, that was the word I was about to say, yeah. It is a bit celestial.

06:10 CRAIG GENT

It feels celestial. Noumenous, liminal, all of these things.

06:14 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, I feel very week 10 of the term, which means I feel like an emptied shell, but this is the nice thing that is happening to me today. So compared to my mood before this dream, I feel rather celestial, too. Michael, how are you?

06:36 MICHAEL DIETER

I'm good. I don't feel empty, I feel energised from the term being over. Excited.

06:42 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Oh really?

06:43 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, my teaching's done. I'm ready. Ready to do anything other than teach right now!

06:47 CRAIG GENT

See these are like bourgeois professional preoccupations. I was just thinking to myself, I feel Christmasy.

06:52 MICHAEL DIETER

I do feel a little bit Christmasy in the season as well. We have a Christmas tree just off green screen. Craig, tell us about this book.

06:54 CRAIG GENT

What do you want to know?

07:06 MICHAEL DIETER

Give us the, you know, do they call it the elevator pitch? What is this book about? We've got the title, *Cyberboss: The Rise of Algorithmic Management and the New Struggle for Control at Work*.<sup>[1]</sup> I feel like I sort of know what this is about. But, you know, give us the sales pitch. Tell us about your book.

07:27 CRAIG GENT

Okay, it's a long time since I worked in sales, but I did once. I'll try.

07:32 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

You can give us a bad sale pitch.

07:35 CRAIG GENT

Okay, you're gonna buy it regardless [laughs].

07:37 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, yeah, exactly. We've already bought it. So...

07:43 CRAIG GENT

So I should say the idea of this book started before people were talking about algorithmic management in the context of work. So really where it came from was a moment in time that I don't think has really gone away, where people were feeling that, you know, like there are some problems with the idea of the future of work. Like things don't look so like optimistic, and in particular sectors we can see this kind of nexus of bad conditions, 'something to do with technology', poor working hours or contracts, low pay, kind of all coming together and contriving this really exploitative way of working. And at that time, people were doing quite good valuable work into things like precariousness, but there was quite limited work happening around the technology. And one of the jumping-off points for the book, and it's kind of a wager, I suppose, but it's one that goes back to this old labour theorist, Carter Goodrich, that I cite in the beginning, where he is referring to some some trade unionists who are speaking at a commission in around about the 1920s and he says that, you know, there is a struggle that goes beyond pounds, shillings and pence, and there's an unrest that he refers to as the "straining of man to be free."<sup>[2]</sup> And basically what he's saying is that, you know, you can improve wages and you can maybe improve conditions, but there's still going to be something about the way this work is happening that makes us uncomfortable, and that we think is injurious to interests, or limiting of freedom. And I think that's how I feel. And so I wanted to focus squarely on the technology itself, which really means focusing on how communication, information, power, work within these workplaces. And kind of bracketing, in a way, the kind of precarity preoccupation, and

trying to focus on the actual- like what happens when you digitally mediate a set of social relations that fundamentally are as old as industrial capitalism? But what does that look like now and how does it produce political forms? How does this kind of technical reorganisation of work like produce political forms that are maybe unexpected?

10:31 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

You said before that you're interested in power and how power is exercised and mediated and digitally mediated today. Do you remember, or can you tell us the story of, how did you get interested in power?

10:54 CRAIG GENT

I think because I grew up very poor, and I think when you grow up poor in a town that- so I grew up in Barnsley in South Yorkshire, which was the centre of the miners' strike in the 80s. And even though I didn't grow up through the miners' strike, it's very hard to live in that town and be unaware of this kind of relationship between politics and history and just general social life. So it's kind of like this sort of ambient awareness. But, I mean, I got interested in, like power specifically- actually, it was through initially reading second-wave feminism. This is the real story, I'm gonna level with you, okay?

11:37 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We want the real story, of course!

11:39 CRAIG GENT

We're on the bean bags, I'll give you the real story. Here's the real story. The real story is that when I was young, my household had a lot of domestic violence, and me, my mum and my sister, we went to domestic violence refuge, a women and children's refuge, and whilst we were in the refuge, my mum did an access course so that she could go on to do a degree (she didn't do college or anything like that). And so she got onto this access course, and it was on women's studies. And so she would bring home these videos or bring home these books, and she didn't really have anyone to talk to about it, so she would talk to me about it. And I think for her, understanding power through the lens of patriarchy helped her to understand what we'd collectively gone through. And then me, kind of, just beginning to sort of tip into adolescence at that time, it gave me a kind of framework for understanding gendered power in the world. And then not long afterwards, she got me a book that had three essays in it. One was by Marx and Engels. One was by Che Guevara, and one was by Rosa Luxemburg. And so I just like, devoured this.

12:48 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

The perfect present for teenager in South Yorkshire, yeah. A gameboy and yeah.

12:56 CRAIG GENT

And I was like, okay well the Guevara stuff seems quite exotic and then the Marx and Engels stuff at

the time seemed a bit fusty, but it's actually the Rosa Luxemburg that I really latched onto, and this kind of 'council communism', it used to be called, but this idea of reorganising social relations politically within a locality. And it just sort of took off from there. I mean, that's how I really got into it. But then, I don't know, my first job was a paper round, and I got unfairly sacked from it, and it was like a burning injustice that's motivated me ever since [laughs] and I had no representation, you know, so, yeah, I don't know. It was just there, and then it just developed at some point.

13:41 MICHAEL DIETER

I think there's a lot of interesting aspects to the book that we will get into. How you've written it, the methods that you use, the different styles of writing that you adopt, both theory and different narrative styles. But it makes sense what you're saying in terms of your background, because when you describe certain areas of the UK in your fieldwork, I think there's a real attention to detail, attention to those histories that you're talking about, for instance the miners' strikes, and you do interweave these personal stories as well. Maybe I can invite you to talk about the first warehouse job that you took up that you mentioned. I found that I could relate to that moment myself, not that I worked in a warehouse, but as a student I went through so many different hospitality jobs in all kinds of different contexts, from major global fast food chains to very local cafés to also a kind of flexi-style work, where I was sent around to different cafeterias around the city, including places like - in Australia, we would say, working with the wharfies - that got the dock workers and serving them, and just that range of experiences and the people that I would meet, and just going through these different working conditions, you know, has always stuck with me. I say to my

students, even those experiences stick with me in terms of, like, there's always going to be a week on labour in my introduction course on media. And anyway, I just invite you as well. Like, what brought you to these topics, though, it was some of those experiences as well working and what you sort of saw or encountered in those workplaces?

15:51 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, so I guess if I go back to a similar time in my life- I remember, actually, when I was a PhD student, I was probably teaching on the module that you're referring to at the time, and I sort of presented my seminar group with a list of all of the all of the ways that I'd made money by the time I was 18 on one PowerPoint slide and it just completely filled the slide with all these things. So one of those things was working for a summer in effectively a kind of a warehouse [where] goods would come from High Street stores and they would just be re-tagged with the sale tickets on and sent back out again. And your job basically was to open boxes, scan everything, re-tag everything, box it back up and send it off without stealing anything.

16:47 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So when you started working there, you had already read Marx and Rosa Luxemburg or not?

16:53 CRAIG GENT

[Laughs] Yeah, I had.

16:56 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Because in your book, you really thread in the personal and the theoretical. When you started working there as a young person, how old were you?

17:05 CRAIG GENT

Sixteen.

17:06 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Sixteen? So super young, like a teenager, but a well-read teenager, we must say. Credit to your mother. Did it resonate? Like, were you there like, boxing, unboxing things, thinking, oh, you know, the Communist Manifesto, or, you know, this must be patriarchy. Like how did it resonate?

17:31 CRAIG GENT

That's a super interesting question. I think the thing that surprised me most about it was that it was the first time... I can say it now, I guess I could say it then, but the company was Next, the High Street chain Next, but I wasn't working for Next. I was working with all of their stuff, but the warehouse was run by different company, who was only temporarily in this warehouse for a little while, and they had been contracted by Next to do this thing, and I was actually employed by another third party that was nothing to do with the warehouse whatsoever. And so this is just kind of these entities within entities, within entities. And so it definitely complicated what I would have found in Marx as this sort of sense that you have the working class and the owning class. I do think there's a truth to that, but it definitely complicated the picture. I wasn't yet thinking

about the actual labour process itself, but like the work was-

18:28 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Also you were sixteen.

18:30 CRAIG GENT

No, I know, but like it was obvious to see it. We were grouped onto lines of twelve, and then as far as you could see within the warehouse, you just have these lines that go all the way down and at the end of each one - because there wasn't a- you know, this was before broadband - like there was a supervisor for every single line who was standing at the end with the sellotape. That was their job, to stand with the sellotape for fixing things [laughs] and signing things off. And then every hour or so that person's supervisor would come around. So you begin to see this kind of operation of capital and productivity that isn't really present in the same way [when] working in a shop, for example, where we have like monthly sales targets, but if you hit them [or] you're not going to hit them, whatever, you might get a bonus or not. Whereas in this particular workplace it was really obvious, and it was my first time working with many, many workers who didn't speak much English, for example.

19:42 MICHAEL DIETER

I want to pick up the term that's in the subtitle, algorithmic management. Because what you're describing is already like the these logistical spaces, how much they are now sites of abstraction, forms of automation, new forms of

alienation. Your work in investigating these sites, it intersects and overlaps with a lot of other debates, discussions, concepts, I think of things like digital labour, platform labour, but in your work, you decide to focus on this term, algorithmic management. Why algorithmic management? Why do you zoom in on that? Where does that take you in this research? Why was it important to really be emphasising this?

20 : 30 CRAIG GENT

Well, it's a really good question. And I think that there's really valuable work that's done around platform labour or platform capitalism, and also around digital labour. But I think when I was starting out, I focussed on logistics in this book, and when I was starting out this sort of research strand, really for the reason that it kind of offered a clarity about these technologies, and there's a clear political will around them as well. Whereas, when you see now algorithmic management adopted in offices and things like that, often a lot of the managers who are bringing them in don't really know what they are getting themselves in for and don't necessarily understand the technologies themselves super well. And there's something about logistics that spoke to this sense that they're at the apex of something. But why I focus on algorithmic management rather than- It's fine.

21 : 28 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Michael is still listening, he's just disappeared. You ask questions and then you disappear.

21:35 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

21:35 CRAIG GENT

[Laughs] I should just speak as if you're still there.

21:39 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Well this is part of exploring hybrid space together.

21:42 CRAIG GENT

It's hybrid hosting! [Laughs]

21:44 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Laughs] It's hybrid hosting.

21:45 MICHAEL DIETER

The glitchiness is part of the experience!

21:47 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Exactly, it is the presence and absence...

21:50 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, yeah.

21:50 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Exactly!

21:52 CRAIG GENT

Anyway. So, I think, when I was starting this out, 'digital labour'- it just seems like that term almost really speaks to a moment in history that I think we're probably just beyond now.

22:10 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah.

22:10 CRAIG GENT

Like I struggle to think of any labour that couldn't be described as digital in some way, or wouldn't have a digital-

22:10 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Like it's too general a term.

22:15 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, it's very diffuse, and what I would see around that literature would be more and more typographies of trying to break down different types of digital labour and that kind of stuff. And I'm just not sure how useful that category is now. Because fundamentally, it's about labour. Like that's the point of trying to describe it, to say something about labour. So why not just say something about labour? I don't mean that to sound facetious, but like it just seemed kind of-

22:49 MICHAEL DIETER

No, that makes sense. But platform labour, I mean, that takes you in maybe a different direction but yours is interesting - I'll just add to this, I think - because when I read the book, I got the sense - I'm not sure whether you say it so explicitly, you possibly do at some point - but you look at these spaces like Amazon warehouses and other logistical, highly automated warehousing contexts and shop floors, but there's this sense that the kind of work going on there is coming for all of us, in a way, and this is why those sites with the intensification of those processes are really important to be paying attention to. And there's also this sense as well, when I read it, that the internet really has become this global logistics system. And also, then, therefore, it makes sense to focus on these sites. You know, what is behind the interface of even our web browser is this global logistics chain. I think that comes through really strongly. But, yeah, maybe I'm answering your question, but I think still, like, why algorithmic management within those resonances that your case study has? Like, where do you go with that concept?

24:19 CRAIG GENT

I'm going to backtrack a little bit and say the reason I didn't settle on platform labour, so to speak, is because I think that, particularly when you're speaking about actually existing workplaces, [it] gets so quickly tied to the gig economy. And it became really clear to me that this is not just a gig economy kind of issue.

24:41 MICHAEL DIETER

You look at that as well [inaudible]

24:42 CRAIG GENT

I look at that as well, yeah, because it's important to do so, but I try to expand that out-

24:47 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Sorry to interrupt you but my week 10 brain probably, but I'm not the only one who's tired in this room or in the world of our global audience. So what kind of work environments are you considering in the book specifically, just to put first things first.

25:09 CRAIG GENT

Yeah. So I look at e-commerce warehouses, I look at a sort of logistical hub that sort of sits behind a High Street supermarket, there's online shopping departments. So these are the people who like fulfill your order if you buy groceries online, they go around and pick it for you. There's a food delivery platform in there, there's Amazon warehouse in there, there's some delivery drivers [of] different types as well. And so I tried to sort of capture a part of the logistical supply-

25:39 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So it's mostly logistics.

25:49 CRAIG GENT

Yes.

25:50 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So this was your criteria of inclusion, so to speak, you wanted to look at the logistics, and how would the logistics work, or what is sort of behind the apparently immaterial, smooth surface onto which we click when we buy something.

26:12 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, sure, yeah.

26:13 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Like, there's a world of workers that we sort of tend to forget. Okay. And then we're saying we are talking about algorithmic management. So it's not really platform labour, it's not digital labour, it's algorithmic management. And so to go back to Michael's question-

26:32 MICHAEL DIETER

Well maybe another one here, just to make it clear, what is management?

26:36 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah.

26:36 MICHAEL DIETER

People mention to me like, 'Oh, this is a decision from management.' Or, you know-

26:41 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We need three microphones [inaudible]

26:42 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah [laughs]. People will, you know, they'll say to me, 'Oh, this is coming from management.' Or 'This is...' but, like, what is management? Like why do we need to pay attention to that? Maybe that's the first step. Like, what for you is management all about?

26:55 CRAIG GENT

Well, I think, fundamentally, what I think management is about is... So labour is a commodity, but it's a commodity unlike other commodities, in that when it's purchased in the world, you hire someone, you're hiring their potential for work, not the actual product of their work, yet. So in the process of working, you have to actualize labour power. You have to actualize the potential.

27:23 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So you see the Marxist in you here.

27:27 CRAIG GENT

But it's a useful language, you know.

27:30 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Of course.

27:30 CRAIG GENT

So I think fundamentally what management is about is ensuring that your work has an output, and that when you're paid wages, that something is coming from that. And so, yeah, fundamentally, I think that's what the point of management is. I mean, I trace a bit of a history that sort of underlies algorithmic management, specifically in this [book], because I take your point about the internet and stuff, but it's important for me to locate the origins of algorithmic management, if we want to put it like that, not with the computer revolution of the 70s, but more like the bureaucratic revolution within work in the 1910s, 1920s. So I start off with [Frederick Winslow] Taylor, because I do think that we're in a fundamentally Taylorist paradigm here. And Taylor's big insight - he's often associated with piece work and stuff like that, and wages for piece work breaking down the labour process in this way - but his real insight was to do with power and communication. His observation, and this was a man who really hated organized agitators, as he called them, but his real observation was that owners of factories would hire workers in to do a job. And the workers, it's not that they would kind of go slow or sabotage or anything like that, but they wouldn't work to their full potential because they knew they didn't have to, because, fundamentally, they knew more about the work process than the manager did. The manager was there to to pay them, and then to get the product and not to really interfere with the actual happening of work. And so his idea was to separate the conception and execution of work. I would say that's the fundamental development, and that becomes central to so much of management thinking subsequently throughout

the 20th century, and it happens in different ways. And through the book, I talk about humanistic forms that this takes and trying to harness the social aspects of the workplace. And I also talk about Japanese management thinking, where these ideas, in some sense, are coming together. But I think that there's a sort of cybernetic turn that happens in the 20th century, where feedback loops can be built into the work process itself, and also then with computerization subsequently, management, productivity-thinking no longer has to necessarily detour through representation and can instead focus on these systems of sped up or automatic calculation. And where I try and get to it is that I think one of the things that's novel about algorithmic management is that- and we should probably say what it is, but it's basically a system where workers can be instructed, tracked, monitored, guided, assessed, allocated within their work by an algorithmic system without necessarily having human managerial input, and it will happen on a real time basis-

31:12 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Can you give some examples, like, I think one classic example is the bracelet of Amazon workers that calculates the time they spend in the toilet. It has become almost common sense, at least in my bubble, that - I don't know how representative it is - but can you tell us some telling examples of how these, or how the algorithm, works as a manager?

31:45 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, okay. So the one of the first examples I give in the book is a worker called Lorenzo. Lorenzo works at a logistics hub that services a major

airport, services Heathrow, that kind of Heathrow industrial corridor, and he's in the back-end hub that is going to organize produce for going out to supermarkets and stores all across London. And he starts his work day by entering the workplace and gets given a handheld scanner, and he scans it, and it's then assigned to him for the day. There's an interface on the scanner, and he calls it a wristwatch, but it's basically like a big thing strapped to his forearm. It weighs about 450 grams, so it's quite heavy. It's like a small tablet, almost, but with buttons on his forearm, and then it has a wire that goes down to his finger, where there's a ring scanner, so it clips onto the end of his finger-

32:52 MICHAEL DIETER

It's a Motorola device, right?

32:53 CRAIG GENT

The Motorola WT4000.

32:52 MICHAEL DIETER

It's somehow a bit iconic. I did some Googling and it's, it seems to have-

32:56 CRAIG GENT

It became iconic, yeah, actually I should say after my research, but it became iconic because Banksy put it in the Dismaland exhibition. But there are others, the Motorola MC3000 if you really want to go down it. I mean, really, we should have hired one or something for the stream and played

around with it. But, yeah, so like, he gets one of these, and it tells him where to go, what to do, what to pick. It doesn't actually tell him his productivity. In some places like Amazon, it'll tell you your productivity, [it] might give you a countdown timer, so it might give you 12 seconds to locate and pick the next item. And so you're working in these micro-loops of productivity. But in his case, it tells him where to go and what to do, but it tracks him as well. If he goes to the bathroom, that's 'time-off-task', and so it brings his productivity down. At the end of the day, he kind of hangs up his scanner and he leaves, but then in the morning the next day, he wakes up to a text message that's automated from the productivity system that tells him whether his shift for that day is confirmed or cancelled based on his performance the previous day. And confirmed or cancelled is whether he's above or below, I think it's 92%. 92% of what, he doesn't know. But he's either above or below 92% of the desired performance. And his shift can be punitively cancelled at moment's notice because he's an agency worker on a zero-hours contract. Now, interestingly, he doesn't have to be on a zero-hours contract, but because he's an agency worker, and that's very normal in that sector, the union branch at that workplace doesn't want to know him, essentially, because agency workers - because they're temporary - don't count towards the calculation for recognition agreements, and so fundamentally, he doesn't have any actual representation in his work either.

35:01 MICHAEL DIETER

You've already touched on something else I wanted to ask in this response, which is about your methods. So I think we have a good idea of the topics and the issues and questions that you're interested in the book and research project, but maybe you could just tell us a little bit [about] how you went about researching this. You mentioned Lorenzo. There's some field work, but I think that I just invite you, as well, as you're talking through that, to reflect on if you're researching these conditions, what are the methodological challenges? Why did you do it the way that you did? And what are the maybe bigger political questions as well that are raised around methodology for this kind of research?

35:56 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Before you answer this articulated question, I have an easier one.

36:03 MICHAEL DIETER

[Laughs]

36:04 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I'm like the lay-woman today, Michael is admittedly more prepared than me. I'm also concerned that maybe these jeans are too short. But anyhow, so what you told about Lorenzo and the algorithm, it's quite brutal. It's quite violent, right? Because you have, like, an object judging you, and you don't know what kind of criteria this object works with or this subject works with. So at least when other humans are involved, you can say, 'Okay, I have to be at least as good as Chris or at least as good as Cecilia. Okay, I can live with that.' But you are 92% of what and how would Lorenzo or other participants in your study, react to it? Were they angry at the algorithm, were they subdued? How do you react; what kind of affective relationship you have with the cyberboss?

37:17 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, okay.

37:22 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Sorry, I stole your question. But then we talk about methods. I was very curious.

37:26 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, I'll try to get into them both. One of the big methodological problems, a really obvious one, is just access to these workplaces. Not least if you want to access them literally through the companies, it's just probably not going to happen unless there's something really in it for them. And accessing the workers is hard because a lot of the jobs are very high turnover, or people feel at-risk and so on. I would say that there's also methodological challenges, if you really wanted to get into like, okay, but what is the data? How is it calculated? How do we think about these types of data? Because the data isn't just the productivity of scanning, increasingly, it's the monitoring of movement, for example, or in some workplaces even experiments with affective algorithmic management and so on. There is, I think, a bit of a movement around 'explainability' and opening black boxes and things like that. And I maintain that I don't really think that you could hope to isolate any particular algorithmic function or line of code that would yield the explanatory power to explain the new politics of the workplace. And so I'm okay with speaking to the workers and getting a sense of what they understand by the algorithm,

how they interact with it day-to-day, which is also not what you would get from a patent or something, even though those things can be - you know, patents for these actual wearables - can be instructive, because they can sort of teach you about some of the affordances or the desires that underlie them, for example. And I did a bit of that as well. But what was the second question?

39:30 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

How Lorenzo feels...

39:31 CRAIG GENT

Oh, yeah. I really wanted to get into the subjective experience of working with these things, or what Mark Fisher calls the political phenomenology. I wanted to get into the political phenomenology of the workplace. And I found that algorithmic management has a number of effects. Obviously effects on things like labor allocation, as I just mentioned, but in some workplaces it has an effect on people's conception of time. If you have 12 seconds to pick something and that just repeats and that is your day - 12 seconds, 12 seconds, 12 seconds - it's almost like a state of flow, but a flow that is harnessed for the productivity machine, and for the ends of the employer, fundamentally. So yeah, disrupting people's sense of time, disrupting people's sense of space - particularly in a warehouse context, people are working within very high stacks. If you imagine the biggest library that you've been in, very high stacks. So you can only see in two directions at any given time, and the organization of workers by the algorithm should be such that workers are not actually

encountering each other. It's like, Pac Man, right? You shouldn't be going down your aisle and [finding that] someone's coming back the other way, because the aisles are narrow, and that's going to create congestion. So, instead, you're being sent in the same direction, or you're far away from each other. You're picking items that are continually near. I know that in the BBC [documentaries] people have talked about having to run for items and stuff. But really people should be moving relatively little [distance] to get to the next item. And to facilitate this, Amazon has a random stow system where a shelf will have a CD and a toilet brush and a Christmas tree all on one shelf. Because it's much easier to pick out a CD from a shelf [containing] a Christmas tree and a toilet brush and a sofa cushion than it is to pick out a CD from a shelf of CDs. They don't want workers doing that. So they stow the items randomly to facilitate this. And so, within that, people would say, 'I'm aware that I'm in a very big workplace with 200 people working at any given time, but I don't actually see anybody. I might see a worker somewhere in the distance, cut[ting] across the aisle somewhere, but I'm not actually interacting with anyone. And so also - this is not just Amazon, but many other places - there's a real reduction in the sociality of a workplace, and an emphasis on redirecting communication that we might to happen between people, but redirecting it through the device instead. Now obviously things like being told not to talk at work is not novel to Amazon, but I think it was striking that it came up time and again; people said that they had never had a job where they talk less. And it's worth saying that all of these things, the ability to be in physical space with your co-workers, the ability to have some

degree of time to have a conversation, and the ability to actually converse are all prerequisites for organizing politically. [Ask] anyone who's ever done any kind of Organizer Training 101, the first thing is speak to your colleagues, find out where your colleagues are in your workplace. All of these things, they're actually borderline impossible within the workplace in these places.

43:18 MICHAEL DIETER

I want to ask about something else that I found interesting. I think it's part of a broader conversation about the impact that the algorithms have on organizations. But algorithms also change management, right?

43:31 CRAIG GENT

Yeah.

43:32 MICHAEL DIETER

And that's one of the discussions, I think, that's really interesting in your book. So can you talk a little bit about, like, what happens to management with this kind of the rise of the algorithm?

43:45 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, so you see this - I describe it as like a reorganization of authority within the workplace - where the algorithm itself, or the idea of the algorithm, or sometimes just 'the system', is elevated and bestowed with its own power, both perceived and in a sense, a real power, like a protocol power. It's constantly updating and its nature demands that people have to work to it in

certain ways, and with it in certain ways. But this is interesting because it complicates this maybe traditional sense that we might have where workers are taking instruction from managers or from supervisors. And I say in the book that supervisors in particular, it's interesting what happens to them, because the traditional epistemological function of supervisors - of having this oversight and knowing more than other people - is completely hollowed out. And were it not for the fact that they do mainly still reserve some basic disciplinary functions, you know, they get to shout at people or whatever, and that's fine. They have a monopoly on - what's the Hannah Arendt thing? Monopoly on state violence - they have a monopoly on shouting at people in the workplace, yeah, disciplinary power, you know. But were it not for that, they might be described as kind of like subvisors, because they are observing and seeing the workings of the algorithm almost from the same point of view as workers. And their role changes to be almost like a kind of pastoral role to help people to work with the algorithm better, rather than-

45 : 42 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Like coaches, in a way.

45 : 43 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, rather than to discipline them based on the algorithm always. In one workplace, it was an Amazon warehouse, the person I spoke to was a packer, and he said, 'Look, does anybody hit the target?' He spoke to all of the co-workers that he could around him. He was in the rare position that

he's stationary every day, so that he can shout across to the next person. 'Does anybody hit this target? Because I'm not hitting the target. Nobody hits the target.' So he came to the conclusion [that] the target that we have for our work must not be the target that Amazon has for its actual fulfillment of orders, because Amazon does fulfill its orders - we've experienced it, it's very effective as a logistical process. But they're just giving us this target to discipline us. So he spoke to the supervisor and said, 'Look, this target business, where do I stand with it?' And he said, 'Well, you know, the supervisor just gives me some tips for how best to pack a box or how best to optimize myself towards the algorithm.' And that this is fundamentally what his main interactions with the supervisors are, like the giving of tips and so on. But I also think that it reorganizes management in ways that are more politically interesting still. I talk about managerial distantiation in the book. The algorithmic system and the use of devices and interfaces both allows the possibility of a physical distance from the shop floor for managers, in that they can not be present because the workers are being supervised by the interface. That's [the workers'] first line of management. And so there are few [managers] actually present, but also in terms of the labor process, they're less involved with the actual giving out of instructions. And so this does a couple of things. It means that actually, managers don't always know what is happening, or what's being allocated where is being decided by the system. But it also gives them a kind of plausible deniability, and that if something is going wrong, it's not the manager to blame. It's the system. And actually the system knows best, because it's an authority in itself. And so this

mantra came up in a lot of different workplaces of 'just trust the system'.

48:22 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah. So I want to know if there's some questions from the audience, whether online, offline, half and half. Of course, you've been talking about, it's a slightly depressing picture.

48:48 CRAIG GENT

[Laughs]

48:49 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I'm sure there is also the part on tactics of resistance. I'm sort of a Foucauldian, so wherever there's power, there must be also some patterns of resistance. And I know that in the book, you talk about it. So if you want to know how to resist the algorithm, buy the book, read the book. But, you know, when we talk about work, we really talk about the wellbeing of people, the relationship with power, the relationship of solidarity with colleagues, the opportunity, the kind of social and personal relationships that one establishes, as well as how control is exercised. And I think that this idea of 'the system' is quite interesting, because this is very disembodied power. I mean, the power has always been kind of systemic, right? I mean, it has never been, at least in modern times, fully embodied in one individual. But I think this is even more evident now. And of course it poses the question of how to resist this kind of power. And it's interesting how it is, in a way, the risks of stabilizing for individuals, so that supervisor or human managers become almost like your pulse, like, 'Okay, I coach you into coping with the algorithm.' So that was me feeling the time so that people can gather their ideas. Do we have some questions online view? It's very difficult for me. You were right.

50:34 CRAIG GENT

Come in, come in.

50:34 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I'm now in the screen. No, I'm not in the streaming anyway. So Matías from Hull. I just need to go here anyway. Okay, stealing the front of the scene. Hi.

50:49 CRAIG GENT

Hi.

50:50 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

So Matías from home is asking, if, beyond this expansion of algorithmic management from logistics to society, such in the social factory, are there inverse movements too? And I asked if was about movements of resistance, because this is the way I intended. But actually I think I misunderstood, because the second part of the question, as you can see here, is thinking about platforms that copy features of leisure or non-work platforms to analyse and monitor productivity of weird variables within work environments.

51:26 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

What an audience we have!

51:28 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

I mean, yeah, this is why.

51:34 CRAIG GENT

This is a super interesting question, and not one that I tackle head-on, but there is a relationship. I would point you to the work of someone like Phoebe Moore, where there's a relationship between the use of these management-of-the-self technologies, like Fitbits and like the Quantified Self, and like health tracking apps, sleep tracking apps, and this relationship between that whole industry of health tracking - and some people see it as social tracking, Strava for your runs, and things like that - and work technologies. That's a real kind of bleed that's happening. I don't know if it's relevant to the question or not, but it's also the case that, particularly with some app-driven algorithmic management, there are ostensibly non-work functions sometimes built into them, like playful functions or gamified functions that are there to encourage some social investment, whether it's leaderboards or being able to compare statistics and things like that with your co-workers. I spoke to some people for who worked for a food delivery platform, and once they had decided they were going to finish [their shift], they would actually cycle out of their way to go and meet with other riders to compare their stats as a fun thing to do and compete with each other, you know, in this slightly sort of machismo kind of way, sort of see who could outperform each other, which is very much like people comparing their personal bests with Strava or CrossFit or something like that, but they were comparing their personal bests with Deliveroo.

53:32 MICHAEL DIETER

I'll just pass the microphone. Question from the audience.

53:35 CRAIG GENT

We should say, by the way, we've had playing in the background this game - because I just saw 'insurrection' flash up behind us - To Build a Better Mousetrap. It's this kind of abstract management game that has a lot to do with algorithmic management. We should say props to Timothy [Gawayá], who was like, playing in the background.

53:58 MICHAEL DIETER

If I keep looking off screen as well...

54:01 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

It was just a follow up thing. It didn't deserve, I think, even the microphone. But given that you were talking about races to compare [at] the end of the day results, more than the Fitbit thing, it reminds me more of that Burawoy research that they did around the piece work, and how that was concealing somehow the control, no?

54:32 CRAIG GENT

Mm, yeah.

54:32 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

It's so interiorized somehow, that level of control that, yeah, they want to show off how well they did. That's the job done. You don't even need the apps anymore.

54:44 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, completely.

54:45 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Well, you do them to just continue that game-like type of ambient and environment. But yeah. And my question has always been, I wonder, you know, how actually skilled the designers of those devices and control mechanisms, digital algorithms, were in thinking back to piece work and thinking back to the game attraction, the game element of it. I find quite scary.

55:19 CRAIG GENT

I mean, I completely agree. There's a bit in the book where I take some inspiration from Natasha Dow Schüll, who researched on the design of casinos and slot machines and things like that. And this sort of, well, *Addiction By Design* is name of the book. But this almost psychological hacking happens [in order] to get the job done, as you say. And to go back to the other question of management, these technologies are really about achieving a certainty of result. That's the idea. Workers can be many things. They can be really productive. They can also be lazy. They can have good days and bad days. They can chat to each other, they can have fun. They can be serious. They can be too depressed to work. They can be all sorts of things. And so [many] of these

technologies, they're trying to conceal all that and trying to just get a uniform output that is measurable and trackable. And, it doesn't have to look the same every day, but as long as you can track it and model it and predict it, then that is the job done.

56:17 MICHAEL DIETER

I think there's so many other things that we could talk about with your reading of algorithmic management. I think there's also interesting observations about how it, in a way, reorganizes ignorance as well, and how it really privileges performance. But I think to move things more towards a conclusion and to pick up the question that Carolina asked about tactics, I think we can go a little bit over time, given that we started late. But to wrap things up, let's talk a little bit about where you see the potential for political intervention in this whole situation. When I read it, I was really quite struck by, in your book, your knowledge and reflections on the role of unions when it comes to interventions in this area, and also your historical accounts of why unions have maybe struggled to think about technology, or to really consider that within their modes of intervention. I was hoping you could talk a little bit about that, and then, because - this is how I read the book - this is part of your intervention, to look at that broad landscape and the things that you're emphasizing, like this lived experience on the work floor, the importance of technology, the effects it has, thinking of technology also as a system that's reorganizing labor and so on, I see it as you're you're making a contribution to this. Like, what are the possibilities here? I'm making a bit of a statement now, rather than a question. But can you expand a little bit on how you see the role of unions when it comes to this situation, how you see the kind of contribution you're wanting to make in this book, for how people that are

involved in labour politics might think differently about what's going on here?

58:50 CRAIG GENT

Yeah. So I remember actually having this minor tussle with my editor, John Merrick, who I'm grateful for. He gave so much to the book, so if you're watching, John, I appreciate you. But he won't mind me saying that we had a small back and forth about [a passage where] I said that in the society where we have to work in order to live, unions are 'basically a good thing'. And he crossed out 'basically' and said they're a good thing. And I said, 'No, I mean to be slightly equivocal there.' Because anyone who's ever spent time in trade union politics knows how imperfect that can be. And even in good unions, there can be good and bad ideas, and good and bad strategies, and people who are a fucking nightmare. It just happens. And there are also good and bad unions as well. Like, I will happily say that I think Usdaw are a bad union. Usdaw is the union that represents mainly shop workers in this country, and they, certainly in the supermarket sector, are one of the biggest unions there. And, you know, we just had a massive pandemic where public opinion of supermarket workers and public sympathy for supermarket workers was never higher, and people really felt that they were essential workers, almost on a par with nurses and doctors. And their members were coming down with Covid, left, right and centre, taking it to their families and all sorts, and they managed to win nothing. They won nothing throughout that whole time, like there was the perfect opportunity to win anything, and they didn't win anything! And I think that's bewildering.

And it's interesting that when I have this conversation about the book, particularly among people [who are] thinking about tech and digital media, digital mediation and stuff, it's always surprising to me [that] people will talk about informational capitalism and stuff like that, but actually unions don't figure much at all in the conversation. Like, actual unions don't really figure as the actual political vehicles that we might think of for making change happen. When you speak to people who think about management and the organization of work, unions come up a lot more, but I think there's a reluctance to be critical often, because people who think about unions are acutely aware that they have been under attack for 40 years or more. I'm making no concession to that whatsoever. But as someone who has been in this world, and organized both within and without of unions, and has this kind of 'one foot in, one foot out' politics, an autonomist politics around labor, I do think there is room for improvement. And I am sympathetic to the idea that, well, we have to organize in unions because it's what we have - they are something that we have, I think it's important to say that, and I'm not misty-eyed about them, or nostalgic particularly. I know I said the stuff about the miners strike and that, but I'm more interested in the future. But trade unions are really bad when it comes to technology. They're really bad. They don't want to be seen as anti-technology by any stretch because they think it just consigns them to the historical dust bin. So they're really reluctant to just be anti-technology. They often buy into this narrative, which is a management narrative, of like, we can all share the benefit of the technology. I'm doing a paper at the European Trade Union Institute next year, I just

found out, and it's called 'Stop trying to make sharing the benefit happen: why getting real with technology means getting real with management'. So that will go down like a sick sandwich. We'll see. But I just feel like it needs to be said, like someone needs to say it, someone who's on side needs to say it. And so, in the book, to go back to resistance question. I completely agree with you, Carolina, where there is power, there's resistance. In actual fact, I think that algorithmic management comes about because of the power of workers and in response to them, and I identify ways that workers, quite of their own accord, are resisting these technologies through things like slow downs or through intentional mistakes, what one participant called 'fuckery', or snooping or skiving, and finding ways that they can do this in such a way that's often undetected and actually invokes some of the strategies that someone like James C Scott talks about in relation to nascent anti-colonial struggles, because it's like a high risk environment and the consequences are severe. So how do you organize in that context? And I think some people have read it as a fetishization of micro-resistance, which I don't think is fair, but I do think there's a case for broadening the activist or organizing repertoire, and I think it probably needs to both be prepared to take on questions of technology and management, and probably stop recognizing the right to manage which gets put into every recognition agreement, boilerplate, as if it's a natural law that the employer has the right to manage, [when in fact] that's a massive concession. And I think a lot of unions who do want to do good work on technology, increasingly, because they are changing on it, and I should recognize that, but they will still try to hang their

concerns on health and safety or data rights and these quite narrow ledges, rather than actually tackling the problem of, look, this is injurious to workers. It's making work undignified. This is what actual workers are saying about these technologies. We could do something about it. It demands a political response, and that's not currently forthcoming.

1:05:09 MICHAEL DIETER

I think this is a good actually point to wrap up on. There's so many other things that I would have loved to talk to you about, and with you about, and I'm sure that we'll have that occasion, just not on stream.

1:05:20 CRAIG GENT

If CDI-TV ever wants to do a Cyberboss series in the future...

1:05:25 MICHAEL DIETER

You know, the things that you're talking about remind me of [for example] the history of participatory design in Scandinavia, I think, is a good point to go with what you're saying about how do we think about the design of technology from the ground up, with workers, as co-participants really not subject to management in advance. And I would love an opportunity to push you a bit further too on where these micropolitical practices go when you scale them up, and what barriers do they hit? But I think we're going to leave it there.

1:06:12 CRAIG GENT

I mean, I do explain that in the book so people can... we don't want to spoil everything, right?

1:06:18 MICHAEL DIETER

We spoiled quite a bit, yeah, but...

1:06:25 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Inaudible] page 180 and then just like that [inaudible]

1:06:34 MICHAEL DIETER

Another way into the book is to read the Epilogue, the three-page Epilogue on AI, I think is a good starting point for the book.

1:06:44 CRAIG GENT

Interesting. See it circulates like a feedback loop.

1:06:48 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, well, I think that's it's a good intervention there as well that hopefully in another stream we get a chance to get into the challenges around AI and creative labor. But thank you, Craig, for talking about your book.

1:07:04 CRAIG GENT

Thank you for having me.

1:07:05 MICHAEL DIETER

I thoroughly enjoyed reading it. I didn't get an opportunity to just say it's wonderfully written.

1:07:05 CRAIG GENT

Thank you.

1:07:07 MICHAEL DIETER

So I say it now, and I love the different styles. There's some deep theoretical engagement. There's some nice narratives around your- I guess you would call them, the people that you're speaking with, your co-investigators in the workers inquiry. Yeah, there's some great stories there about their experiences as well. So yep, check out the book. Get a copy of it one way or another.

1:07:47 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We should have said all these flattering things to you before starting right? This is another lesson that I'll take home for the next stream.

1:07:59 CRAIG GENT

I like that you kept it till the end. It meant I didn't know where I stood all the way through it.

1:08:04 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Laughs]

1:08:04 CRAIG GENT

It probably made me better for it. It meant I couldn't get complacent, you know.

1:08:09 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

This is a very nice book, very nice cover also. So if you don't want to read it, you can kind of display it, and it's still work. No, jokes apart, Cyberboss, Craig Gent, thank you very much for being here, and stay tuned with CDI-TV, because we have more episodes to come. And thank you very much. Now I'm going to collapse somewhere, so maybe I can just collapse here. Bye bye.

1:08:40 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Claps, cheer]

## FOOTNOTES

1. Craig Gent, *Cyberboss: The Rise of Algorithmic Management and the New Struggle for Control at Work*, London: Verso, 2014. ↑
2. Carter L. Goodrich, *The Frontier of Control: A Study in British Workshop Politics*, London: Pluto, 1975, p. 3 ↑



SPEAKERS

**Carolina Bandinelli**  
**Computer**  
**Michael Dieter**  
**Roman Dziadkiewicz**  
**Embodied Audience**  
**Noortje Marres**  
**Valentina Tanni**

RECORDED

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liminality  
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technology  
user-generated content  
digital mythology  
internet folklore  
digital art.

GUESTS

Valentina Tanni

00:03 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Two, one, live. Okay, I think we're live. I think we're live. So welcome everybody. We are here for the first CDI stream episode of 2025, so this is pretty good. I don't know why everything has to be framed like this new year thing, this is a new year thing. I'm just repeating some stereotypes. My beginning of the year has been quite awful, I must say. Yeah, I've really struggled. So it feels already like December, but today is a good day because I was very much looking forward to welcoming Valentina Tanni to our episode.

00:48 VALENTINA TANNI

Thank you very much. Thanks for having me.

00:51 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Applause]

00:51 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, clap. Do clap. Yeah, of course! We can clap so that you know we do have a real embodied audience, like full humans. And also, of course, welcome to our global audience, tuned in from wherever in the world and in the galaxy. Welcome to the people who are now entering the room, and feel free to grab a beer. And also I was doing dry January, I was telling Michael, I was doing dry January, and I'm interrupting it for the stream.

01:29 VALENTINA TANNI

Special occasion.

01:30 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Special occasion. Because also what I really like in doing this stream is that I can drink while working. That is sort of a lifetime achievement. And today I experienced another lifetime achievement. So we met with Valentina and Rom from UKRAiNATV, StreamArtNetwork, who's with us today. And we traveled up to Coventry to reach the University of Warwick, where CDI-TV is based. And I've never met Rom in person, and he said, 'Oh, I've seen you on TV'. Guys, 'I've seen you on TV'. So I am one person to whom someone said, 'I've seen you on TV'. So this is pretty, you know, high-level achievement. Now without further ado, let's start the streaming for real. Well, the conversation with Valentina for real. I should remind you that I'm Carolina Bandinelli from the University of Warwick, and here we have Michael Dieter from the University of Warwick, and here we are, Centre for Digital Inquiry TV, CDI-TV, in collaboration with the Media Lab. Okay, so today we really do have nice visuals. And how could [it] have been otherwise when we have Valentina Tanni? Valentina Tanni, when it comes to visuals, is really the person you'd like to talk with. I realized it yesterday when I had the honour of going to the Tate Modern with her. I was so happy, I was like a child, tell me everything.

03:04 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

03:14 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Because Valentina is an art historian, a curator. She had been working in the art world and the international contemporary art scene for over 10 years. She's an author, a researcher, and currently she's working at the John Cabot University and NABA University in Italy. And throughout these different projects, what she's really been interested in is the internet cultures. So in a way, here we have someone that combines the critical lenses of art history, so the tools to really analyze the visual cultures and technology, and indeed the internet. So she's an art historian, she's passionate about internet cultures. And she's also one of those people - I'm not one of

those people, but I have the impression you're one of those people - that were really there, also Michael you're one of those people, and I feel kind of deficient compared to you, because you were really there into the early internet. So-

04:31 VALENTINA TANNI

That is true.

04:32 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Right?

04:32 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah, yeah.

04:34 MICHAEL DIETER

Chronically online.

04:34 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Chronically online.

04:35 VALENTINA TANNI

From the very beginning.

04:37 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So you had the possibility of witnessing, in person. You've grown up with the internet. You've seen how the space of the internet developed. What has become, what will become, perhaps. So I suppose, I guess, this is also why you decided to write this book, *Exit*

*Reality*, about which we're gonna talk a little more today, but tell me about your interest in internet cultures. <sup>[1]</sup>

05:08 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes, that's a long story, but I will try to keep it short. As you said, I've lived on the internet since the very beginning. When I got my first internet connection at home, it was 1997 I believe, and it was this very life-changing moment for me. I also talk about that in the introduction of the book. And for the younger audience here, I should mention that the internet in 1997 was a very, I don't know, archaic kind of technology. It was not that exciting. It was not like the kind of very rich, diverse internet that we have nowadays. It was kind of small and maybe seen from our point of view not that exciting, but for us it was already hypnotizing. It was a life-changing experience. So I got sucked in completely. And I wasn't a computer user before the internet. I mean, not that much. Maybe I played some video games before, but I wasn't a computer kid at all, but the internet changed me completely. I was around maybe 20 when I started going online, and I was studying art history.

06:34 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, and do you remember what it was about this internet thing that instantly drew you in?

06:40 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah, the possibilities. Like infinite possibilities. Like this portal to everything, anything, this idea of just going online and see what you can find. And also talk to people from all over the world. For us now, that's a given. Like, it's completely normal, talking to people all over the world. But at that time, it was crazy. It was like the future, it was science fiction. We just went on, like in the first few months the fun thing to do [was] just enter random chat rooms and talk to people. Like, where are

you from and what you do? Who's there? Like this sense of exploration. Like the world is open. We have this portal. And also, I was studying art history, contemporary art history in Rome. And also we got access for the first time to libraries and images. For example, for an art history student, finding images of artworks before the internet, it was very difficult, like you had to spend a lot of time in libraries and sometimes travel or ask other people to send you images. It was not easy.

07:58 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So you were 20, and you were...

08:00 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah.

08:00 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...studying art history...

08:01 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes.

08:01 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...and you discover the internet...

08:03 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes.

08:04 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...and somehow these two things, art history and the internet...

08:07 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes.

08:08 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...had accompanied you. Their entanglement had...

08:10 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah.

08:10 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...accompanied you till now. [Laughs]

08:12 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah, I usually say that I have a pre-modern life and a post-modern life. Like that object like completely changed - and also completely changed the course of my studies because - this will sound strange, but I was planning to graduate in medieval art history at the time...

08:35 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Mm!

08:35 VALENTINA TANNI

...so I kind of pivoted.

08:38 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Kind of a shift.

08:39 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes, and I started to study contemporary art a little bit more. And I had an amazing professor at the time, Silvia Bordini. She was one of the very first scholars in Italy to take media art seriously. So she introduced me to video art, to interactive art, in general to this idea that technology could be used to make art. And I graduated with a thesis about internet art, and that's the beginning of the story.

09:08 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Because for someone that is not already familiar with internet art and the different entanglements between art and technology, it may not be that immediate, that obvious to understand: okay, what does [the] internet have to do with art and with art history? And I think this is something that in both your books, *Memesthetics* and *Exit Reality*, emerges in one of those ways that like - of course, why didn't I think about it, before this is super clear! - because, at least the way I understood it (so we are getting a little more into the book now) the internet creates a whole aesthetic in which we are immersed. We see things. It is a landscape. We can think about it as a visual landscape, as a space that has its own colours, its own codes, its own shapes and we are constantly immersed in this flow of image, and without even realizing it, we acquire those aesthetic codes. The subtitle of Valentina's book reads Vaporwave, Backrooms, Weirdcore, and Other Landscapes Beyond the Threshold. So when I read vaporware, backrooms and weirdcore, I had to Google them all because I didn't understand what they were about. Then I Googled them, and I was like, of course, I know it. I want a T-shirt with this image...

10:40 MICHAEL DIETER

Some of them are behind us now [gesturing to the green-screen video]

10:46 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
And some of them- exactly.

10:51 VALENTINA TANNI  
Yes.

10:51 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
Some of them are behind us now. So that's a sense in which what  
Valentina's book does-

11:04 VALENTINA TANNI  
I'm slowly, like... I need to get back [adjusting the beanbag]

11:05 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
[Inaudible] yeah.

11:05 VALENTINA TANNI  
[Inaudible] in position because...

11:06 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
[Inaudible]

11:08 VALENTINA TANNI  
[Laughs]

11:08 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

But yeah. So there's a sense in which your book, in a way, is able to pinpoint and name and make sense of some of the things that are part of our space-time, of our experience. So can you tell us something more about our experience? I would say 'of our reality'. However, maybe it's something different because this book is titled *Exit Reality*. So perhaps we can start from the title.

11:35 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes, so the book is my attempt to investigate and analyse internet aesthetics in general, and all the words that you mentioned that are in the subtitles are just some of the most popular, relevant internet aesthetics that we have seen emerging in the past decade or so, decade and a half maybe. And yes, I felt the need to investigate not only what artists, like professional artists, are doing with technology and around technology, but I felt the need to investigate also what general or normal users are doing online, so so-called 'user generated content'. That's more of a marketing term, but I like 'amateur' content online. I am interested in investigating what users are doing. In fact, the previous book was about memes, right?

12:39 MICHAEL DIETER

Mm.

12:39 VALENTINA TANNI

So it's connected in that sense. And as you were mentioning, these images, sounds, text, all these cultural expressions that people produce, collectively and spontaneously online, they say a lot about us as a society. They are kind of a way to understand our contemporary moment and the way we see the world. Like, I tend to consider art - I mean, art is a lot of things and does a lot of different things, but one of the things that I think art does is - and that is valid for amateur art and professional art also, it doesn't really matter - but what art

does is to kind of help us understand the cultural atmosphere, because sometimes we unconsciously put into images and text and sounds a certain worldview, a certain sentiment about the world, right? So art sometimes is a symptom, right? And I think that since these images, sounds and texts compose internet aesthetics, since they are produced collectively, spontaneously, online by millions of people all around the world, they are probably the most kind of reliable place, the most... I don't know...

12:39 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
Significant.

12:39 VALENTINA TANNI  
Yes, significant, yes.

12:39 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
If we want to understand the spirit of the time

14:08 VALENTINA TANNI  
Like the zeitgeist and-

14:08 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
Outside the manifestos and...

14:13 VALENTINA TANNI  
Yes.

14:15 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...canon...

14:16 VALENTINA TANNI

Mhm.

14:16 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...then perhaps what is produced by the multitude on the internet...

14:21 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes.

14:22 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

..is that right?

14:22 VALENTINA TANNI

Like internet folklore, someone would say, right?

14:25 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Mm.

14:25 VALENTINA TANNI

It's really important. So we study folklore in general. We have been studying folklore for a long time. So why not study internet folklore like, the culture that is created by users online day by day.

14:39 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And - then I'll pass the mic to Michael [who] is another computer, how did you say it like post-modem, pre-modem...

14:49 VALENTINA TANNI

Post-modem people [laughs].

14:50 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...post-modem, pre-modem human.

14:53 VALENTINA TANNI

Chronically online people.

14:55 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, yeah, the chronically online [laughs]. Can I ask you... But yeah chronically online, but in a kind of a cool, deep way, because we are all chronically online right?

14:55 VALENTINA TANNI

I don't know. I don't know. I wouldn't make that difference though. I don't know. I'm not sure.

15:08 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Well this is my projection on you.

15:10 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah [laughs].

15:11 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I'm using it to feel 'not enough' at this moment. But I want to-

15:15 VALENTINA TANNI

You're probably saner than us, so I will take it [laughs].

15:19 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Well, that is a whole debate we can talk about at dinner. But can you give us some examples of these images and aesthetic so that we can have something to think about while you go more in depth.

15:37 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes. So, as I said, these so-called internet aesthetics are spontaneous like art movements that we see emerging online, and they are basically collections of images, writing, sounds that are created by communities of people online to try to convey a specific emotion, a specific... vibe would be the correct word to use, and it's the word that most users are using right now, sorry for the play on words. And so people are using these images and sometimes also the sound component, to evoke a specific atmosphere, to conjure a specific atmosphere, to kind of try to communicate a feeling to other people. So, in fact, it's not really about how they look. It's about how they make you feel. That's the point of internet aesthetics. It's about trying to use content and manipulate content to transmit feelings, emotions, vibes, a state of mind over the internet. It's a place where- this is another important part of the book, I talk about how our bodies are kind of left out still, like in spite of all our efforts, going online is still largely a disembodied experience. But we are bodies, and we live in space, and so since we have bodies, we try to find a way to transmit also physical sensations, and through the manipulation of the senses, you can reach other mind-states. So internet aesthetics are a lot about this. About trying to make you feel certain things, very specific emotions sometimes, very specific

atmosphere. Because also internet aesthetics are created and distributed also with a memetic logic, meaning that they are modular, and also meaning that they have certain templates that people tend to reuse and change. So, in a way, they are a special kind of meme in a certain way. And what I do in the book is also try to build a little bit of a history, of course, since I'm an art historian-

18:05 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Of course. You can't help, right?

18:06 VALENTINA TANNI

Of course, yeah, exactly, I can't help. So the first internet aesthetic in history, I think, has been vaporwave. It's the first moment in which we see a specific kind- like a group of images, a style, and first of all, a genre of music, because vaporwave emerges first as a musical genre, and after also as a visual style. And vaporwave emerges in the late 2000s. So between 2009-10, and it's the first internet aesthetic that is entirely native to the web, because it's kind of the consequence of having lived online very early. So it's the music, and it's composed by sounds and images produced by people that have been growing up online. In that sense, it's the first aesthetic that is native to the internet. It's produced by the generation of people that went online in their childhood or early adolescence, so the formative period, and so it's like: for them, the internet, it's a new landscape. So it has kind of a very- it's an inspiring role. It's like, I don't know, 'the city' for the modern artists, like 'the modern city' like for for the 20th century artists, like this new...

18:07 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Inaudible]

18:18 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes, exactly.

19:39 MICHAEL DIETER

I think you've already partly answered the question that I was going to ask, but just to draw some links with what we're doing with CDI-TV and the StreamArtNetwork. You know, we're so happy to have you here, because our kind of approach to doing these streams is to accept the fact that now the internet is no longer just on a desktop, but is, you know, in our pockets, is around us all the time, and all space is sort of mediated in this patchwork way so that we're always bleeding into these other time-spaces. We think about this as hybridity. And so it's great to have a theorist of the aesthetics of this come to the stream. But one thing I wanted to ask just a little bit more about, this kind of historical side of things. You know, in the 90s, I'm sure you'll remember, like one of the big concepts for the internet was cyberspace.

20:40 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes.

20:40 MICHAEL DIETER

So how do you understand- I mean, you've sort of partly answered this, but can you say a bit more about what's the difference between that era of spatial imaginary and cyberspace and virtual reality, versus exit reality and the liminal?

21:02 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes, so, as I said, the topic of space, together with the topic of time, are two things that I investigate a lot in the book, because they are really central. And that's true, we have been using spatial metaphors to talk about what happens online since the very early days of the internet. And so, yes, we have been talking about 'cyberspace', which is a term that comes from literature, right? From a very famous novel by William Gibson. But also other words. We have been talking about, I don't know, 'the information superhighway', which is also a spatial metaphor. And also, I don't know, 'chat rooms', if you think about it, we still say that we 'visit' websites.

21:49 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yes.

21:49 VALENTINA TANNI

So we use it a lot, our 'desktop' is like a virtual desktop. And so we have been using these spatial metaphors since the very beginning. Because, of course, we use metaphors to kind of help people adapt to new things, new tools, new social situations, new technologies and so on, also new feelings, right? Like it's a tool that we use to try to adapt, especially when it comes to new technologies. But in the 90s, and for at least a decade, the online and the offline were considered two separate worlds. It started like that. So we had - in fact, cyberspace also was... We had cyberspace. And the opposite of cyberspace was meatspace, like the space of our 'meat' bodies, right? So it was like this very- also, people were talking about the 'real' and the 'virtual', right? As two things that are completely separate. So this was the beginning. So we felt that the internet was this other dimension in every sense. But over time, the entire perception of what the internet is has shifted.

First of all because more and more people got online. So it was not just a special experience. And also we got mobile technology and WiFi connections, and this thing that we have right now, which is 24-hour connection, a non-stop connection, we are always connected. It's not just- like in the old days, people would say, "I'm going to go home and connect to the internet." Like, "No, today I can't go out because I'm going to surf the web." It was like a very like, special experience.

23:41 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I remember the internet cafe.

23:42 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes, we had internet cafes...

23:44 MICHAEL DIETER

[Laughs]

23:44 VALENTINA TANNI

...or special places where you would go to go online, to surf the internet, because that was the way. So in the beginning, two separate dimensions, then we realised that it was not really the case, and so we got in a new era, and the perception of the internet shifted. And now we tend to see the online and the offline as two dimensions that are not separated at all. They are continuously interacting with each other, and the online world is just another layer of the real world. It's not perceived as a separate dimension. And also we learn, sometimes at our own expense, that what happens online doesn't stay online and that we need to consider that these two dimensions are basically connected and always kind of intertwined. And so the whole perspective has changed so much. But what these aesthetics, I think, express very well is the fact that nonetheless, even if now

we don't perceive the internet as a separate dimension anymore, we still kind of feel frustrated by the fact that this door, this portal, is always partially shut. We can go in, but not, for example, not with our body, not entirely. We can't teleport anywhere like we do in video games. We can't time travel.

25:17 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Inaudible] yes, yes.

25:18 VALENTINA TANNI

It's a lot about unfulfilled promises of technology, like we have been promised time travel and teleportation.

25:25 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yes, exactly!

25:26 VALENTINA TANNI

We don't have that.

25:27 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And we ended up with Instagram!

25:28 MICHAEL DIETER

[Laughs]

25:28 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes, yes, it's true.

25:31 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

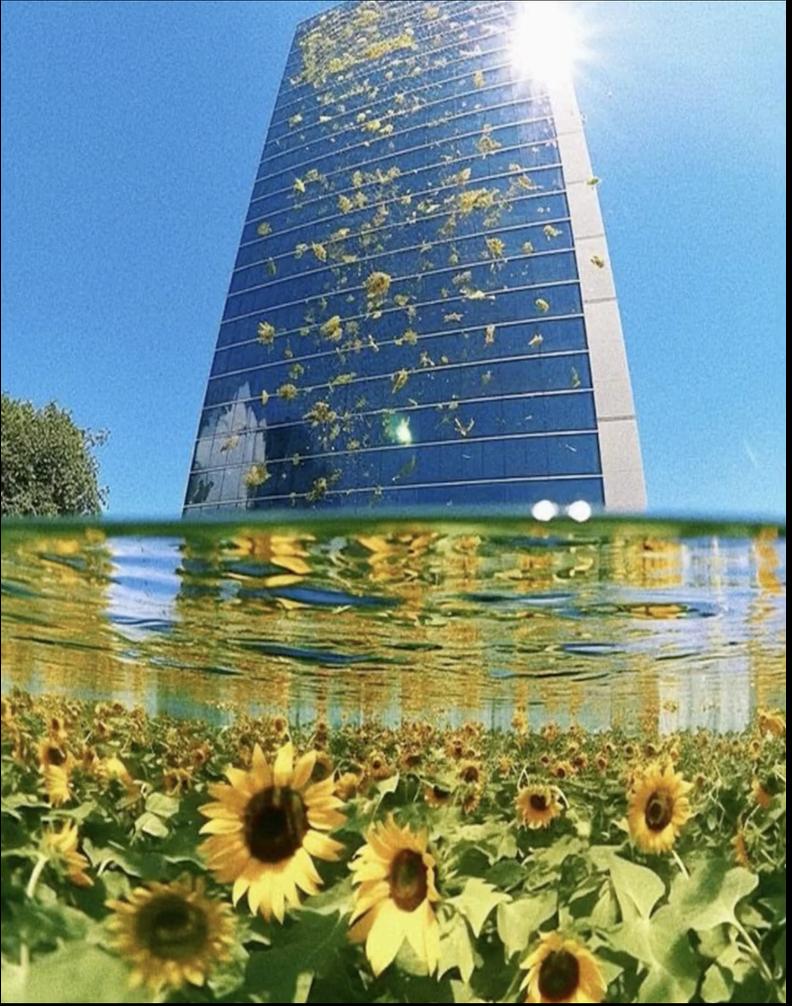
It's true, like where are the flying cars? Where are the teleport technologies?

25:35 VALENTINA TANNI

Exactly.

25:36 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I mean I don't need Google Maps, I just want [inaudible] like that.



25:40 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes, exactly. And so I think that some of these aesthetics, they express a lot of different feelings, but one of the things that comes out, I think, very strongly, is the fact that we try to find compensating tactics to open this portal. So we use images and sounds and other media content to trigger emotions, to be in the same place mentally, together with people that are not there physically. And so in, for example, in the book I talk about ASMR, that you surely know, which is all about sensory stimulation.

26:17 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Mm.

26:17 VALENTINA TANNI

Also 'ambience' videos are extremely popular and are used by people to trigger a specific state of mind, and they also have a maybe therapeutic kind of effect. People use certain sounds or certain images also to kind of cope with certain situations, to cure themselves. In a lot of different ways. And so, yeah, and then in the second half of the book, I also talk about how you can start by just wanting to travel with your mind, but then you might want to go higher and therefore we see other phenomenon, such as the reality-shifting trend. I don't know if you have heard about it? So young...

27:11 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Have you heard about it?

27:12 VALENTINA TANNI

Reality shifting on TikTok.

27:14 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Who heard about reality-shifting?

27:16 MICHAEL DIETER

[Laughs]

27:16 VALENTINA TANNI

Just you!

27:18 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Inaudible] I'm not alone!

27:20 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah, it's a trend that we have seen emerging a few years ago, especially on TikTok, but not only, also on YouTube and on other platforms. Basically, in order to make it more comprehensible, it's similar to lucid dreaming, right? It's kind of like we see these young people that really want to shift reality. They want to travel with their mind to another plane of reality, another dimension. It's also based on the multiverse theory, you know, this idea that there are infinite universes that you can travel to. And so they have been very young people. But when I say young, I mean really young - reality shifting emerged initially from people around 12, 14, like very, very young people - and that from their bedrooms they were trying to meditate and achieve like a certain kind of transcendence with their minds to shift to another reality. Maybe go to Hogwarts and meet Draco Malfoy [laughs]. They want to travel to fictional universes. You know Harry Potter? That was the ref. Yeah, and the interesting thing about reality-shifting is that in order, if you want to shift

you need to script your reality in a very detailed way. You just take a piece of paper and you draft your desired reality and then you meditate, you kind of, you have to... there are a lot of so-called methods, and there's an entire movement around this. And I think that this is just maybe the higher level of this staircase, like you start maybe just with stimulating your senses, then you travel with your mind. And then you might want to try to, like, project your entire being elsewhere.

29:16 MICHAEL DIETER

I think you're starting to cover a few areas I was specifically interested in, what are some of these vibes?

29:20 VALENTINA TANNI

Mhm.

29:20 MICHAEL DIETER

Some of them that you talk about are also horrific, like they come from the horror genre...

29:29 VALENTINA TANNI

Mhm, yes.

29:30 MICHAEL DIETER

...so I just want to encourage you a bit more to speak about - like, there's this basic kind of mechanism of wanting to, or being frustrated with this threshold, and then it gives rise to all of these different vibes. And if you're saying that there's a sort of zeitgeist here, what is this zeitgeist?

29:46 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Mhm, yes.

29:58 VALENTINA TANNI

One of the keywords in the book that comes from the world of this - I mean, internet aesthetics in general - is liminality. Maybe you might have heard of liminal spaces. That's one of the aesthetics that we see online. And it's also something that we can see in most of these aesthetics, like this fascination with places. There are known places, places where you're just supposed to pass through, or spaces that look abandoned, empty. We have one now [laughs]

30:32 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

The corridors.

30:33 MICHAEL DIETER

The backrooms.

30:34 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes, those are 'the backrooms.' Yeah, the backrooms are - it will take hours to explain what the backrooms are - but let's just say that the backrooms are an internet mythology that has been created by internet users, and it's this kind of horrifying place that is composed by an almost infinite number of identical rooms, all yellow, deserted, and no one is there, apparently, maybe. And that's the horrific part, because you don't know if something or someone is there, and it's kind of an infinite labyrinth. You keep going on and on, and you don't know

what's there. The only thing that you can hear is just the buzzing sound of the neon lights.

And the horrifying thing about the myth of the backrooms, the meme of the backroom, is not just that the place is empty, it's the fact that you can end up there accidentally. Like, according to the original post that was published on 4chan in 2019, you can accidentally step out of reality through a process called 'no-clipping'. Yeah, no-clipping is a term that comes from gaming culture. Gaming culture is the absolute, like the main source, for most of internet aesthetics. The generation that has been raised on games, is kind of bringing most of the culture inside internet aesthetics. So you can 'no-clip' out of reality, and you end up in this terrifying place that is basically out of this world. That's why it's called the backrooms. And this entire mythology, that in a few years have produced, I don't know, I think thousands of video games, memes... There is also a movie under production.

32:36 MICHAEL DIETER

Also the television show Severance is inspired by...

32:39 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes...

32:39 MICHAEL DIETER

...backrooms.

32:40 VALENTINA TANNI

...exactly.

32:40 MICHAEL DIETER

So it's found its way into...

32:42 VALENTINA TANNI

Very clearly, yeah.

32:42 MICHAEL DIETER

...quite mainstream culture.

32:44 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes, so it has become this giant mythology. And it all started with a photograph just found online by some users, and at some point another user added a caption, and then this giant narrative. This is really fascinating. This is one of the things that I like about the internet. Like millions of people around the world, they don't know each other, they build a myth, right? Over the years. And then the backrooms got other levels. Because, like every video game, you need to also have other levels. And it became this mythology. And to go back to your question about the threshold, we seem to be talking a lot about this idea of living between things, like in this sort of liminal space in which we we feel like we're stuck and we don't know exactly where's the exit, and if there's an exit, like this sensation of being in a transitional space, but stuck in a way, right? And this is a cultural idea that starts from vaporwave. Like we can relate vaporwave with hauntology and all the work that Mark Fisher did about this idea of being culturally stuck, like this idea of being stuck in a loop, that culture is not evolving anymore, and we don't see the future.<sup>[2]</sup> That starts with vaporwave, and it's still very much there in all the other subsequent aesthetics, this idea of liminality.

34:14 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So I have a question that is, I don't know, it's kind of a personal interpretation of what you've been saying, so I don't know whether it makes sense or not, but I agree it's super interesting, this mythopoiesis - the creation of myths. And in a way, myths are created exactly as you describe, like millions of people around the world that don't know each other, and somehow a myth is originated. And one could argue that the internet remediates this process, perhaps changing the pace of it, because in the span of a few years, we have a myth that is there.

34:56 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes.

34:56 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I suppose there is one question about whether internet mythologies - so mythologies created, originated within the internet - how they percolate into the experience outside the internet? Okay, I shouldn't say "outside the internet", but we understood each other.

35:21 VALENTINA TANNI

AFK. That's how.

35:23 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

AFK?

35:24 VALENTINA TANNI

It's 'Away From Keyboard.'

35:25 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, away from keyboard.

35:25 VALENTINA TANNI

That's the word we should use.

35:27 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

That's the way the cool kids say,

35:29 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah [laughs].

35:30 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

You know, I told ya, I showed ya. Okay, so AFK- [crosstalk]

35:30 VALENTINA TANNI

...young people just say "in real life"...

35:36 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

In real life.

35:37 VALENTINA TANNI

...even if it's outdated, but they still use it.

35:40 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

In real life, okay.

35:40 VALENTINA TANNI

...that the internet is real but...

35:41 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

No, because I never found a way to say it, because I understand that, okay, the internet is not a separate reality.

35:49 VALENTINA TANNI

Mhm.

35:50 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

But either way, it's not even, I mean, every space...

35:56 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah.

35:56 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...is integrated, but also separated...

35:58 VALENTINA TANNI

Mhm.

35:58 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...like this is a space that is partially separated from my living room, in a way, but anyhow...

36:04 VALENTINA TANNI

Mhm, yeah.

36:04 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
So this is one question.

36:05 VALENTINA TANNI  
Yeah.



36:05 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And the other question is about these rooms, the back rooms, because the first time I encountered them, I was like, well, for a horror dystopia, it's not that bad. After all, it's a corridor. Like it's a corridor very similar to, I don't know, an office corridor...

36:23 VALENTINA TANNI

Mhm.

36:24 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...or a hospital corridor - which I admit, it is terrifying...

36:27 VALENTINA TANNI

[Laughs]

36:28 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...but compared to other sort of dystopian horror spaces, like I don't know- Well, perhaps the first one of the first mythologies of a horror space you can end up [in] is hell...

36:41 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah!

36:42 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...like a place with flames in which you burn.

36:45 VALENTINA TANNI

Mhm, mhm.

36:45 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So a corridor is not that bad, but it's interesting how you know these spaces...

36:53 VALENTINA TANNI

Mhm...

36:53 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...like the non-places, to quote Marc Augé.<sup>[3]</sup>

36:53 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes. Yes!

36:55 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...which you quote in the book, have become horrific.

37:02 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah.

37:03 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So I suppose my question is...

37:04 VALENTINA TANNI

Why...

37:05 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...can you expand on how...

37:06 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah.

37:11 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...the horror-fication of non-places...

37:13 VALENTINA TANNI

Mhm.

37:13 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...of a pale yellow corridor has become, like the spirit of our time, the ultimate nightmare?

37:24 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah, I think that there are at least a couple of reasons. The first one is that it's not just a corridor. It's a space that is so big that we don't know the exact extension of it. And the horror lies in the fact that there are all identical rooms, like randomly segmented and they're all identical, and you don't see anything. But in the original meme, the caption also says that, like you might want to be silent because something can hear you at some point. So the horror first of all lies in the fact that you don't know.

38:01 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...mm, mm, mm...

38:01 VALENTINA TANNI

You don't know if there's an exit, you don't know the extension of this place, and you don't know if someone is there.

38:07 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Mm.

38:08 VALENTINA TANNI

That's the first thing. And also it's the horror connected to the concept of infinity. You know, we as human beings, we don't deal very well with the concept of infinity, because we are finite beings. And so there's something terrifying. Think about the infinity of space, of outer space, for example, like that's some horror in there, right? This idea of being lost in a place that you don't know how big it is, and if it has an end or not. The other reason lies in the fact that liminal spaces are not just empty spaces. Liminal spaces are in the context of internet aesthetics, are spaces that we normally see crowded or inhabited, and that suddenly we see empty. There is an amazing book that I also quote: it's called *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, it's written by John Koenig, and the book is actually a dictionary with new words.<sup>[4]</sup> It invents new words for new feelings. And there's a word that is contained in the book and that internet users have adopted to talk about liminal spaces, and this word is kenopsia. Kenopsia, according to The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows, is the feeling that you get when you'll see a place that you normally see very crowded, like bustling with life, and you suddenly see completely empty. For example, a mall deserted, or a school completely empty, a supermarket and so on, a parking spot... All these places that we normally see full of life completely empty. Seeing these places kind of gives us a weird sensation, probably unconsciously, because the question that comes to mind is,

'where is everybody?' Like, maybe something catastrophic happened. Maybe this is how the world looked like without us, or after us.

40:19 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Mm.

40:19 VALENTINA TANNI

Like, this is the unconscious kind of thought that you can have without realising it. It's about the world without us. That's a terrifying kind of feeling, I think. So I think maybe these are two things that are connected. And also, maybe one last thing very briefly, is the fact that the back rooms are - in the book, I suggest - that they can be also interpreted as a render, maybe not a natural place, but as a simulation. Maybe they have been produced by a computer program, right? And this computer program glitched, and so it keeps expanding, and maybe it will keep expanding forever. So I think that it's also connected to our fear of technology and of losing control over it. Yeah.

41:15 MICHAEL DIETER

There's so much there, and Carolina and I have so many other questions, but I should also invite others that are here for the livestream, either in person or online, to ask any questions or make comments. While you're thinking of anything you may want to ask Valentina, I'm just going to ask a bit of - it's not quite a methods question, but it's a little bit about how you see your role as a theorist of internet aesthetics. Because it occurs to me, reading the book, that there's so many insightful examples that you pose that are already themselves theorisations of the phenomena...

42:00 VALENTINA TANNI

Mhm, mhm.

42:00 MICHAEL DIETER

Like the internet sort of self-theorises all of the time. So I just wonder, as you're preparing these books and thinking about what interventions you want to make, what kind of book is this, like, how do you deal with these topics, what do you add to that?

42:18 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah...

42:20 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And in the meantime, if you want to raise your hand, I'll be ready with the mic. [Beanbag rustles]

42:26 VALENTINA TANNI

[Laughs] Okay, are you okay? You need help? [Laughs] So, yeah, I decided to... I mean, during my work, I selected a lot of material from forums, from comments on, I don't know, the comments on YouTube videos and comments on different platforms and websites. And in the beginning, it was just material that I archived for me, because I just wanted to know a bit more. I took a sort of ethnographic approach. I wanted to be there in the forums. I also engage in conversation with users because I think that it's really important to not just describe these images or these sounds. It's important to try to explain to the reader why these images are important, why these sounds are so important to people, right? And the only way to do that, I

think, is to let people - users - speak for themselves. And so the book is full of quotes that I extracted from, as I said, comments and forums and a lot of these sources, or from YouTube, Reddit, 4chan and so on. So I thought it was important to give users a direct voice, because, as you said, it is true that the internet theorises itself a lot, because a lot of users, they love to discuss the culture they build. It's something that happened from the very beginning, and there's always a lot of discussion. That's a suggestion: I encourage you to always take a look at the comments on YouTube videos, especially YouTube videos that are maybe related to some very emotional piece of music, for example. Those places are incredible. People engage in very profound conversations, and they get together, and there's this really emotional kind of thing going on. And at least for me, in this moment in time in which the internet is not an easy place at all - like now we're talking about aesthetics and the joy of being online, but we all know that there are also a lot of issues that we need to deal with, right, and that we have a lot of problems of different kinds - economical, political - it's not an easy moment, right? Technology is taking also a dark turn for a lot of reasons. So I think that exactly for this reason, it is important to also remember that people online are not - despite what the dead internet theory says - people are still online and people are still alive and still producing content and still talking to each other and kind of infusing the internet with human qualities. So, yeah. I don't think I answered the entire question, but maybe...

45 : 33 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I will have more questions to answer now. [Laughs] Okay, so we have a couple of questions here, and one there. Should I take the three question and then... Yeah, let's do that.

45 : 52 NOORTJE MARRES

Yeah, thank you. It's been great listening to you. You spoke about the early internet. So I couldn't, can't resist asking a question about that, because I also remember it as a time where the aesthetics of the internet was super important. And, in a way, it was what it was all about. And what for me was really memorable was... So I was in Amsterdam in the 90s, and there was lots of net art around...

46:26 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah, that was the golden age of net art, especially in Amsterdam.

46:29 NOORTJE MARRES

Yeah it was amazing in all kinds of ways. And one of the things I remember is the collective called Jodi?

46:36 VALENTINA TANNI

Oh, yeah. They're great.

46:39 NOORTJE MARRES

They created this CD that when you put the CD into your computer, it would basically take over your OS, and you would watch your computer, your OS, disintegrate visually and sonically. And I really loved it. I found it really liberating.

47:03 VALENTINA TANNI

It was, it was great. Jodi in the mid 90s, they were like the most exciting thing you could find online. Yeah.



47:12 NOORTJE MARRES

What I wanted to ask you, I'll turn it into a question, is... So the way in which breakdown featured in early internet art, and how that could be liberating... How do you see that within the broader aesthetics of the internet? And do you think that that is something that translates to the current moment, or are we in a different place now?

47:37 VALENTINA TANNI

We are definitely in a different place, yeah. I remember the times you were talking about very well, and actually Jodi's work was a giant part of my thesis. The thesis was about net art, and their work is central to the entire movement. We live in an entirely different internet for so many different reasons, not only from the point of view of aesthetics, but in general. I think that that attitude, though - this idea of misusing technology to expose the limits, the structure, how it works, what it does - it's really important. It's something that we should bring back, because now we live in a technological world in which we are surrounded by interfaces, and some of these interfaces, they are extremely layered. So we don't see the machine anymore. We don't think about how the machine works. We don't know that, and most people tend to use the technology as intended, without asking questions about how it works, who designed it and which possible consequences of the technology can be for society. So unfortunately I would say that today that kind of 'hacker attitude' is not there that much, but I think that we are witnessing a bit of a revolt, finally. I hope. I don't know how far we are going to go with this, but I see that a lot of people, especially [the] younger generation, they are getting a little bit sick of just being on the platforms and just doing what they are told. So they are trying to find new ways of being online, but it's a very different kind of environment. And these internet

aesthetics that I talk about, they are more... I would say that they are more... I mean, in an artistic sense, they are less... I don't know how to phrase it. They're not political in the way that Jodi was political. They are more concentrated on the emotional side of being online. And they're all about our feelings and how we feel, how we cope with life, more of an intimate kind of reflection on life online. It's different. Not less important, I would say, but different.

50:12 NOORTJE MARRES

Just to say that having met Jodi a couple times in that period, they never talked about politics.

50:17 VALENTINA TANNI

No, no. I wouldn't say politics in that sense.

50:20 NOORTJE MARRES

I was quite frustrated because they wouldn't be interested at all in talking about...

50:25 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah, yeah.

50:25 NOORTJE MARRES

...culture, society, politics. So that was also their strength...

50:30 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah, but they were political without addressing politics directly. But their work was highly political. They were

deconstructing technology in a very radical way, and I think that that's political, like, even if they... you're right, they never talk about politics, or they never... and also they used to speak very little in general about their work [laughs]. But it was very radical. It was about deconstructing the interface, like radically. And that was, I think, political for me.

51:04 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So we have another question here.

51:07 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Thank you. Thank you so much. We are discussing, you are discussing, places and weird places and liminal places. And I'm just wondering, what do you think does the internet do to time, and what maybe what does time do to the internet? So, for example, this screen is broadcasting something what is happening here. But there is a gap, a time delay, right? But we cannot be really sure if it is a time delay. Maybe it's a time lapse, or maybe, well, this picture is something which will happen in a couple of seconds, so maybe it's a future too, or maybe it's a past, or maybe it's just a lapse and nothing is really happening. So I understand your book is around places, but what do you think? What does the internet do to time? Or how time and temporality and internet are related? Thank you. Thank you.

52:16 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah, the book talks a lot about spaces, but also about time, because time and space, we cannot separate the dimension. They are linked profoundly. In the book, a couple of times I quote Philip [K.] Dick, and this idea of time, being out of joint, is everywhere. People, users online, are very interested in this idea, not only of travelling to different dimensions, but also

travelling to different points in time. So this is also very, very present, and it's true also that the experience of being online also changes our perception of time. And another thing that I talk about a lot is the fact that we also kind of time-travel artificially when we are on the internet, because now, at this point in time on the internet, we have access to material from all the different... I mean, not all, but most historical periods and places and cultures all around the world. So we can kind of artificially time-travel, like we can kind of reconstruct, I don't know, the atmosphere of a certain place in the 70s, very easily, because we have access to movies, we have access to music, fashion. And in fact, young people are doing that a lot. They sometimes kind of romanticize a point in time in history. They would like to relive that moment, and they use the internet to research very profoundly about that historical period and recreating the atmosphere, the vibe of that point in time. So there's this idea, also, that time is like a line that we can travel - maybe not with our body and not properly, not proper time-travel - but maybe with our mind. We can explore vibes and times and, in fact, another giant - I mean, that will open a big chapter, but I would just mention it - another important keyword in internet aesthetics, all internet aesthetics, starting from vaporwave, is nostalgia. Like people are indulging in nostalgic sentiment all the time. And we see this weird thing happening, of very young people being nostalgic for things they never experienced. So nostalgia is becoming like a generic sentiment, right? It's not really about being nostalgic about your past. It's about being nostalgic in general. So nostalgia is kind of this... I don't know, propellant that you can use to go elsewhere with your mind. It's about imagination more than memory.

52:16 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

There's another question here. A lot of notes. I can see a lot of notes. That's really a lot of notes. Specs.

53:03 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Yeah. I've had the therapy, I've stopped writing notes [laughs]. The first thing that I was really...

53:13 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Do you want to speak on the mic for our global audience?

53:36 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Yes, stick me on the mic. The first thing that really occupied my mind was the thought of the metaphors that you're talking about - corridors, doors, doors partially open, people exiting reality - and lived experience as a parent and collective of parents about what's actually happening now with teenagers not attending school, struggling to socialize, self-harming. It's widespread, like I'd say endemic rather than pandemic. But that's not the question, okay? So my question is, and I think I'm heading towards trying to create something positive...

53:36 VALENTINA TANNI

Mhm, yeah.

53:36 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

...from what we're observing. How does Donna Haraway's autopoiesis fit within this liminal space, the backroom space, so that autopoiesis being the sort of collective-making, about community, the community of compost, which is partially self-sacrificial, with a clear vision of a future and a way of making future. So the antithesis of what you were describing, that weighs heavy...

53:36 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah, I get it. I think that it's obviously connected, but in this aesthetics, I feel like this sentiment and also the act of myth-making, it's not entirely conscious as a process and maybe that changes. It's not about wanting to create change. It's more about elaborating a tactic to survive, to communicate, like creating your own world. It's about world-making. But I wouldn't say that it's like a conscious attempt, right? I would say that these aesthetics are more like a spontaneous way that people are finding to express themselves, to connect with each other, to kind of communicate these vibes, to feel related. But maybe this is the difference. It's not entirely conscious as a kind of, yeah...

54:45 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Inaudible]

54:45 VALENTINA TANNI

The myth-making in general, the backrooms also in particular. Like initially the myth of the back-room, it started just as a joke.

54:58 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Inaudible whispering]

54:58 VALENTINA TANNI

It was just... sometimes it's associated with a thing that is called creepypasta online. Now, creepypastas are just stories that you can find online, like urban legends, internet urban legends, that kind of thing. They are related to horror, they are mostly horror stories, and they're called pasta because it

comes from copy-paste, because people tend to copy-paste these stories, but then they make little variation[s]. And so it becomes a mythology in that sense. You don't have just one story, you have one story and all the variations, like in folklore in general. Like mythology in all folklore is not just one story. We have versions of them.

54:58 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Inaudible at length]

54:58 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah, yeah, yes, yeah. It's a lot of things together. It's that, but it's also just a game in the serious sense of the word, and there's something also interesting about internet culture is the fact that games and rituals sometimes are the same thing. And I don't think it's the first time that we see that in history. Like, I think that young generation sometimes they use games as rituals, to connect together and also to imagine possible worlds. It's not always a very conscious process of saying, "I want to build a future, I want to change things." But I think that unconsciously it's a way of trying... like a wheel of... I don't know... wanting to, yeah, leave their mark in a way, or just communicate with their peers in a...

55:31 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Do we have any other question? There is time for one more question. Yes, I knew there was.

55:31 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Thank you for this inspiring talk. While listening to you, I was thinking, oh my god, like you have been doing this for so long, right? Since the 90s. And now here we are at 2025 speaking about this. I'm thinking, do you have the feel

about blockchain arts? I don't want to say just NFTs, but also NFTs. I have been involved with an exhibition, a group of NFT artists two years ago. And there's so much interesting work that they can do using the blockchain technology, not only just the digital image of the money, you know, like, there's so many things.

55:31 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes. [Laughs]

56:40 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Do you have any research going on about that? It's... I don't know, the whole like... listening to you, basically, I have been listening, but also in my mind I started this blockchain art history thinking already. Do you have any studies about that?

58:12 VALENTINA TANNI

If I studied blockchain?

58:12 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Yeah. Did you have any research?

58:16 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah, I mean, it's not really my focus. Of course I've been researching a little bit about it, because since I study [the] relationship between art and technology, for a couple of years every interview and every social situation, people were asking me about NFTs, so I kind of had to get into it. I think that the blockchain as a technology has immense potentialities, but unfortunately, we tend to build a lot of hype around certain

technologies. And now, for example, we have this giant wave or hype around AI. And when the hype is very high, it tends to obscure the real potentialities of the technologies. We want to apply that technology to everything. So it just becomes a buzzword. And that happened with blockchain, unfortunately. So we were victims, I think, of a lot of marketing and hype and a lot of scams, unfortunately, but I think that the blockchain technology has potentialities that we can still kind of apply. For artists in particular, it's just a way of monetizing like their work, which is nothing bad. There's nothing bad about it, but it's... and there are just a few artists that are also experimenting with the technology. Not just making an image or a sound and just selling it, but just trying to kind of work with the blockchain technology. But very, very few.

1:01:49 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Crosstalk]

1:01:51 VALENTINA TANNI

There's an interesting book written by a friend of mine about that. It's called *Surfing with Satoshi*, it has been written by Domenico Quaranta, and it's about blockchain and art. <sup>[5]</sup>

1:02:04 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Okay I'm gonna look that up. Thank you very much.

1:02:08 VALENTINA TANNI

Thank you.

1:02:09 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And then Rom from UKRAiNATV, Stream Art Europeans, Europe Stream Art Network. I've just Googled the keywords!

1:02:17 ROMAN DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah it's their transition from European Stream Art Network to just the Stream Art Network. Yeah, that we try to do. Accelerate.

1:02:28 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Inaudible] ...didn't survive...

1:02:30 ROMAN DZIADKIEWICZ

Europe is still in the background, but there is something more than Europe. There is the future. That's what I would ask about, I would like to keep this direction maybe, because there was something about nostalgia. There was something about the beginning, some archeology of the internet, this liminal space. There was nothing about the hybridity that we love to use in this similar context, I think, working with this multi-interconnection situation that we are actually with, yeah? So I would like to maybe ask you about some reflection about the current, and the future, possibilities for travelling in time. Because for sure we have two chapters, two big chapters: the web 1, which was the moment of time and space for some illusions and some utopians that will connect, that we will be free, that is decentralized and so on, that we can connect cables and connect people together. And then we found ourselves stuck in a platform internet, the web 2, that we are just

consumers, yeah? We have apps, we have mobiles, we are still online, but there is kind of the gap between ourselves... and this is what we try to do in the stream art, and also in these kind of meetings, yeah? That we can invert the cameras, we can find that aspect, that set of... that we are like an interconnect, yeah? Here you watch your social media. You can do the story. You can stream it. You can do your own streaming from this stream event, yeah, in the same time. Also, we are interconnect together with [key?] now and so on. And is it a future also for that kind of decentralized dreams from the past? Also, I found, a few years ago, NFT not only as a kind of field for some technological experimentation, but also institutional experimentation, that it's like a new form of collecting. It's of course related to this digital accelerate rightwing, concentrate capital and ownership, way of thinking. But maybe there is also like something inspiring to grab, to deal with in a subversive way. This is kind of the comment, and this is kind of a set of questions or possible direction to go out from the...

1:05:53 VALENTINA TANNI

The hope for the future, right? I would say that's our hope for the future. And, as I said, I see that something is moving, and we need to all keep pushing towards it, and especially... I mean, this may sound banal, but education is key. Like, what we need to do is talk to people directly and try to kind of do what Jodi did back in the 90s, to deconstruct, open the interface, open the box, and show to people what technology really is, so that they can make up their mind about it. And also maybe have the

courage to get their hands on technology, because that's also what you do, right? Like this idea is not to just accept the tool as it is, but have the courage to mess with it, also in the wrong way, or with what you have, like in a very liberating way. So my hope for the future is that we can transmit to the newer generations this attitude to technology, that it's a more hands-on kind of attitude that we lost, as you said, over the years. Yeah.

1:05:54 MICHAEL DIETER

Thanks so much. I think we're going to draw to a close now. That was such an amazing session.

1:05:54 VALENTINA TANNI

Thank you.

1:05:54 MICHAEL DIETER

Both books recently translated into English, just last year. I think are easily Googleable if you want to get hold of one.

1:05:54 VALENTINA TANNI

Yes, yes, you just Google my name, you find both [laughs].

1:05:54 MICHAEL DIETER

And really look forward to the next book, or your next project. I don't know whether you can make any final comments about what you're working on at the moment.

1:05:54 VALENTINA TANNI

Yeah, I recently wrote a short essay about artificial intelligence and art, and specifically about how artists are conversing with machines. It's about the dialogue with machines, not really about AI art as a product. It's a reflection about how artists enter in a dialogue with the machine to produce something, right? So it's about the relationship between the human and computer. That book will come out in Italian in a couple of months. I don't know about future translations. And now I'm working on a new project, but that I can't really talk about that much.

1:05:54 MICHAEL DIETER

[Laughs]

1:05:54 VALENTINA TANNI

But it's related to what Rom was saying. It's about the possibility of reclaiming technology in a way.

1:05:54 MICHAEL DIETER

Okay. Thanks so much. And if I could just invite everybody to thank Valentina for her time and insights.

1:05:54 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Applause]

1:05:54 VALENTINA TANNI

Thank you. Thank you for coming and inviting me. Thank you.

1:06:40 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And in case you are around and sharing the same architectural space with us in the Midlands, tomorrow from 1pm to 2pm at Warwick Faculty of Arts Building, Valentina will talk a little more about conversations between art and technology, between the artist and the machine. The seminar will be recorded, so it will be available online, and also Valentina will be our guest at the podcast Media Whatever. So, yes, so see you soon, actually. Stay tuned, as they say.

1:09:15 VALENTINA TANNI

[Laughs]

1:09:15 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

As the pro would say, subscribe. No-

1:09:18 VALENTINA TANNI

Like and subscribe.

1:09:19 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Like and subscribe. Yeah, okay, goodnight.

1:10:08 VALENTINA TANNI

Thank you.

1:10:08 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Applause]

1:10:09 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
Cheers.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Valentina Tanni, *Exit Reality: Vaporwave, Backrooms, Weirdcore, and Other Landscapes beyond the Threshold*. Rome: Nero, 2024. ↑
2. Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. London: Zero Books, 2013. ↑
3. Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. London: Verso, 1992. ↑
4. John Koenig, *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2021. ↑
5. Domenico Quaranta, *Surfing with Satoshi: Art, Blockchain and NFTs*. Translated by Anna Carruthers. Ljubljana: Aksioma - Institute for Contemporary Art, 2022. ↑



SPEAKERS

**Embodied Audience**

**Chris Bilton**

**Keith Bloomfield**

**Carolina Bandinelli**

**Alessandro Gandini**

**Cecilia Ghidotti**

**Michael Dieter**

RECORDED

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KEYWORDS

Digital disconnection

pandemic impact

social media use

work-life balance

remote work

digital detox

generative AI

political disconnection

leisure vs. work

algorithmic dynamics

quiet quitting

great resignation

digital nomads

platformization

micro-practices.

GUESTS

Alessandro Gandini

00:00 MICHAEL DIETER

Welcome!

00:01 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Welcome. Are we live?

00:02 MICHAEL DIETER

We are.

00:03 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We are! And how do you know it? It's not written anywhere, but you sense it, okay, you sense it.

00:11 KEITH BLOOMFIELD

Just trust me, it's fine.

00:12 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, okay, now I know I'm live. Okay, good. So we are live.

00:20 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

There is a buffer.

00:21 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

There's a technical problem. Problem solved. Amazing, huh? This is how life should be. The utopia of problem solving in the digital society, digital society, or digital culture or digital ideology, is a lot about solving problems, but in most cases, this

really doesn't work. And also now, I mean the problem is recurring, there's the recursivity of problems. Anyways, while our stunning équipe of technicians and media wizards are solving the problems, let me welcome everybody in the room and in the rooms all over the world, because we have such a global audience Gandini you should know, of course, you must have heard about our global audience, haven't you? Yes, and we are here for the CDI-TV stream episode. Michael Dieter, yours truly, co-directors of the Centre for Digital Inquiry at the University of Warwick. And today we are going to talk about digital disconnection. So, you know I'm a huge fan of over sharing in contexts in which you shouldn't overshare, so I'm gonna overshare right now. This, for me, is a little bit of a dream, because Gandini and I are like academic siblings.

00:45 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

True.

00:46 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Not because we are very similar, in fact, we are kind of different, but we grew up together intellectually and academically, and we have the same sort of academic equivalent of family traumas. You know, those events that really mark your way of thinking. But, in another life, Gandini and I would have been MTV VJs. Do you remember MTV?

02:19 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

02:19 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We have the right age range here, haven't we? So I think we've always had this sort of more or less implicit dream of, yes, academia is cool. I mean, it's good for us, because otherwise

what could have we done, but being VJs would be much better. And also Gandini used to play in a band.

02:43 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

True.

02:43 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And I'm totally not a player, neither a singer. I'm completely out of tune. But I could have been the producer, or maybe the ragazza imagine, how do you say it, like the one that is there because of the look, you know, I want to be remembered because of the way I look. We also, at some point, had an idea of setting up an indie band, which was The Immaterial Labor, and that would have been such a good idea, such a missed opportunity. So here is the closest we are getting to The Immaterial Labor. Perhaps you're not going to sing, perhaps you're not going to play, but we are going to mess around - with what? With the idea of digital disconnection, which is Alessandro Gandini's new project. Now you have to know Alessandro is one... You are a little bit of a rising star of academia. He's one of those over achievers that,

02:43 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

03:52 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, no, it's true. Like he wins the grants. You know, he's the one that wins the grant. It's difficult to be your friend in this respect.

03:54 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Same!

03:54 MICHAEL DIETER

[Laughs]

03:54 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Like it would be very easy to hate you. Like, he got this ERC starting grant, the billions, trillions, but he's also super cool, so you cannot really hate him. So I mean, yeah, it's not, it's not easy, but it's one of the greatest things that happened in my adult life.

04:43 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Aw. Same, you know that.

04:15 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, no, no, this is all gonna be about us exchanging love. Fortunately there's Michael and maybe at some point you can, you know, intrude and bring us back to the rail, however curvy rail of today. So, digital disconnection. What is that? I don't know anything about these ideas. But you said it is not a new project.

04:46 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Not yet, let's say. First of all, thank you for embarrassing me. I love you.

04:51 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

You were ready.

04:52 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

All of what you said is true, and as you say, as the saying goes, never trust your friends in a public place.

04:59 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Never ever.

05:00 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

And this makes it, of course, very sweet to be here. Thank you for having me. Yeah, it's not yet a project. It's something that has grown into the project that I'm working on, into the projects that I'm working on, as you also mentioned, as an interest also by way of a number of meetings throughout those years, with colleagues who are very engaged with this topic and this type of research, which looks at the different ways in which, especially after the pandemic, we are seeking to somehow take a distance from digital technology in their burdening presence, which is quite a thing now, especially following a period of our lives where we have just been online, basically. So digital disconnection research comes out of this as something that was already there but probably found a proper audience and space and field, so to speak, following the pandemic. And for me, it taps into a number of different things that relate to work, which has been the long term object of my study - digital media, digital technologies and cultures of work; it's what I do for the most part.

06:15 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

For a living.

06:18 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

For a living, exactly. And that's something that has been able to explain some of the things that I was seeing while studying work, and helped me to make sense of a more, sort of, longer term trajectory, although it's not long meaning we're talking about the last decade or so, in several practices in the so called new forms of work. So drawing a few lines of connection among different phenomena that were on my radar with a term that wasn't.

06:50 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay. So what I understood is that-

06:53 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

But you want the definition, I guess, or something along those lines?

06:56 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

No, no, no, not necessarily. No, no, no. I totally don't want a definition, but more of a description. So you're saying there was a pandemic, there was a moment in which we were all online, kind of this compulsory onlineness of Covid and from there has been maybe a reaction-

07:17 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

A backlash!

07:17 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Or a backlash.

07:17 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

That's the word that the literature on this topic actually uses.

07:18 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, as a backlash.

07:20 MICHAEL DIETER

Techlash!

07:24 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Exactly! Because tomorrow we are going to speak about a techlash. So today we're going to speak about backlash. So this should say something about us. Anyhow, so as a backlash, what you're saying is that there is a growing or rising, or whatever, tendency towards saying, 'Okay, let me disconnect. I want to opt out of this.'

07:49 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

A set of micro practices that point, if you see them all together, into this direction.

07:54 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So things that people do and that sort of go counter [to] the kind of default assumption that today's life is online, there's no way of being not online.

08:06 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Yes, correct.

08:07 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And so now, of course, my question is, what are these things? And you said that you noticed them as part of your research on work. So your research on neo-craft work?<sup>[1]</sup>

08:17 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

In general, on work as a long term research interest, as you know, of mine for a few years now. In relation to the sort of specific, smaller, let's say, topic of digital disconnection, I'm referring to practices like setting one's limits to access social media, or news avoidance, resisting different forms of datafication, which occurs in a number of ways in the context of, also, privacy related conversations, increasingly so for younger generations as well, which are much more mindful than we are, also millennials, in relation to these topics. You might remember, I guess, the time we went on Facebook and we used to post, I don't know, 73 pictures of our Saturday night on the Sunday morning. Nobody really wanted that, but we did that.

09:12 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I always remember when I joined Facebook, and I wasn't an early adopter at all, and the platform asked you, 'What are you thinking?' And at the beginning, I was actually writing down what I was thinking, like for real.

09:29 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

I used to do that in songs.

09:33 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I didn't have that, same, yeah-

09:35 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Thinking about a song or some lyrics-

09:37 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Now it would be totally cringe to do that.

09:41 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Millennial, probably.

09:42 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Millennial. I mean, yeah, we are millennial, but we are not-

09:45 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

That's what we are, after all.

09:47 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

What were you doing in the first social media? You were more tech savvy than us, I think? What was your way of [inaudible]

09:56 MICHAEL DIETER

Oh, not necessarily. I mean, I never really took strongly to social media. But I did quit Facebook on the first 'Quit Facebook' day, which was I think sometime in May 2010, so I was a kind of early digital disconnecter. And, you know, disconnection, I guess, it has a kind of history that always accompanied the stronger ideology of connection. Part of that, I think, was originally a more technical understanding of the digital divide, so the people that were disconnected were... it was like a problem that had to be sort of solved through design or technology. And then I think there was a kind of hipster idea of 'the disconnecter', which was also accompanied by a political idea of disconnection. But you're suggesting that, I think, with the pandemic, this kind of history changes a bit.

11:08 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

It has, I guess, from my sort of small observatory, it has made many people, and especially the younger generations, again I have mentioned this, think about how much they've been online, and to an extent try to find a better balance between their everyday intake of different types of social media, which also has a significant impact on social lives, like very everyday practices, from solving an argument to going out for a drink, up to, you know, completely different settings and practices. And that's when work comes into the picture for me, because the ideology of connectivity, as you described it, in the context of work, becomes the ideology of productivity, and the ways in which, also throughout the pandemic, the impression of digital technologies in datafying and monitoring work has increased, despite - or perhaps in parallel with - the rise of remote work, which has produced also a bit of a breakdown in the ways in which people think about how can they be productive at work, which doesn't necessarily mean going to an actual workplace. For us academics, it's probably

easier to understand, because that's what academic work has always been. But outside our sort of bubble, there are a lot of people who had to show up at work every morning and didn't really like that.

12:45 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, but I think also for us it was kind of a thing, at least when Covid arrived... Well, as an hypochondriac, and as someone who is very pessimistic,

12:59 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Something we also share.

13:01 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Something we also share. I wasn't happy at all. I mean, I was one of those that really took it seriously from day minus one. But the only thing that at some point felt appealing for me was that, okay, maybe I can be a digital nomad. Maybe I can finally work only remotely and travel the world, like the people that some of us would study back in the days. And that sounded like an appealing thing. And then a few months into the pandemic, I was like, no, this is a total nightmare. Like, I totally don't want to be a digital nomad, because it was the less- Well, of course, during the pandemic, the nomadism was much restricted. But the whole thing of feeling, like I really did feel completely wired and I missed coming here, and I used to hate taking that Avanti train and getting to Warwick and I was dreaming of a canal and teaching everything online forever. And after the pandemic, I must admit, I still kind of strongly dislike it, getting on the train, etc. But also I do kind of value it more.

14:22 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, it's a funny thing: in some ways, the origins of CDI-TV, what we're doing now, lie also in the pandemic, because CDI was set up in 2020 - at that time, it was directed by Nathaniel Tkacz who's...

14:40 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Nate.

14:40 MICHAEL DIETER

...Nate, yeah, who's now at Goldsmiths - and almost immediately after CDI was founded the pandemic happened and things went online. Carolina, you did a great series of streams...

14:44 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

The Summer of Love.

14:51 MICHAEL DIETER

Summer of Love, yeah. And Nate did some streams as well. And then after Nate left, when we were looking at what CDI had done, we were like, "yeah, maybe we should sort of return to the livestream." But I have to admit, there was almost, for me, anyway, a slight element of trauma where I'm like, 'Oh man, I don't know whether I want to go back to livestreaming'. And what made it interesting was going hybrid, like this, and also sort of accepting the fact that we *choose* to do this, and that we sort of had left the medium of the livestream a bit unexplored, in a way, because we'd been forced into it the first time. And it was, of course, you know, Zoom and Teams with the talking heads and this kind of, you know, flattened experience of space. So, yeah, but there was still a little bit of a traumatic moment, I think, going back.

15:55 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Which is perhaps a very sort of similar story of remote work, again, which some latitudes, Italy being one of them, has never really been experimented, has been imposed upon people for the period of the pandemic. [2] And then people found that there were some sort of negotiation space between what the companies imposed upon them and what they wanted to do, and they struggled, of course - I guess perhaps more than us here, we still enjoy some freedom in what we do more than other jobs - many [still] struggled with locating this negotiation space, and where to draw the line between, 'Oh, this is something that I want to do remotely, this is something that I have to do remotely'. And the other way around. This is something for which I have to go back to the job, or I like going back to the job, or, or just sort of continue being on a remote work organization.

16:57 MICHAEL DIETER

Can I ask you more [about] how then you're thinking about it? Because I also bring this example up because I think early in this moment of like, okay, I'm choosing to disconnect. I remember when I would tell people about quitting Facebook, sometimes I would be greeted with hostility, actually.

17:20 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

What year was it?

17:21 MICHAEL DIETER

2010.

17:22 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

You were a hipster(!)

17:23 MICHAEL DIETER

Well, unfortunately, you know, it could be read that way. I mean, there certainly was the argument like: *who has the privilege to quit?* And that was very legitimate, I think, arguments around who can disconnect and who can't, especially when it's related to labour. But I think there was also, of course, people who would be confused: *what exactly are you doing?* And honestly, I didn't always necessarily want to get into a lecture mode about the problems with the platform, etc, because sometimes it was like we're at a party, we're at a bar, but people would be like, *why can't I connect with you on Facebook?* But anyway, I think in that moment, there was this idea that disconnection was kind of somehow a final gesture. It was somehow decisive. It was somehow a clean break. But I think what you're describing, and also something about even this experiment of going hybrid, it's more about choosing to connect and disconnect in specific ways. And I just wonder, can you expand a bit on how you see disconnection now? Like, let's say post-pandemic or in these labour contexts, how is it different from that earlier moment where you're either online or you're offline?

18:53 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Yeah, there's, I think, a big difference talking about our everyday lives, let's say. I guess I'll start by saying this. One of the key articles in that particular emergent field of research actually brings forward a counterintuitive argument. It's Stine Lomborg's article, and her title is 'Disconnection is Futile'.<sup>[3]</sup> This is, I think, 2020 or something along those lines, but very early in this conversation. And this is interesting because when you did this particular move, there was a sense that this was - I joked before saying this was a hipster move, because people still saw the good side, or primarily, predominantly saw the good side of this particular connection, which also reflected how platforms, how

digital platforms, social media in particular, came to us, social network sites, so networking, connecting was the thing - and now we are on the other side of this conversation, where they are more platforms than social stuff. So the platformization process has brought us to a point where these are instruments of some kind of social organizing, be it work or otherwise.

20:18 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Which is also what we are going to discuss tomorrow, in tomorrow's episode, right?

20:23 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

So we are in a very different place, because your move, if I can use that particular anecdote to finish my point, was in a setting where we didn't accept, or somehow come to terms with, the idea that disconnection is futile. You were running against the grain of a narrative that promoted social media as a good thing for the world. I guess we've passed beyond, well past that. And today, the people who do these kinds of things - from everyday practices up to work, which is sort of subset of this conversation, let's say - they do it upon the principle that disconnection is futile, and therefore you have to find a way to live within this hyper connected world, that you don't suffocate within.

21:16 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, so I'm thinking various things, and one of these is that I should probably arrange this beanbag in a different way.

21:31 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

I am also falling backwards.

21:32 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So let me do it, and in the meantime-

21:35 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

So we can move, actually. I thought I was sort of like a statue, freezing on this- Okay, because I am on the floor, actually. Oh, okay, let's try a new one.

21:49 MICHAEL DIETER

While you're resetting, I was thinking. Oh, are you ready?

21:53 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

No, yeah, I'm ready. I want to ask you. Not the best position to be on screen, but anyways.

22:04 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

This is before, now it's after.

22:06 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, yeah, exactly. But. So disconnection, when you're talking about disconnection, I can see you mean different things. It's like disconnection is a spectrum.

22:21 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

A constellation of practices.

22:24 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Ah, of course it's a constellation of practices(!), sorry if I didn't get it before.

22:33 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

I should have said this before.

22:27 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

No, of course it's a constellation of practices. I think constellation is a word that is getting momentum, so I like it.

22:33 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

I am also into Co-Star, and all this particular-

22:35 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Into?

22:36 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Co-Star and horoscope apps and all of that. We'll talk about it later.

22:39 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I don't know what you're talking about. But a constellation of practices amongst which I can see this limiting [of] social media use. So there is a growing awareness... We see it also with our students, our undergraduate students, that they would say, 'Okay, I want to monitor my time on social media, on Instagram', there's an awareness of it, and also some functionalities of the smartphone. They give you daily reports, etc. And I think it's also part of the Quantified Self, or any way calculating and quantifying everything, but there is this sense.

There is also a sense of what should we post and what we should not post, so what material gets connected and what material should remain disconnected. Probably the most evident phenomenon of this is the double sort of Instagram or Tiktok profile, like-

23:39 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Finstas.

23:40 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

The finstas, exactly that was the name. And then there is something else, which is the 'Okay, I quit a specific online platform space', like you quit Facebook, like recently you quit X, right, or I quit X. And the whole kind of movement of quitting a platform as a way to boycott the politics of the platform. Obviously, the case with X was quite evident, the reasons why and the whole debate, right. Okay, but this is futile. I mean, who cares? You know, like these people that were saying, like some no-ones like me, saying, 'Hey, I quit X!' And they're like, yeah, and now, you know? But then, on the other hand, maintaining a sense of intellectual honesty, so monitoring and being aware of the time you are on a platform. Opting out of a platform or a specific online space. Differentiating between what is connected and what is not, what is online and what is not. And then, also, I think I kind of sense that within this constellation of practice - already quoted, Gandini, 2025.

25:00 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

This counts as a reference.

25:03 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

This counts as a reference. There is also something that at least I kind of connect with the quiet quitting thing, with the whole

phenomenon, or another constellation. And now I'm gonna say constellation all the time, you know, you can start counting.

25:25 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

You like the word!

25:26 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Totally, I love it, because I love horoscopes, as you know.

25:30 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Of course.

25:31 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So the quiet quitting, la grande dimissioni, how do you say?

25:33 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

The great resignation.

25:37 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Those ones. And also I'm thinking of your research, Cecilia. There's Cecilia Ghidotti there, a colleague here at the Centre for Cultural and Media Policy Studies, that you did research on quitting the creative industries. So there's something about disconnecting that is not only about disconnecting within, or in relation to, the internet, but disconnecting to a wider system.

26:04 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

As a social practice. Yes, I agree with that.

26:08 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Did I get it right?

26:09 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Correct. And that's, I think, more clearly visible when it comes to work again, which also interestingly for me, is not simply something related to the pandemic. Now, of course-

26:23 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Inaudible, laughs]

26:24 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Disconnecting a little bit. Of course! Unplug.

26:28 MICHAEL DIETER

[Laughs]

26:29 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

It's not related to the pandemic, or it is related to the pandemic, but it's not simply the byproduct of the pandemic. It was there before, and there were things that were there before, that were already going into that direction only we couldn't draw the lines. You mentioned digital nomads. It's a form of disconnection from a certain type of work, one might argue. There are other types of work. The one that I have studied, again, neocraft work, potentially can be seen as a form of disconnection from certain types of highly

intensive knowledge work, which becomes hyper-datatified and very productivity-oriented with a significant level of digital intrusion. But then again, the pandemic has made this visible in plain sight. The great resignation, quiet quitting, are the ways in which you cope with these things, and remote work as well has become a sort of negotiating chip, let's say. The interviews we've done in another project in Italy were clearly demonstrating that many who have been forced to go back to work in person left their job at some point because they didn't like the idea of not choosing. And therefore, I think, something to connect to your broader, higher point, let's say, is about the possibility to be afforded to choose, which is also a matter of inequality, which goes in the direction of society at large. Who can and cannot quit social media is also a question. Who can and cannot quit digital technologies, or some forms of work, or highly intensive knowledge work, is also a matter of people who can or cannot afford doing that.

28:26 MICHAEL DIETER

I want to ask a question about this 'futility' baseline that you point to. Do you understand that as a kind of, like, what you would call 'the vibes'? Is that the structure of feeling around digital connection today? That it's futile, but somehow I do it anyway, or... Because I think to push things onto the more critical, theoretical side, how are you thinking about it? Is there agency here? And I guess, coming from the Italian tradition, is there a politics of exodus, or not? How do you make sense of these messy practices of a futile disconnection?

29:22 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

I think I see a bit of all of this into the mix. Certainly, it's some kind of form that is pointed at reclaiming agency

by users or workers, or- who can tell the difference now, who is a user, who is a worker? We are all the same. Also that particular literature that you mentioned, at the start, tended to distinguish between the two. I think it's not necessary anymore. A user is a worker and a worker is a user at the same time, without necessarily going into, you know, the digital labour debate. But because we are so plugged into a number of different technologies and platforms is really sort of factual now, hence futile. But also it may be seen as something that, again, is the acknowledgement of a state of things that wasn't there before, and that comes on top also of the realization that platforms have changed over the years. They're not simply there for fun or connection or telling other people what are you thinking right now, which is kind of scary. You can use Chat-GPT for that to an extent. But it's the realization that these are instruments of capitalism, and as a result, you know, they do something with our social relations that we have to somehow locate in our own scheme of things without necessarily being overcome by it, or hopefully not being overcome by it. Did I answer your question?

31:03 MICHAEL DIETER

Well, I'm still just dwelling on this 'futile' thing, because we had Valentina Tanni recently on CDI-TV. And I think her argument might actually be the opposite, where she was suggesting that if you look at internet aesthetics and the vernacular memes and so on that people produce around the experience of connectivity, a lot of it is that connectivity is futile, that the promise of connectivity - what we were promised in either cyberspace or immersion or some kind of sci-fi, Silicon Valley future - often the experience of that is quite a bit less than what we've been promised. So, yeah, I just wonder...

31:57 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

That's true, I agree with that.

31:59 MICHAEL DIETER

...about this, using this 'disconnection is futile' as a way to understand what digital disconnection practices might look like today. I don't know whether that...

32:14 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

I agree with Valentina's point here, although the way I understand it is, this is a slight variation of what I said before. So that promise we were sold, it's gone. There are some-

32:30 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

The promise that being connected, being on the social media, the promise of cyber democracy, the electronic public sphere, that sort of thing? That is gone? Okay.

32:42 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Yeah. Sorry for the apocalyptic tone, but you should have expected that if you invited me.

32:46 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

No, no, no, I knew. I mean, I was informed that-

32:49 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

This could have been possible.

32:51 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah that the Habermasian public sphere, Alberto told me.

32:54 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Yeah, no, I know.

32:55 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, yeah, I know. I was told that. So that is gone. And you said disconnecting is related to that-

33:06 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

To an extent.

33:07 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

-in a way to an awareness that, okay, you sold us like a fake promise, so-

33:14 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Not necessarily. I wouldn't see or qualify this as a sort of counter movement

33:19 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay.

33:20 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

But more as the realization that it's over.

33:23 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

The realization that it's over.

33:24 MICHAEL DIETER

That's like postdigital.

33:25 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Postdigital.

33:26 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Somehow, yeah, I like that word as well. This is very related to the disconnection debate too, the condition of our understanding that the digital is part of our everyday lives. Thank you for raising that. It's a point I usually make in these kinds of conversation that I missed doing before. So postdigital being the realization that our digitally hyper-connected lives are a structural condition of our social existence, which have problems that we need to work within, that might potentially be solved or not, we'll see. And hence, the simplified version for me is disconnection is futile, because you can't really just unplug from all of this. Well, you can, but, I mean, it's really radical/impossible.

34:12 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Sorry Alex, because-

34:13 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Of course.

34:15 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

-there's a link that I'm not able to make. So you're saying there is this constellation of practices of disconnection, which ultimately they are futile, because there is not-

34:27 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

No, the micro-practices of disconnection are not futile.

34:32 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay.

34:33 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Disconnection, as the idea of being unplugged by a society that is increasingly digital in the way in which we socialize, is futile.

34:42 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So the disconnection as an absolute thing, like 'full disconnection' is futile-

34:49 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Yes.

34:49 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

-also as in utopic-

34:51 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Yeah.

34:51 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
and unrealizable-

34:53 ALESSANDRO GANDINI  
Yeah.

34:54 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
-unattainable. However, the micro-practices of disconnection are not futile in themselves, they can be tactic, to use a-

35:03 ALESSANDRO GANDINI  
Yes. To use a [Tiziano] Bonini and [Emiliano] Treré concept.<sup>[4]</sup>

35:05 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
Exactly. They can be like a tactical move. Now I want to go back to, I mean, to stay in the meaning of these connections. Because from what you told before, from the micro-practices that we named, I see different aspects. Because there's one that also has to do - I hesitate to use the word self-branding, because perhaps it's not correct; a matter of habitus, who knows - but a way of signalling one's personality, or a way of positioning, or a way of signalling belonging to a certain cultural milieu or political atmosphere. So I quit X because I'm not a technofascist asshole, no? And that's the thing. So I don't think that I'm gonna change the world. Of course, I don't think that I will necessarily feel better myself. I don't think that, but I do it as sort of, yes, this 'signalling of the self' in a way.

Then there are perhaps moves like disconnecting from an uber-productivity expectation, which I think also has that sort of political côté, as in a contemporary form of micro-striking, or individual striking, perhaps one could say. But I mean, there is a relationship with those more in power, or with capital, capital versus labour, if you want to go Marxist. So I see this aspect. I suppose one of my questions is, what is the politics of disconnection, if we can start thinking in that direction? And also there's something else, especially when it comes to the monitoring, to the other examples that we made about monitoring, setting limits on social media, that I see more through a Foucauldian notion of the care of the self. Like, somehow I disconnect, because that's something that is bad for me. So I'm not doing [it] because I'm cooler. I'm not doing [it] because there is an underpinning political set of values. But I'm doing [it] because I'm getting fucking burnout and I feel bad with myself.

37:36 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Yes.

37:36 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So I would like you to explore more about the disconnection and its significance for the subject, and its social and potentially political significance.

37:53 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

I [will] start from the second answer-

37:55 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And then I go back [laughs].

37:56 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Then you go back. I start from the second aspect: there is a lot of that. One of the things related to the digital disconnection work-related interviews that we've done in Italy that is taking a straight line directly to some of the experiences that, for instance, my Gen Z students tell me in class when we talk about these topics, is the idea of being 'tired' of this.

38:24 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Tired.

38:24 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Tiredness. So it's-

38:26 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

An affect, an emotion.

38:28 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

The idea of the 'self care' in that aspect is absolutely spot on.

38:34 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Mm.

38:34 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Moving it into a politics of something. It's a whole different discussion.

38:34 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Mm, I suspected it.

38:40 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

And it still is, to make it very simplified, an individual response to a collective issue. So these are micro-practices that are still, for the most part, largely individualized. In work, we have two examples but this has not necessarily been only that. The example of the great resignation was a pseudo-collective sort of point, at some point, that people wanted to make...

39:10 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Can you- So perhaps everybody knows what is this great or big resignation, but maybe you can say a couple of sentences so that we appreciate- we are on the same page about this political potential.

39:26 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Yes, the great resignation is a term that encompasses...

39:31 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...a constellation of practice.

39:32 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

39:32 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

One practice, in this case. Quitting. Quitting one's job-

39:38 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

The planet.

39:40 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Well, that's Elon's idea. But the idea of quitting that became an option, started to become an appealing option, in the height of the pandemic, when many people, especially in two countries - the US and Italy, for some reason - many workers were laid off because of the global pandemic, and they started to reconsider their relationship with work. And so this has been difficult to actually record in numbers across different countries, but there are clear data that, at least in these two settings, something has happened in that particular period of time, and it's probably now also been reabsorbed into the wider social... but it was a pseudo- - I use this expression; Francesca Coin used this expression <sup>[5]</sup> - a sort of pseudo-social movement, when it comes to- there was a logic of contagion somehow. When other people saw that people were quitting and thought, 'well, I'm going to do the same'. It wasn't only individualized. And quiet quitting, to an extent, it was the same - being a social media trend. With a pinch of salt, discounting the fact that it was a TikTok trend. So it started out as something that people also did for perhaps a wider set of reasons, than just sort of quitting or quietly quitting, but it became something that people did with a sort of logic of contagion that points into this particular direction.

When it comes to the more micro practices, it's still very individualized, I think.

41:33 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Questions from the audience! Have you quit something?

41:42 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

It's Lent.

41:42 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Huh?

41:42 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

It's the first day of Lent.

41:45 MICHAEL DIETER

First day of Lent.

41:46 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Il primo giorno di quaresima [*The first day of Lent*]

41:48 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Ah! Well, while you think whether you... Oh! There's a question.

42:07 MICHAEL DIETER

Also, do you want to introduce yourself?

42:05 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Oh, hi. I'm visiting scholar Dr Guy Healy. Wonderful to be here. So impressed with your use of YouTube and the hybridity with academia. It's wonderful, most impressive. You mentioned the constellation of practices. That's such a lovely term. Empirically, what does that look like? What makes up the constellation? I think you mentioned it a couple of times, but if we could elaborate on that some more, thanks.

42:41 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

For the empirical side of this particular discussion, the data I have are related to work, and what we've seen is that it's never a radical thing. It's never some sort of radical thing. It's something you, at some point, sort of make sense and find your own recipe to do. Even when it comes to the ultimate decision, so 'I'm gonna quit my job' and, you know, start a sourdough bakery or something like that.

43:16 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Which is another job.

43:18 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Another job, but a different one, which is something that gives you back some certain types of autonomy, but it's perhaps a different conversation.

43:27 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We will talk about it more tomorrow.

43:29 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

We'll talk about it tomorrow. But it's never black and white, on and off. It's something that at some point you start making sense, that there are these different practices, and they come on top of the realization - and I'll use a term that I hope you're liking as much as constellation of practices - it comes on top of the realization that many people have had throughout the pandemic, many people who we have interviewed in these few years that their relationship with work is a toxic relationship.

44:01 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, I kind of love it. Also, the Britney Spears song.

44:04 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Of course. Britney Spears is a Marxist, as we know.

44:09 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

A feminist Marxist!

44:10 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Absolutely.

44:11 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yes. I'm just standing up in case someone wants to ask a question from the lovely, embodied, disconnected audience.

But also, of course, there can be some- if there are questions online, Cecilia...

44:26 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

There was a comment about how much disconnection is futile sounds like capitalist realism, so perhaps you want to comment on that connection.

44:38 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

What can I say?

44:40 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Sorry, yeah, that's my bad.

44:42 MICHAEL DIETER

It's on the stream.

44:43 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Yeah, we need more mics. So there was a comment about how much this claim that disconnection is futile resembles the notion of capitalist realism. So perhaps you want to comment on that.

44:56 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

What can I say? Touché.

45:00 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

45:00 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Yeah, clearly, for me, at least the way I read that particular debate. There is a lot of that in the way I approach and make sense of that particular conversation.

45:12 MICHAEL DIETER

...but do you see also within these micro-practices, a possibility to go utopian? Is it possible for us to start imagining a shared horizon that we can move towards that's not just postdigital, that's not just futile? There are many more calls, for example, for a publicly-led democratic stack. And I think the conditions that we're living through at the moment with, let's say, the kind of technofeudalist Trump alliance, certainly, I think, foregrounds the significance of thinking this way, at least in Europe.

45:57 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

That's a very... I'm not sure if I'm the right person to answer this.

46:00 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

No, come on Gandini. Pretend you think you know the way out of this.

46:05 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

No, I don't!

46:06 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Give us the solution, Gandini!

46:08 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

...and it generally ends up in a sort of apocalyptic kind of tone, which - I mean the room is light here, I don't want to make any apocalyptic sort of... - but I guess the serious answer to your question is there are ways in which we already have, potentially, a way out of this, as you were saying, which starts from the exact opposite of what is happening now when it comes to - as you described, this sort of technofeudalist turn that we're seeing in places like the US, but more generally speaking - the way in which a very limited number of tech companies get into the fabric of society in the same way that different other types of institutions in industrial capitalism have done, in a way that they organize everybody's ways of living. Thinking about the role of consumption, for instance, in both the 20th and the 21st century.

So how do we get out of that? I don't know, but certainly, one thing that I keep coming back to when I'm asked these kinds of questions is the idea that we have become unable to think about the future without thinking about technology. So the vision of the future is embedded in something that must be technological, while perhaps something that we can learn from this debate is that technology is not the end goal. It's a given. So what we construct, what we build upon a technologically-wired world, it's for us to decide not for technology overlords.

47:48 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I think you did amazing.

47:52 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Applause]

47:52 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Thank you.

47:52 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I love how you got around it.

47:53 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

47:53 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I love how you started, like saying, yeah, it's just totally the opposite of what we are doing now.

48:02 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

You're all so partisan.

48:03 MICHAEL DIETER

I mean, to be fair, it wasn't much of a question.

48:06 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

It was more of a comment.

48:07 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, I think I just gave you a statement.

48:09 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Laughs]

48:09 MICHAEL DIETER

Maybe a manifesto statement.

48:11 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, no, but it was good, and... Here, just because it's easier for me.

48:11 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I think you want to say something.

48:11 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Okay [laughs] pressure on me.

48:21 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Yes, I'm Greta. Hi. I'm just a doctoral student here at Warwick. And my question is maybe a bit going beyond work. But what I was thinking about - especially when there was a discussion about being simultaneously on and off and never really disconnecting - it made me think about this idea of connecting to, with, for, what? And usually we think about humans, right? We're connecting with humans. But I teach a generative-AI module, and I had a super interesting conversation about students connecting or forming relationships with

AI personas. And that's kind of connecting, being online, for what we could call maybe a chatbot, a bot, right? And it just really- I don't have a particular question, I guess. I just think how we can think about in relation to work, because there are various apps that, you know, allow you to train your interview skills with an artificial hiring agent, let's put it this way, and it kind of changes, reconfigures our social relations and practices of how we think of doing that kind of work and labour. But also maybe you can talk about emotional connection that perhaps might be more absent or perhaps more artificial. I don't know, just some thoughts perhaps about that.

49:57 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

That's a very complicated one. Do you want to say something about it?

50:04 MICHAEL DIETER

No, but I think I would love to hear what you think.

50:08 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

50:09 MICHAEL DIETER

But I would just add that Greta is making me think about what this connection looks like in relation to AI. And if you think about the vast reservoirs of data that have fed these generative-AI systems - and of course, in some cases, that is open data, and as we know, in many cases, it isn't - how do we think about disconnection in that context of datafication, extractionism, and then also, of course, our personal practices, and then maybe the larger social picture? Of

course, that's a lot, but is this a part of your research, going into the AI question?

51:02 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Well, I'm not there yet, so at some point in the next year, I guess, I'll wrap up the more work-related component, and then the idea would be to expand on things like the ones that you've just described, and more, again, a lot more on the micro-practices, and try to find more sort of theoretical connections and locate them more in a discussion around the social in the present day and age, with all these sort of platformization dimensions.

And to get to the point of generative AI, I guess my instinctive reaction would be that we now have generative AI, but generative AI is not the first nonhuman interaction and social exchange that we've created. We've come a long way in our relationships with algorithms now that is very humanized for many people, and we've done research a few years ago where it was pretty clear that the anthropomorphic algorithmic dimension is something that people do all the time, and you talk to your algorithm, and the algorithm doesn't understand you, and all of these sorts of things are a sort of proto-relationship of what you described. So we have some basic coordinates around which to build these new connections with generative AI that you were talking about. And there are also some other aspects that are pretty concerning, I think, which also relate to the idea of how we use technology as a general problem fixer more than a general intellect, where you have generative AI doing all kinds of things that supplement other things that should be there for pretty much everybody, let's say, but then they sort of become ingrained.

And, I don't know one thing that strikes me all the time is the use of generative AI as therapy, that many people who cannot afford therapy, and younger people in particular, have started doing, and the interaction the sort of psychological and therapy-related advice that they get from Chat-GPT and creating a psychoanalyst persona from a generative-AI application. That's already there, right? So it's very new, and I don't know what to think, other than we have some coordinates to that, but we have to find our own space of negotiation within them.

53:42 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And this also goes back to - now I'll give you the mic, Chris - but this also goes back to what Valentina said during our seminar, which was - sorry, I come a little closer - but basically she was saying, 'Look, it's not a new thing that we have a relationship, like humans-machine relationship'. And she was talking about the history of art, but I think it can be - No, no I love doing that, I love going around. - And she was saying this, but I think it also applies outside of the history of art. Like, you know how people have this on-and-off relationship with the apps, especially with dating apps, to go back to my research. 'Just to go back to my research' [laughs]. But that was really something that came across, like the algorithm as a libidinal object. And I think it's super interesting, this idea of that ChatGPT becomes not only a companion, but something more than a companion, perhaps even a therapist. I just want to be on camera.

54:56 MICHAEL DIETER

I knew it.

54:56 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah. And I think this is not that weird, like if you go back - well, 'go back' - if you think about how Lacan describes the figure of the analyst, or a certain transfer that you have, which is the 'subject supposed to know'. And in a way algorithms, even well before - or technology, or digital technology - even well before AI or Chat-GPT, occupied that function. That position, sorry. As in, we know something about you. We, as in algorithms, interfaces, or whatever set of technologies. There's something about you that you don't know, but we do. Like even Spotify that tells you, look, we know that you like this song, but you don't know it yet. So I think that it was really already there and I find it quite interesting. And also, in the module that we run for the Masters, we did a creative media project, it was on artificial intimacy, so sex, love, AI, etc. And quite a few students they worked on using AI as a sex educator.

54:57 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Wow.

54:57 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

You know? And this is something that I didn't necessarily expect. But then the moment you think about it, like, 'Oh, okay.' And I think it's super interesting looking at the position that technologies take.

56:33 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Yeah, I agree. I don't know what to add here.

56:36 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

No, just that you agree and I'm very clever. That is all I want.

56:41 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

56:41 MICHAEL DIETER

I think it's a whole other kind of unexplored genealogy to the disconnection debate, which is the libidinal side of things.

56:52 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah.

56:52 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, exactly, yeah. So maybe-

56:55 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So I am very clever, that's good!

56:57 MICHAEL DIETER

Maybe this is your grant! [Laughs]

56:58 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

This is my grant. My grant.

57:01 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, so this will be your forthcoming proposal...

57:03 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah. If there's someone connected that wants to give me, I don't know, 100k, 200k, I can work on that. But now Professor Chris Bilton, tell us also something about you. I know you're very famous, but just in case someone doesn't know you yet, you're famous because you're co-hosting the Media Whatever podcast, yeah.

57:23 CHRIS BILTON

So I am the co-host of the Media Whatever podcast, that's my main famous thing, with Carolina Bandinelli. And we talk about media, and we're going to have Alessandro as one of our guests on the podcast very soon...

My question is: the digital disconnection you're talking about is in relation to work, but for a lot of people, it's more about leisure, isn't it? And that leisure becomes work. And so there's a blurring between work and leisure, and digital media is right at the heart of it. So you're kind of doing things that are supposed to be fun, but they become like work. So my kids, when they're updating their profiles or responding to messages, it's work, it's labour, but it's supposedly fun. And flipping that around, you also have musicians and writers who have to spend a lot of compulsory time updating their social media accounts, which for everybody else is maybe a social thing [but] for them it is 'of the job'. It's more of the job than the writing. So my experience of digital media is something that is neither work nor leisure, not very pleasurable, and very time-consuming,

but addictive, and I can't stop doing it, and I still put up videos of my cats, which the students like, and then I feel better about myself for about 15 seconds, and then I feel worse, right?

58:53 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

58:53 CHRIS BILTON

Yeah, thank you. Thank you. Yeah, you're all in this space. So digital disconnection, for me, is sort of almost about a clarification of boundaries between things, and my Covid experience was like: *am I at work? Am I not at work?* I don't know. Everything just became this soup of sitting in front of a screen for 16, 17 hours with breaks and not really achieving anything. But maybe that's just life in general.

59:20 MICHAEL DIETER

What's changed?

59:21 CHRIS BILTON

Well, yeah, nothing. I mean, yeah, that's true. So what can change? I suppose we're back to the big question is how do we switch? How do we change? And can we? And is it utopian and futile?

59:39 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

There's two things that this beautiful point actually makes me want to say, if I can. I'll try to be brief. The first one is that I totally agree with the leisure/labor discussion that you just laid out. I would add that the way we've conceived, also academically, of leisure and labour, is something that pertains to industrial capitalism. Probably that's a concept we should ditch. It's over.

1:00:15 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Oh, it's over, guys. Amongst the other things that are over.

1:00:19 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Perhaps something from consumer research, like the idea of 'lifestyle', is something more useful, where you locate all these different practices into an idea of what you do as a living human being. I'm not there yet, I'm not settled already on this particular idea, but I think it works much better than just trying to figure out a boundary between leisure and labour, which is moving constantly and for individual people can mean very different things. The other aspect, also somewhat related to this, is when we talk about digital disconnection, we should not forget that - probably I should have said this before as well, in another set of the conversation - we should not forget that digital disconnection is also actively sought after by capitalism to make us work more. Thinking about mindfulness retreat[s], digital detox practices, are also practices that are there for us to do, as workers, so that we can come back to work more productive. I

think we are not past a Radiohead song from 1997,  
'Fitter, happier, more productive'-

1:01:34 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

No, totally we aren't there!

1:01:35 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Which is not even a song, it's just a computer blabbing words about how fitter, happier and more productive we will be in the age of computers. That was 1997, it was *OK Computer*, it's still here.

1:01:48 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I've been listening to that album these days. Yeah, I'm glad you just mentioned Radiohead. However, I'm not entirely convinced about ditching the leisure/work, because-

1:01:54 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

It was a provocation, of course.

1:02:01 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, I know, I know. But also I was at Lyon to visit the lifestyle research people, so we had this sort of conversation. I mean, maybe it's a bit of a basic comment, but I still tend to think about work as that thing that pays me a salary or with which I pay my bills. And I think that ditching this part, however, you know, maybe too much of a basic Marxist thing. It's still sort of dangerous.

1:02:39 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Well, do you want to be 'the Marxist'?

1:02:42 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

1:02:42 MICHAEL DIETER

No, just a comment, it seems like we are lacking the right vocabulary. Especially if we talk about a constellation of practices. I mean, we're really just...

1:03:02 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Laughs] Which we definitely are talking about.

1:03:03 MICHAEL DIETER

Part of me is not at all even opposed to thinking dialectically, at times. But it seems like it would be more productive in this conjuncture for us to have a wider vocabulary, beyond just work, leisure; you know, to describe different kinds of experience that mix those two. And I think of the example of posting your cat to your students: *what kind of experience is that?* And then just other experiences of conviviality, you know, a certain kind of sociality that is not reducible to a leisure moment or a labour moment, but probably is quite important for us to re-energize or become inspired in some way, or even maybe work towards. This is always a tricky point I think that Carolina raises, are we just engaging in technologies of the self and to what extent is this just the optimization industry? But it does seem related in the way that we can work on ourselves so as not just to tread water, I would think maybe make some kind of progress... I don't know.

And we have a question here.

1:04:38 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

I agree.

1:04:39 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

My name is Dion, and I'm a PhD student just at the end of the first year. PhD is in Cultural Policy - don't know whether that's relevant, but that's why I'm in here. So a little while back, I was just thinking about those three reasons that you gave for disconnecting, and the strongest reason I've ever disconnected is political value. And the frustrating thing is that initially, when I disconnect, it's been misinterpreted or ignored. So as a political statement, futile is perhaps the right word. And then with an awareness of AI models and systems - scraping, learning, whatever they're doing - there's almost a social responsibility to respond and connect actively, as activism, kind of, but that's in contraposition to the professional conduct in your work environment. So those boundaries that someone else talked about, they're actually quite important as a professional. As a researcher, of integrity and reliability, can I make the comments that I want to make to counter what's out there? And when I see other people doing so, I just do so. I just go ahead and risk future employable opportunities, because I want to put them on the right platforms where those potential employers are. So that's my sticking point.

1:06:24 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Yeah, wow, that's a difficult one.

1:06:26 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Heh heh.

1:05:07 MICHAEL DIETER

But I think super relevant. Because, I think that, well, certainly for myself, I self-censor in a particular way. That's putting it very strongly, but there's maybe some idea of disconnection there: for instance, I don't feel like I want to endlessly be on social media, making known all of my objections to things that I see going on in the world, for many reasons, and I wonder about that sometimes. But then I also wonder about people who really seem to be out there doing that all the time. And I think that there's some kind of very complicated situation we're in regarding the judgment of disconnection and engagement, the politics of engagement. Yeah, it's very, very complex. And that's also labour that we're constantly going through, assessing: *do I engage or not engage? Should I say something or not say something?*

1:07:36 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Yeah, it's quite difficult, and to an extent also personal, I guess, the way in which one would relate to this particular boundary that you were talking about. One thing we have as academics still, probably the only thing that we have left, is expertise. So that is also something that we might ourselves value more, because the rest of the world doesn't much. So we know that some of the things we say are not simply, should I engage? Should I not engage? But may come from a perspective that is not necessarily opinion-based, but it's based on-

1:08:16 MICHAEL DIETER

It's not just reactive.

1:08:17 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

It's not just reactive to a particular situation where you can make a political point, but also you can make a political point based on expertise and, let's put it in a way that I don't necessarily like, evidence-based research that carries some weight, at least.

1:08:38 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So 'Should I engage or should I not?' can be the new song of The Immaterial Labor, potentially. And of course, you're welcome to join as a 'feat.' for that. Okay, we have another couple of questions. If you all agree, we are gonna stay another few minutes. Tell me again your name, because I don't know how to pronounce it. Otherwise I would introduce you.

1:09:06 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

It's okay. I also don't have a fancy PhD, so it's fine.

1:09:09 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

No, but you are our real Gen Z. You know how we talk about all these young people, these undergrads, our students, hey, we have a real one. You know, Nanni Moretti. Do you remember Nanni Moretti? Giovanni. This is a reference only for the Italians, but hey. Okay, but thank you.

1:09:28 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

My name is João. J, O, A, O. I feel sort of embarrassed because I think my last two interventions, I mentioned [Marshall] McLuhan, but

because Chris mentioned the difference between leisure and work. And I've got to say, from the chapter on 'Automation' in *Understanding Media* - I think I'm quoting exactly here - he states that in the electric age leisure looks more like work and work looks more like leisure.<sup>[6]</sup> He has pages on that. But what was I going to say? In the chat, they mentioned capitalist realism, and if it is indeed easier to see the end of the world than the end of the internet. You sort of mentioned this political dimension - and in your question, [you] also mentioned the political dimension - because nowadays, a true political movement must have some algorithmic dynamic, you know? But how do you even have an algorithmic dynamic of disconnectivity, or of you disconnecting, if that's the air we breathe, the digital. During the pandemic, there was an explosion in off-grid stuff, like that type of content, like I moved to the woods, or I quit my job, etc, and I now lead this very non-online lifestyle even while I am an online influencer with millions of views and hours and hours. Another sign of this is these critical video essays of modern capitalist life that are like three hours, and I spend like three hours hearing about all the problems with digital capitalist life. But you know, I'm spending all my time there. It is sort of an ouroboros, because you need an algorithmic capacity to make a movement of disconnecting. But if you're still inside the algorithm, you're still connected.

1:11:48 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Can I just comment on your comment that you said you don't have a fancy PhD? I can give you one ad honorem. I think this question is totally worth it and if you ever want to do a PhD, you

know my email. So thank you for the question. And when you mentioned McLuhan, in that way, it was a totally mic drop, you know, it was like, ah, perfect.

1:12:10 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

He didn't read McLuhan [out]. I like that.

1:12:12 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Exactly. [Drops mic] I did it, I did it for you.

1:12:17 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

1:12:20 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

What can I say? There's a lot here. I guess the short version might be that this is not necessarily new either. It's always been like that, right? How do you fight capitalism - outside of it or within it? Right? It's the same old question. How do you reconcile the existence, which is perhaps the newest iteration, what we are talking about today, but that's always been there before as well, like different waves of refusal of work in a setting where work is still very significant in defining who people are and what worth is their life. So I see, and I totally agree, this particular circular, so to speak, kind of dynamic, which is sort of inherent, I think, to the idea of how you as, again, a political person, not necessarily in relation to party politics, but as somebody interested in the common good, position yourself in relation to these discussions.

1:13:36 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I like that we are getting deeper and deeper. And to finish it off the very last strike. Cecilia is our colleague here. Cecilia Ghidotti, and you also did a PhD on quitting the creative industries. So when it comes to quitting...

1:13:53 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Maybe I should say that it is not completely about quitting, but quite a lot of it. I cannot guarantee any depth at this point, so perhaps we just reached the top. I was thinking about vocabulary. So having done some research on quitting, especially in the Italian context, and we were speaking about vocabulary, my question is about, how do you engage or react with the temptation of reading contemporary practice of quitting in relations to the tradition of post-operaismo, operaista Marxism, because this is something that I've been playing with quite a lot, and I was always undecided whether to use that framework and in what dimension it could be useful or not. Especially considering, yes, the social movements of the 70s were very much social movements. However, workers refusing their work back then, they were not so politicized under many accounts, so more broadly, I was thinking we should perhaps [be] trying to look at histories of disconnection before the digital or even going back, like [the] Luddites, but how it is productive to open these avenues, or it is just simply too much in the effort that we are making of making sense of connection and disconnection and contemporary work.

1:15:31 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

This was the perfect last strike, I think.

1:15:34 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

I can recommend a book at this point. Nobody has done that yet, so I think it's appropriate, I guess. *Breaking Things at Work* by Gavin Mueller is a go-to read for this particular question. <sup>[7]</sup> Personally, I think it's useful to go back to these histories. I think it's important that we don't simply do that, so that it doesn't just become a self explanatory device. 'Oh, you know, this is like the 70s.' No, the field has changed. The rules of the game have changed. We can learn something from that particular framework and take, of course, the things that we need from it, but we'll have to adapt to a context that is indeed very different, because that particular framework comes out of a transition from industrial capitalism to post-Fordism, whatever term you like to describe that particular setting, that works for that particular setting, but not necessarily does in sort of a carbon copy with what we're living [through] right now.

1:16:40 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, I really love the idea of a media archeology of disconnection beyond even the Luddites. And sort of extracting - extracting is the wrong word - but tracing these histories and maybe some of them we don't even really know very well.

And just a couple of other comments that I'm thinking of. I think that with the disconnection debate, at least early when I was following it, other than the fact that it was painted in a very stark binary, there was, I think, a problem with not being able to think

about effects that could be long-term or medium-term, rather than just short-term. This whole thing of like: *What's the point of what you're doing? What do you think you'll achieve?* It kind of reminds me of how people talk about strikes, sometimes. Like, 'Oh, you have a strike, but the legislation goes through', or 'those people are still in power', and it's like, well, actually, the purpose of the strike is to subjectify. Subjectification. And we don't know the effects of it right away... 10 years from now, 15 years from now. It's transformative. I think with disconnection, it might be useful to think in those broader terms. And then another thing is investing in alternatives, so that when the moment of disconnection comes, there's somewhere to go to. I think, for instance, of the whole Fediverse. There are many critiques that are very legitimate about it, but it's been a long-term experiment, and it still sort of gains traction at times. I think those investments in alternatives also feel important within the politics of disconnection.

1:18:40 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

I really like the-

1:18:41 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Applause]

1:18:42 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Yes, please. I really like the metaphor of the strike here, but I would add one point to it. Another function of the strike, another goal of the strike, is to disrupt. So in order of doing what you've just envisaged, we should find a way for this particular set of constellation of practices, sorry, to become disruptive. At the moment, they're not. They are individualized, sort of self-coping strategies, for the most part, but they don't raise to the level of a disruption, especially when it comes to a disruption of, you know, social media platforms that

are so global and giant that it feels also difficult to think about how to disrupt them. And there have been attempts, as we know, but they didn't really work out in the way that we should envisage.

1:19:40 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

But it is also what you were saying before, like we don't know in 10, 15, years.

1:19:45 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Yes.

1:19:45 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We tend to be kind of short-sighted in this regard. This is just because I wanted to finish up on a surprisingly positive note. I think we've almost nailed it, guys. Disconnect! Subjectify! Disrupt! CDI-TV stream! Alessandro Gandini, Michael Dieter, Carolina Bandinelli!

1:20:11 ALESSANDRO GANDINI

Thank you everybody.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Alessandro Gandini and Alessandro Gerosa, 'What Is "Neo-Craft" Work, and Why It Matters.' *Organization Studies* 46.4 (2025): 577-95. ↑
2. Alessandro Gandini, 'Disconnection or Hyperconnectivity? Remote Work and the Case of Italian South Working,' in Albris, Kristoffer, Karin Fast, Faltin Karlsen, Anne Kaun, Stine Lomborg, and trine syvertsen (eds) *The Digital Backlash and the Paradoxes of Disconnection*, University of Gothenburg: Nordicom, 2024, pp. 215-232. ↑
3. Stine Lomborg, 'Disconnection Is Futile: Theorizing Resistance and Human Flourishing in an Age of Datafication,' *European Journal of Communication* 35.3 (2020): 301-5. ↑
4. See Tiziano Bonini and Emiliano Treré, *Algorithms of Resistance: The Everyday Fight against Platform Power*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024. ↑
5. Francesca Coin, *The Great Resignation: The New Refusal of Work*. London: Bloomsbury, 2025. ↑
6. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964/2002. ↑
7. Gavin Mueller, *Breaking Things at Work: The Luddites Are Right about Why You Hate Your Job*. London: Verso, 2021. ↑



SPEAKERS

**Alessandro Gandini**  
**Matías Valderrama Barragán**  
**Computer**  
**Glitch**  
**Noortje Marres**  
**Embodied Audience**  
**Carolina Bandinelli**  
**Greta Timaite**  
**Michael Dieter**

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value extraction  
interdisciplinary theorization  
social networks  
digital sociology  
societal change.

GUESTS

Matías Valderrama Barragán  
Alessandro Gandini

Noortje Marres  
Greta Timaite

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 Matias, 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](http://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? <sup>[1]</sup> 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 MARRS

Yes, that's exactly it.

35:59 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

35:39 NOORTJE MARRS

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 MARRS

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,<sup>[2]</sup> 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]

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.

44 : 58 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 MARRS

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 MARRS

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 disconcerting. 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.<sup>[3]</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup>] 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.

01:26:31 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.

01:30:21 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 issue. 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]

01:36:53 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>. ↑



SPEAKERS

**Rom Dziadkiewicz**  
**Computer**  
**Craig Gent**

RECORDED

**27 March 2025 at 12:00**

KEYWORDS

Novara Media  
independent media  
grassroots project  
student movement  
austerity programme  
live streaming  
supporter funded  
community radio

political ideas  
automation  
cyber boss  
luxury communism  
workers inquiry  
digital mediation  
live streaming resistance.

GUESTS

Rom Dziadkiewicz

Craig Gent

00:00 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ  
[Sigh] Okay, UKRAiNATV back and...

00:04 COMPUTER  
We drift together towards...

00:07 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ  
Nice to meet you...

00:07 CRAIG GENT  
Nice to meet you too.

00:10 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ  
...physically in UKRAiNATV studio. Amazing guest, Craig Gent, here. But we are in touch in the last few months, actually, collaborating across StreamArtNetwork, but for me, this is amazing occasion to talk also...

00:36 COMPUTER  
[Knocking, echo]

00:37 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ  
...mostly about your past. About your history in independent media activism...

00:46 CRAIG GENT  
[Laughs]

00:46 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

...about Novara Media, that you used to work there more than 10 years, yeah?

00:54 CRAIG GENT

Mhm.

00:55 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Craig is editor, director, author also of a very important book that we will talk a little bit about, I hope later. But yeah, this is what I found that maybe is good to ask you about: the very beginning of Novara Media. Because for us here and now, it's also a kind of case study and a kind of learning process of how to do this very grassroots, small project, one that's possible to grow up into a laboratory for utopian working/thinking about media production, co-production. So tell us a bit about the very beginning of Novara Media and your activity there at the beginning.

02:04 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, okay, so Novara Media began in 2011. In 2010 in Britain, you had a very big student movement. This was largely a response to the election of a coalition government in 2010 of the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, who embarked on a big austerity programme following the financial crisis and the massive cutting of the public sector, public services and also cuts to higher education, as well as an increase in student tuition fees. So this created a very big student movement that became quite radicalised quite quickly. In November 2010 there was a massive demonstration, 52,000 students on the streets of London, and that culminated in the students taking over and occupying the offices of the ruling

Conservative party and smashing into the building, getting up onto the roof, which then led to a series of follow-up demonstrations, a big wave of occupations across universities all over the country, so a real radical crucible of activism for students. But at some time in 2011, just about the time that participation was declining, especially because we lost the fight against tuition fees, the conversations were getting really interesting. And so in the occupations we were having these quite deep conversations about political ideas. And Novara first began as a place to have those conversations and to keep having them, and I suppose, for want of a better word, to sort of institutionalise those conversations, to give them a form so that they could be returned to. So Novara in 2011 just began as a radio show on a community radio station in London, and then we would get the recording, and we could put it on Mixcloud or on SoundCloud, and people could access it. This is kind of pre-podcasts in the form that we know them now. This continued for a couple of years, and then in 2013 there was the ambition to broaden it out, to become Novara Media. And the idea was that there would be a website with articles and things, but also there would be a video dimension as well. So this is the point in time when I got involved, 2013. Safe to say there was no funding, no arts money. There were no wages. We were all just volunteers, just doing a thing for the passion of it. But in a way, I suppose it was like the one remaining political project that outlasted the student movement and really came from that moment in time and has continued ever since. And I suppose the organisation really then grew again around 2015-2017. There was a big political appetite for that kind of media in the country at that time. 2017 we started livestreaming for the first time. I was telling you earlier that I think our first livestream was 40 guests, seven hours, one camera and one microphone. So we were always creaking under the weight of our ambitions, but today Novara Media is a project that I'm very proud to

have been involved with for 11 years. It's a full-time news organisation, but it also does commentary. It still has the podcast that started it. It now has many other podcasts as well under its umbrella, and it's able to pay people a wage, and the way it does that is because it's supporter-funded, and so it's the viewers and the readers who freely donate. They don't get anything in return, they freely donate to the project to make it possible.

06:25 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

So it's an NGO, it's an organisation, how is it formed?

06:32 CRAIG GENT

I don't know if I'd call it an NGO, no, it's a media organisation.

06:40 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Mhm.

06:41 CRAIG GENT

But it's supporter-funded, and so people just donate through the website. And then Novara Media has a good relationship with its supporters and develops a range of outputs - TV shows, podcasts and things like that.

07:01 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah, it's a long way from this one camera and totally like a few guys, a few friends, doing things in the street...

07:14 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, it's quite different.

07:16 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

...to this quite big organisation, with still like a precarious danger in the background, or as a context, yeah? How is it possible to do that...? I'm asking about the, I don't know, management maybe, or is it something that you could spread as a model of a business?

07:51 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, I'd like to think so. And the main thing that's disappointed me about the project over the years is that there haven't been more Novara Medias emerging, because I would like there to be a thousand Novara Medias.

08:04 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Totally. In my question, is this kind of imagination.

08:07 CRAIG GENT

Exactly, yeah. I think what happened with Novara is that we got to this point that a lot of organisations get to where they realise that to make it sustainable and to keep going, something big has to change. And so for us, that meant that we had to have some money coming in from somewhere. That was kind of growth phase one. We began to crowdfund in a sort of serious way. And with that we started paying for the things that we really couldn't continue not paying for. So we had to buy some kit, and we had to pay writers and things like that, but we didn't pay ourselves. We actually paid ourselves last, which I think is one of the main things that distinguishes us from any kind of NGO, because they will pay the staff costs first. And maybe that was a silly decision, but you know, we ran on passion for a long time, and it felt unnecessary. But then

the second, more crucial, moment was when we began to have the conversation about paying ourselves and how that would work, and how that would try to sustain the organisation. And that conversation, I have to say, actually went quite smoothly in our organisation, which probably spoke to the sort of very strong solidarity that that happened inside of it. Actually, I remember at that meeting, we had someone involved, just in that meeting, who had been involved with lots of different activist groups and things, and he was kind of observing, and he said afterwards, "I've seen organisations tear themselves apart over that question." And we got through it in a couple of hours. But what we did was, we had an ambition to pay people...

10:00 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah.

10:00 CRAIG GENT

...inside our organisation. That conversation was a conversation amongst us all as equals. We didn't have enough money to pay everyone for all the time they were putting into it, and so we kind of means-tested our wages. We said, "Okay, what do we think everyone should have as a minimum to live on per month? What do people already have coming in as income; maybe they're doing a PhD, maybe they already have a part-time job or something like that? And then we will pay people enough to reach this threshold so we're all living on the same wage." Which meant then we could all go part-time for the organisation. And then we actually went full-time one month before the lockdown, which was kind of good timing, in a way, because then we were in a really good position to expand enormously.

10:56 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

To expand, to exist...

10:59 CRAIG GENT

Exactly, yeah.

11:00 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

...in this strange moment, which was difficult to do something together, but on the other hand, I think for this kind of media project, it was also like a laboratory.

11:12 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, I think it came naturally to us. A lot of established journalistic organisations - you know, the ones that don't have an activist background, which is most of them - I think really struggled to adapt. But we had already spent two years producing videos in the street because we didn't have a studio, and then we were producing them inside people's houses because we didn't have a studio. And so then to just go back to doing things remotely was very simple for us, really, not without some challenges, of course, but yeah, I think it was a really interesting time, because it felt experimental. The other thing I wanted to say is that alongside the kind of money question, we had to have this conversation around our commitment to the project and to each other, which is a really hard transition point for any organisation that wants to become sustainable, especially, frankly, if you're going to make the jump from being volunteers to being employees. Novara doesn't have any bosses. It's kind of nice like that, but like it does have employees, people who work there are employees, and that means making a commitment to the

organisation and to the mission, and especially for a lot of organisations who are making that transition, you don't want to be in a position where, frankly, you have to enforce any kind of contract because you don't have the infrastructure. You can't. It's also going to be, like, horrible, you know. So you have to be sure that the people you're doing this with are really on the same page about the mission, which is not to say thinking the same thing.

12:58 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah.

12:59 CRAIG GENT

And that's really important to say. Novara has always been a politically pluralistic project. People have always had different politics in the organisation, but everyone shared the same overall commitment to the project. That's quite a big difference, I think.

13:17 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah. Mm, the next question, or kind of way of thinking about this could be... What is the drive? What is the most... Or, let's collect a few factors, aspects of this kind of project, directly based on your experiences in Novara. Because there is one more question behind this about automatizations, in a way, and luxury communism. But later.

14:05 CRAIG GENT

[Laughs]

14:05 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

But the first is the question, of course, it is like, kind of a community project. That's people who are the most important, but also like a workflow. That's the work with technology, the work with... this is what, after you're back with this nightmare of the cyberboss. But I think there was also something before. Kind of a dream, yeah? To combine this human energy and nonhuman energy. I would like to ask you about this sensitive moment or this space in between.

14:56 CRAIG GENT

[Laughs] Yeah. Well, I suppose the first thing to say is that I always saw Novara as having a dual purpose. At some points, this is more explicit, and at some points it was maybe more implicit. But Novara, in my mind, always had a dual purpose of trying to provide the means for the movement - by which we mean, social movement, labour movement politics, leftwing movement, whatever it is - allow the movement to speak to itself, to kind of provide this possibility of reflection, and a space for reflection, but at the same time to elevate some of those ideas and introduce them to people who wouldn't come across them anywhere else. They would come across ideas in Novara that you're not going to come across in your undergraduate degree or on the news or in a magazine or in the newspaper. And so those two commitments are actually really hard to navigate, and it's an ongoing process. And actually it means, I think, that a lot of people feel that you're letting them down along the way, if something you're doing is trying to reach new audiences, but they, in that moment, want you to be creating something that is allowing them to speak to themselves. Those two goals can be in competition with each other, so it's a really tricky balance to maintain, I think. But I feel like trying to straddle that divide has always given Novara a productive energy that has been useful. And, I don't know, the technology question is an interesting one, because, in truth, I've struggled sometimes to reconcile my years-long

commitment to this online independent media project and my political commitment to interrogating forms of digital mediation within labour. And I think I've sometimes struggled to wrap my head around what the relationship is exactly, despite the fact that the latter question is clearly embedded in what Novara is and has always been. I don't think it's a coincidence that I wrote this book, *Cyberboss*, or that my colleague Aaron [Bastani] wrote this book, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*. Or, indeed, the fact that Novara Media itself is named for the town in which the film *The Working Class Goes to Heaven* by Elio Petri is set, which is a film fundamentally about the relationship between the human and the machine. And so these things are clearly connected. But I always feel like I'm grasping at the explanation for how they sit together. But maybe that's what gives me my own productive energy: straddling these two things that are occasionally in contradiction with each other.

18:48 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah, I think it's totally... we are on the same page, also here [at UKRAiNATV] with this struggling and researching this intersection. So maybe let's think back a little bit about this fully automated luxury communism.

19:13 CRAIG GENT

Mhm.

19:14 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

What about this radical idea in 2025, when we have technofeudalism-

19:26 CRAIG GENT

What do I think about it?

19:27 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

What do you think about this now? Or maybe there is the history of your personal position into this.

19:40 CRAIG GENT

I suppose my relationship to that idea has been... I think it is important to situate it historically and to not take it too far away from the roots of the idea. So where this idea came from, as I understand it, is first of all there was this blog that was created by some people who were kind of around the Manchester section of a British Marxist-feminist organisation called Plan C that I used to be involved with, and the blog was called Luxury Communism. And the idea was that it was exploring ideas of abundance and a communal type of luxury, but also through the lens a libertarian communism, it's important to say that - we're not talking about Bolshevism or whatever - it's a libertarian communism. I think, in reality, the libertarian communist or the anarchist movement in Britain had had a tendency towards a certain asceticism. You know, anti-possession or, you know, this quite monk-like attitude that we should be dispensing with everything, and we should all share toothbrushes or whatever, which is obviously a bit of a caricature, but I think that was like a tendency, and instead, people wanted to say, well, surely one of the ambitions of this political project is for everybody to have as much as they need and to have the leisure time that they want, and not to be struggling for resources in this way. And so we should-

21:47 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

[Tricky?] version of luxury.

21:49 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, yeah. We shouldn't fetishize scarcity. And so it was kind of an aesthetic and a political intervention, I think. And the phrase they elevated was 'luxury for all', which of course confounds the idea of a capitalist luxury. So before fully automated luxury communism, we had luxury communism. And then at certain point, and who knows how these things really happen in the kind of like memesphere, fully automated luxury communism becomes a meme, essentially. And this is kind of interesting, particularly in a British context, because I mentioned these sort of social movements earlier on, but they were very much dominated by social democratic trade unions and socialist politics that really fetishizes the role of work and a 'right to work'. It had been campaigning for jobs, whereas those who were within the libertarian communist movement in Britain said, "No, we should be campaigning for liberation from jobs, not for more jobs."

23:12 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

The end of the idea is like a post-work society.

23:15 CRAIG GENT

A post-work society, precisely, yeah. And so I think fully automated luxury communism really came about in that sense. You had a critique, first, of the attitude to resources and to leisure and the good life that was quickly followed quite logically, really, by a critique of work itself. And with that, an attitude towards claiming technology for us, rather than for the people who, in fact, control it. So how that looks today... I think realistically the challenges are the same as they were before. We've obviously seen a massive intensification of the ownership of tech platforms

and so on. But I kind of think that the challenge is for anyone who wants to see fully automated luxury communism - and, to be clear, I've always been slightly less enthusiastic about the fully automated part than the luxury communism part - however, I still think fundamentally, whether or not people have that as a goal, the same problems and challenges arise even if your horizon is an internet that realises the promise of what we thought the world wide web could have been. Those are the same problems when it comes to the automated question.

25:01 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah, this automatization, I think it has many, many levels and scales. This is why I'm asking about this, because this is also part of the model of this small collective: working together, doing media, doing something like in a small studio in a garage, and sometimes we are like a craftsman in the period of high tech reality around, but in a way, maybe it's good. It's against dehumanization, or something like that. But it's also a slogan from the 20th century, so I'm afraid about being, you know, like a conservative, leftist.

26:03 CRAIG GENT

[Laughs]

26:03 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

But in the same time, maybe there is a challenge. There is a question to put more attention about particular tools here, for automatization in this kind of a production, remote production, co-production, also for our daily activity in StreamArtNetwork. Because there is a big gap between this interpretation of reality that everything is out of control and we are controlled by automatization and it's all trackers around, yeah? I think Cyberboss is also about this. Is there space to reclaim those tools, to work with

them in our conditions, to help ourselves to work in a more sustainable way?

27:04 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, it's interesting. I hadn't really thought about it in this way. But there is obviously an irony in proclaiming a politics of fully automated luxury communism, and then if I think about the workflow of how an organisation like Novara works, the idea of fully automating it becomes very challenging very quickly. Because it works on this, yeah, kind of like a craft model. In terms of how the division of labour has always looked within Novara, it was recognised very early on that there would have to be a division of labour, but that would be based around skill and competency, really, underpinned by a mutual respect and valuation, an esteem for people's different contributions and competencies. For example, even now that everyone at Novara is paid, everyone is paid the same wage, and that's how it's been since we started. The idea behind that was to ensure that the focus is on the organisation to share labour and to spread labour around. So, if someone's working harder than someone else, rather than paying them different rates, the focus should be to take work away from the person who is overburdened, and having a flat wage reflects back onto the organisation of labour in a way that produces, hopefully, a desired outcome. But I think what's missing here - because, of course, the application of automation to so many jobs, and if we're looking at like the cyberboss examples, and tracking and things like that - I think what's missing is fundamentally something around the politics of information and communication within work. Because the point I make at the heart of Cyberboss, really, is that algorithmic management is organised around not a new principle, but fundamentally a Taylorist principle. It's like a modern day Taylorism, by which I mean - for people who aren't aware -

[Frederick Winslow] Taylor is this big management theorist at the turn of the 20th century, and he's often associated with things like time and motion studies and piece work (so paying people wages for their output, rather than a wage for their time worked), but really I think his fundamental philosophical contribution, if I could put it like that, is the separation of the conception and the execution of work. And so the idea under Taylorism is that you have a division of labour by which a small group of people decide how the work is conceived and what it does and how it operates, and then you have a different group of people who just do the work. And so the people who are thinking about the work and doing the work are not one and the same. And of course, inside Novara, for example, the thinking about the work and the doing of the work are fundamentally one and the same. Of course, there will be strategy conversations and stuff like that, or ongoing judgement calls to make, it happens in any organisation. But there are always these kind of impulses to make sure that the conception and execution of work are not split apart from each other. And I suppose maybe to bring it back to fully automated luxury communism, what I would want that kind of automation to look like, and that relationship to the nonhuman to look like, would be to ensure that we're not dividing the conception of labour from its execution.

31:21 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah. And coming back to the present or the future and asking about also the relation between research, theoretical approaches and practice. This is also what I want to ask you, because you as a journalist, as an editor, as a director, used to work in very practical way with the media, and now I think [you're in] a transition to theoretical activity.

32:10 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, that's fair.

32:10 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

How do you feel also [about] your methodologies in this... That's all [a] field of practice-based research, working in the studio, also in the context of knowledge production. This is what I imagine is very important, and also this kind of gap that we have between people who assist technician skills and people who are in this humanistic or journalistic side?

32:50 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, it's an interesting question really because I suppose it gives me a moment of biographical reflection. I suppose I feel like I'm personally in a weird position, because so much of my journalistic work has never really been detached from the work of theorization, because I was always involved with the strategy and direction of Novara. And so although, of course, there would be these moments of being involved in things happening in the studio or the production of particular stories, it would also be the case that I'm constantly thinking about the kind of strategic, conceptual, questions as well. But over the last year or so, I've gone more into knowledge production, this book has come out, I've been talking about that and all this kind of stuff. And, of course, having had a short break from practice, it's making me want to re-engage with that again, but it has made me start thinking a lot about methods, and especially, of course, we've met through a shared interest in livestreaming. It's an irony that livestreaming is something that I was involved with in an organisational sense for a number of years, and yet I think like many people who use the technology I had a relatively shallow relationship to it conceptually, which might extend to a critique of the algorithm or whatever, all this stuff that we know, but not really thinking about what is the political

potency and potential of the technology, for example. That's the space where I'm at now. A lot of my work has been informed by historical methodologies of conceptual development around innovations, technological innovations in labour, such as workers inquiry, which was a big methodological part of Italian autonomism in the 60s and the 50s. And so today I'm thinking, okay, we have this situation where the new technology itself is the tracking and transmission of data, often in real time. It's not so far away from a livestreaming of something at the informational level. And what would it be like to think about either modes of workers inquiry and research, or, in fact, modes of resistance, that were also operating on this terrain. What does livestreaming mean for workers' resistance within highly automated work, for example? That's something I'm wrapping my head around at the minute. I don't have the answer. But I'm constantly thinking about it, and anytime I'm engaging with anything to do with livestreaming, whether it's artistic practice or aesthetic reflections, then this is always in the back of my mind.

36 : 32 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah. It's these expanded meanings of streaming, of data circulation. Yeah, this is what we are part of. Ongoing processes, and also this tracking and the very meta level and very practice level that... Yeah, this is, I think, a huge, huge field waiting for investigational researchers. Also in a very practice way, to work with trackers maybe in these kind of studios also, and to think about how the logic of these relations and so on... Yeah. And also I think this is kind of a polygon, the lab for a new intersection between some fields of knowledge production. We are at the Academy of Fine Arts, the aesthetics of stream art are something that we explore, but [something that is] totally is a kind of meme from our daily activity here [is] that the department at the Academy that we have a really good relationship with is IT.

38:10 CRAIG GENT

Right! Oh wow.

38:12 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Because they totally understand what we are doing. And this is something that's sometimes open, like a reflection about maybe a movement to another kind of environment, university to work with, people who are more into IT studies and infrastructure studies than the aesthetics aspect. We can negotiate always, but it's more about a really strong mix of aspects around this data circulation.

39:05 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, one thing that's interesting to me is that in conversations I've had with members of the public in 'public forum'-type events over the last however many months, has been people wanting to talk about the role of, say, tech workers or tech designers, technologists, content designers, hardware designers, and the role that they could play in some kind of opposition to digital Taylorism, algorithmic management, something like that. It's really interesting, and it's hard to know what that looks like in practice, especially because, of course, those roles themselves are subject to a Taylorist logic of their own. I have friends who are workers, programmers for consultancies, and they don't really know what they're working on. You know, it's kind of like Severance. They're working on some collection of numbers or whatever, but they don't really know what the overall output is. They're given problems at the level of code to solve and to work out, and not really an overview. But I think it would be interesting to... I mean, maybe we need to get our hands on some industrial trackers and things and begin working with technologists to figure out for ourselves what a kind of

détournement of these technologies might look like. Because it's very clear to me from my research - I had conversations with lots and lots of people about their interactions with these technologies, and aside from the effect on the workflow and so on - it's very clear that there is a strongly aesthetic dimension to the relationship in practice between workers, who get euphemistically referred to as users, but, you know, workers and the technologies themselves.

41:40 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah. And at the small scale, how do you find yourself in the StreamArtNetwork and some possibilities that we can create together? Also it could be maybe there last question before-

41:56 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, no, I think it's cool. Well my next ambition is to set up a studio in Leeds, is what I would like to do.

42:03 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Wow.

42:03 CRAIG GENT

Yeah. But I have to wrap my head around some of the technicalities.

42:10 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

There are more people around that could be involved in that?

42:14 CRAIG GENT

Well, I figure you build it and they will come, you know? So, yeah, I think that would be a cool thing to explore. But I think whether that's a possibility or not, I do want to think about what the role of livestreaming might be within either workers' resistance or workers inquiry. And I don't yet know what that looks like, but I'm hoping that maybe by the summer, I can bring some people together to try to have that conversation, because I do feel like there's something there, and at the minute it feels like feeling around in the dark for it. But yeah, I think it's really interesting.

42:57 COMPUTER

We are submerged... caught in a furious... interfaces, hybrid...

42:57 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

It is. And thank you for the conversation.

43:02 CRAIG GENT

It's a pleasure, it's so good to be here...

43:09 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

We're in touch.

43:09 CRAIG GENT

...in this hybrid space with you.



## SPEAKERS

**Keith Bloomfield**  
**Bahareh Heravi**  
**Sanjay Sharma**  
**Embodied Audience**  
**Jo Garde Hansen**  
**Tanaya Guha**  
**Speaker 1**  
**Carolina Bandinelli**  
**Sebastián Lehuedé**

## RECORDED

**6 June 2026 at 17:30**

## KEYWORDS

AI and politics  
critical AI  
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AI and society  
AI and education  
AI and mental health  
AI and media  
AI and environment  
AI and inequality  
AI and technology  
AI and ethics  
AI and regulation  
AI and industry  
AI and innovation.

AI ethics  
transparency  
accountability  
mental health  
automation  
regulation  
nonprofit AI  
neural networks  
critical minerals  
AI development  
societal impact  
AI training  
public education  
AI safety  
AI culture.

## GUESTS

Jo Garde Hansen

Tanaya Guha

Sebastian Lehuede  
Bahareh Heravi

Sanjay Sharma

00:00 KEITH BLOOMFIELD

You're live.

00:00 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We are live! Welcome everybody to this episode of the Centre for Digital Inquiry TV, CDI-TV, at the University of Warwick. I'm Carolina Bandinelli, and I am realising my childhood dream of being a TV presenter, and that is the main reason you are here today.

You might have noticed, the usual aficionados might have noticed, that Michael Dieter, my co-host and CDI co-director, is not here, and that's why I have taken the chance to stand up and do a proper audition. I'll see it as an audition for the next Eurovision, so I am going to try to be very good at presenting our guests today. I've taken some notes, but that doesn't mean I'll pronounce the names correctly and that I'll be able to properly match names, affiliations and titles, okay? But mistakes, glitches, experiments are really part of our process.

Today our topic is AI and politics. These are a little bit of buzzwords today. Nowadays, everybody talks about AI not necessarily knowing what they are talking about. Definitely I don't know what I am talking about when I talk about AI, and that's why I'll be soon joined by people that know, by people that can help us think through what the hell is artificial intelligence. We even have a computer scientist, so: interdisciplinarity. Tick boxes - just talking to the high-level people at Warwick here for my promotion. Not the Eurovision one, the academic one. Interdisciplinarity. And then we want to explore what are the issues that AI may pose on society, possibly going beyond and ahead and on the side of the either super-apocalyptic or techno-enthusiastic accounts. And then we also want to explore whether AI can be used for good things or to tackle some important societal challenges.

When with Sanjay Sharma, who will soon join me on this stage, we thought about organising this, we really talked about can we start thinking of a 'critical AI' field of studies or areas of thought, and what would it mean? So I don't know if this is a pilot, I don't know if it is a laboratory, but definitely it's not something that is a very fixed, determined and all done, all known. It's something in theory, it's something in progress, and we'll try to think together. That's why [you should] feel free to intervene at any moment, and also... No, I'll tell you this later - building some suspense. Can I invite Sanjay Sharma to join me here? Sanjay is actually the co-organiser of this event... Maybe you should...

03:55 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Applause, cheers]

03:55 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We are rehearsing! We are rehearsing for the big guys up there. And Sanjay Sharma is an associate professor at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies at Warwick. You work a lot on data and justice. Data justice and AI, ethnicity, AI and racism. You'll tell us more about it in a sec. Maybe you can have a seat. And also, because this idea was a little bit more yours than mine, in that you were the one really saying, "Okay, let's think about a 'critical AI'." So maybe to start with, I ask you - before calling the other guests - super quick, if you can tell us what do you have in mind when you think about 'critical AI'?

04:48 SANJAY SHARMA

First of all, it's great to be here and maybe I'll slightly pause, and... I've rethought the phrase of 'critical AI', because if anyone follows the debate, there's a proliferation of prefixes on AI. Ethical AI, critical AI, responsible AI, and I work in those sorts of fields.

There's an author called Yarden Katz who wrote a book about Artificial Intelligence, and he questions this prefixing of AI because it tends to not question what AI is itself. <sup>[1]</sup> What's the object of study here? We've had a day of events. When we named the day of events, we actually called it 'Critical Dialogues on AI', which I think is an important distinction. Very quickly, the field of AI is exploding. Every day you can wake up and there's a new model that's released, or more funding or some other amazing technology, and for researchers it's hard to keep up.

05:59 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Oh yes.

06:01 SANJAY SHARMA

And whilst there's critical dialogues circulating for sure, because there's many harms that AI is creating and producing and reproducing, it's still a fairly marginalised discourse. So even whilst Big Tech corporations talk about ethical AI, it's very much on their terms, and more distinctive voices are marginalised. I'm interested in inserting our voices partly into that debate, and also - which I'm sure we'll talk about later - is to actually question the realities of AI and whether AI is actually creating more problems than it's solving. I'll stop there.

00:00 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

No, but it's so true. There are all of these adjectives just put next to the word AI and sometimes it's not even clear what AI means. Also, I think another problem has to do with disciplinary silos and the struggle to communicate across different disciplines and different vocabularies, so that many people like

me - cultural scholars or cultural sociologists - we talk about AI, but we don't really know what we are talking about, so we need to establish more dialogues with people that know what they're talking about. For instance, Tanaya Guha from the University of Glasgow, who is a... Please, please come join me! Join me.

07:46 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Applause]

07:47 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And a round of applause, yes. Tanya, thank you for being here, and you are a computer scientist. So we are sure about that?

07:58 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

07:58 TANAYA GUHA

Um, no...

07:59 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

No? You see. Damn.

08:01 TANAYA GUHA

Electrical and computer engineer, if I'm being very specific.

08:05 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, this is even better from the point of view of crossing disciplinary vocabularies and barriers. You work at the University of Glasgow. You are a... What is your title again?

08:19 TANAYA GUHA

Associate professor, senior lecturer.

08:20 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Associate professor, senior lecturer. And you are part of the Social AI Group. You are working on a Leverhulme project on machine learning and remembering older women on screen. We were talking about it this morning. But to start with, really think about it as an opening statement: What are we talking about when we are talking about AI? For dummies, please? Because it's true that I don't understand.

08:49 TANAYA GUHA

Oh, that's a great question, I think you need to understand that. AI, very simply, they're basically mathematical models, statistical models, that you can code up in computers, and then you can teach machines to do certain tasks. For example, you can teach a machine to identify between a dog and a cat. So, essentially, they are mathematical models programmed and then doing some tasks for us.

09:22 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And there are plenty of implications of this apparently simple definition. And talking about the implications, I want to invite the third person working on the Leverhulme project on machine learning and older women on screen, who's Jo got Garde Hansen, so super round of applause for Jo.

09:53 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Applause]

09:56 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Jo is a professor of culture, media and communication at the University of Leeds, where she's also head of school. She loves theme parks - that may or may not be relevant, but it is because it has to do with risk. It has to do with being daring and and also being daring to lead and co-lead on a project that has to do with AI coming from more of a media and cultural background. So can you briefly tell me, or tell us, actually, how you got into that? What is your perspective? What kind of entry point did you find for yourself?

10:37 JO GARDE HANSEN

Well, the entry point for the work I was doing, or have been doing with Tanaya, was women and ageing. They were invisible or largely visible in media, film, television, etc. And we'd done a project - years ago, the AHRC, the Women, Ageing and Media Network that was run from the University of Gloucestershire by Professor Ros Jennings. Myself and others like Kristyn Gorton, who's now at Leeds, we were really interested in making visible older women. I think what came from that was this recognition that there was a tremendous amount of life-logging now of older women in social media. I spoke to Tanaya and we had a coffee and we talked about, "Okay, there's all these older women on screen all the time that are ageing on screen." And we got really interested in the messy and disruptive ways in

which older women were in film and TV. And you talked to me then, "Oh, well, you know about the Geena Davis Inclusion Quotient?" And I thought, "No." I didn't know anything about... I didn't even know what an inclusion quotient was. And it was also discovering that, okay, there are computer scientists who are being really thoughtful about their research. And I had met one(!) and I thought, "Oh my God, how lucky am I? I'll hold on to this person!"

12:01 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Laughs] Kind of intellectually get married!

12:03 JO GARDE HANSEN

Yeah! I mean, the thing was in our field, you know, you're doing really quantitative stuff and I guess I'm doing really qualitative stuff. And never the twain meets, you know? And I thought, "Okay, this is such a reach and a bridge between methodologies." But at the same time we had a shared value system, which was really interesting. Values around women and diversity and who gets to speak, and how long they get to speak, and how visible they are in media. And we were just kind of, "Okay, there must be ways of bringing this together."

12:39 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And I was thinking, in a way... You said your entry point was through the topics of your research: the memory aspect, the gender aspect, the media aspect. And in a way, this AI thing -

there is a good reason why everybody, also from the social sciences and humanities and the arts are thinking, "Okay, I need to engage with AI." It is a buzzword, yes, but it's also a buzzword for good reasons, because it puts us in the position that we have to rethink our disciplines, and we have to rethink our topics and subjects in light of... I don't know if it can be called- it's probably a revolution, or, to say the least, a technological (hence also cultural) shift that of course reproduces certain things - so we shouldn't fall in the in the trap of, "Oh, everything is new" - but definitely it also has an agency as a medium, and it is very pervasive, so we need to understand it. Talking about topics, issues, values actually, that are rethought and are put in dialogue with the technological and cultural implications of AI, let me welcome Bahareh Heravi. Bahareh, I asked before how to pronounce it.

14:13 EMBODIED AUDIENCE  
[Applause]

14:13 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Bahareh is from the University of Surrey, where she's a reader on AI and media, and you are also a BBC BRAID fellow, right? Did I say good? These are my notes.

14:19 BAHAREH HERAVI  
All perfect.

14:30 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Fantastic. So I know Bahareh a little less than the other guests today, so full disclosure, but I'm very happy that I'm getting to know you now. Also very nice look.

14:45 BAHAREH HERAVI

Thank you. [Laughs] Thank you.

14:47 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Because also look matters. We are women on screen. Jokes aside, I really like you, and so I'm happy to ask you, is it correct that you work with AI, democracy, journalism... Is it true?

15:06 BAHAREH HERAVI

Is it true?

15:07 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Is it true or not?

15:09 BAHAREH HERAVI

Is that the rumour?

15:10 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

This is a bit of a true crime narrative. "Is it true that you're working with AI and democracy?"

15:17 BAHAREH HERAVI

I work on AI and journalism, so media and journalism. My work at the moment is mostly focused on how journalists use AI and as part of the BRAID programme that Sanjay is also part of I'm a fellow at the BBC working on responsible AI literacy for

newsrooms and at the BBC. But in terms of the questions that you're asking, "Are you a computer scientist, and where are you coming from? And what's your story?" It surprises me now to say my background is actually computer science.

15:49 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Ooh, this is a scoop! We already have a scoop talking about journalism.

15:54 BAHAREH HERAVI

Yeah, and somehow I managed to move into the journalism sphere towards the end of my PhD. I can tell you the stories later, but yeah, that's the area I work on.

16:08 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, great. And then now last but not least is Sebastián Lehedé from King's College [London]. Please.

16:18 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Applause]

16:21 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Come next to me. Sebastián is a senior lecturer in AI and society.

16:30 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

Not yet, only lecturer.

16:31 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Only lecturer. I promoted you.

16:33 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

We're waiting for the promotion, yeah.

16:35 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We are ready for- When you promote people, it's good. If you drag them down, then they might hold the grudge on you. So that's fun. That's fantastic. But for me, as far as I'm concerned, you can totally be senior lecturer. I have no problem with that.

16:35 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

That's right, tell people at my university.

16:50 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I'll tell them, I'll tell them. Because your research, I find it super interesting. Sebastián came a couple of weeks ago to give a seminar on his research, and he looks at issues around climate change and environmentalism, looking at both the possibilities and the obstacles that AI might pose. So can you tell me - it's a little bit the same question that I asked to Jo - what was your entry point?

17:23 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

Yeah, yeah. Well, thank you for the invitation. I love this format. It's very interesting. I think we're not used to

this, so maybe we look a bit nervous, because as academics we don't do this very often. So thank you for the invitation.

17:34 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Never, c'mon. I'm a mess. How can you feel like...

17:38 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

[Laughs]

17:38 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I'm giving the example.

17:42 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

No, basically, during my PhD - some time ago - I did it about astronomy data in Chile. We can talk about that in more detail, but the governance of astronomy data. I met some indigenous people from the Atacama Desert affected by the construction of some of these observatories, and when I talked to them about astronomy and all those kind of things, they would tell me, "Sebastián, that's important, but we have a more important issue here, which is lithium extraction." Lithium is one of the components that are used to build digital devices, even data centres - which are these buildings key for artificial intelligence - use a lot of

lithium. That took me into the material footprint of digital technologies. After that, I turned to data centres, which are these very important buildings we can talk more about. But always with a focus on communities, people, how they are affected, how they are resisting, how they are negotiating these kind of things. So I look at the environmental impact of artificial intelligence from a more grounded or community perspective, if you want.

18:53 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And what are you finding out?

18:56 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

I'm finding out that the discussion that we're having at the moment about AI is very exclusionary and very elitist.

19:03 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay so these are two things that we can think about. Why?

19:07 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

Yeah, yeah. Basically because I think the people who are the most affected by the environmental impact are not part of the discussion usually, and I think they should be, because many of them have very valuable ways of

engaging with nature, with the environment, which I think is something we have to highlight in the current context of climate crisis, rather than undermine. And I think it will make us think AI from a different perspective. Most of the time, they are not AI abolitionists. Even people resisting data centres, it's not that they are totally against data centres inherently, but I think we can come up with a vision of AI that's different if we pay more attention to these groups. And that's only one example, but there are also data workers, so many groups that are not part of the discussion.

19:56 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

This is really good. I was hoping that you would give me a nice cross and bridge for me to open up the discussion, and you did. So thank you very much.

20:06 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

You're welcome.

20:06 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Also, do we want to say ciao to your mama and papa?

20:09 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

[Laughs] Yeah.

20:10 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Because they are connected.Ciao!

20:12 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

Hola, hola, hola.

20:14 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Hola. Bienvenidos.

20:17 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

I told Carolina that my parents will be looking at me today, so they're on YouTube at the moment. They don't speak English though, but I hope that there's a live translation or something so they can understand.

20:28 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Hopefully, hopefully.

20:29 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

Using AI, yeah. We can talk about the environmental footprint of that tool.

20:33 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Exclusionary and elitist. Let's stay with these two words, because on the one hand, there is a sense of, "Okay, AI is everywhere. AI is pervasive. AI has been everywhere for a while

on our smartphones, and it's already very much part of the way we live our lives." So we are all kind of implicated in a way and co-living with AI, but at the same time it is exclusionary and elitist, and the way I'm gonna think about it is elitist because a lot of people use AI, but not a lot of people have AI literacy. So there is this divide, and also exclusionary, because of course there are matters of power implicated in who develops AI for what, where the funding comes from, how is that put to work? And when it comes to AI literacy and matters of power, I think... Bahareh, do you want to add something on it? Maybe you can tell us something more about it? Would you say that's true? When you work about AI literacy, is that the direction you're going in?

21:52 BAHAREH HERAVI

I think I see it in two ways. In a sense, I think AI is democratising the access to information and the access to technology. On the other hand, it is creating bias and ethical issues that we can talk about a little bit more.

But in terms of democratising, what do you mean with that? If we look at a lot of... I'm going to look at both sides of it. If we look at certain levels of privileges that people have had, for example, people who are born with language as a native English speaker. They would have forever written much more easily. As you think, you write, and you can very easily get to certain... You can have good proposals, you can have good papers, you can have good dissertations, and so on. And at some level, a kind of divide is being created here. Now using ChatGPT, people who don't have good English, people who are

coming from other socio-economical backgrounds, have access to certain technologies that could help them create output that could be considered of similar quality. Is it good? Is it bad? Different people will have different views on that. I was in a conference or workshop where a journalist basically said, "I think AI should be used for everything, including information gathering, verification and so on, but not for writing." In my opinion, it's like, why? Because all the other phases of information collection, analysis, verification, and so on, to me are the main parts, while the words are how I'm going to explain that. If I'm good at explaining, I'll do a good job. If I'm bad at explaining, which I am, I will not do a good job. So to me writing may not be considered as the most important thing, while to a journalist or to somebody with a very good level of writing in English and so on, that would be the main output. So we might see this differently, as a tool, as an enhancement, or as a threat, or as something that's destroying the likes of journalism and writing and creativity. But at the same time, certain issues that AI is creating because of who is developing it - who has power in integrating certain decisions and so on in AI systems - are creating other challenges in societies and creating possibly bigger divides that I'm sure other speakers could also talk about.

Yeah, exactly. It's interesting what you said, because it's a similar... Some parts of what you said, it's similar to the debate that surrounded the internet and basically any new technology. There is, on the one hand, "Oh my God, we are going to be substituted by it. We're going to be made obsolete. We're going to lose our memory. We're going to lose our cognitive capacity." The first- one of the first, at least in the Western tradition, who did it was Socrates. In the fifth century before Christ in his letter against writing, which was then written by Plato because, indeed, he wouldn't write. And he was like, "Oh, writing is going to be the end of our memory, is going to be the end of our tradition, is going to be the end of our cognitive ability and the ability to form a community." And now to us, it seems quite funny, because we see in writing that authenticity of the very analogue media and the materiality of paper, etc, but that was not the case.

In a way, with AI it's the same thing. It's about the widening the access to means of production. A little bit what happened with [the] internet, with user-generated content, but even with smartphones, if you think about audiovisual production. But then, on the other hand, these issues of power, and the issues of power are the issues of who produces it, and the issues of who produces it, it goes both ways. One is, of course, the economic issue. Who's going to profit by it? But also whose world-vision is reproduced and implemented in the gaze of AI, to use a word from your project. Maybe Sanjay, you can tell us something more about it, about what values are reproduced, and what are the exclusionary patterns that you've noticed in your research?

26:33 SANJAY SHARMA

I think the question of having the parallel discussion around the internet, and how the internet develops, is interesting. Not to collapse the two things together, with AI. The internet partly developed from an academic-military complex.

26:50 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

The ARPANET, no?

26:51 SANJAY SHARMA

Yeah. But then it had certain protocols which were open protocols, which allowed effectively anyone who shared the protocol to be part of the internet. And then the Big Tech companies came along and created walled gardens. Facebook became the internet, for instance. They kind of took over the internet(!) So when you when you talk to kids these days, they don't really think about the internet, they think about apps, for instance, instead, which are very much different from the promise of the internet. And the problem with AI I have at the moment is that it simply reproduces this kind of walled garden effect about who develops it, who controls it. Whilst it allows a certain kind of democratisation of, say, writing, we have very little control about the tools we are using.

The tools are effectively very opaque, and we're kind of enslaved by them. And, you know, they have a certain mystique to them. You type in something and it'll summarise a really boring set of texts and produce a report for you really quickly, and you think, "Wow." But I like to step back and think, "Well, what's the context of what's going on here?" For example, I remember reading an article about working-class students being able to improve their university admission statements using ChatGPT, and the argument was it equalises the field, where the middle-class students had all the cultural capital in the world they can apply, and so it kind of democratises it. On one hand, you think, "Yeah, that's a kind of interesting

use of the tool." But then you think, "Does that really question the structure in the first place of the structured inequality, or is it still just effacing that? Obscuring that?" In many ways, I think a key point for me with AI is it's a technology which obscures many, many different kinds of power relations. So when I think about AI, I don't just think about the interface or the code. I think about it being part of a wider socio-technical assemblage, which is in many ways reproducing many inequalities. Some of the side effects might be that it increases certain elements of... where people can participate more or improve their skills. One of the simplest definitions of technologies: it augments human capacities. And AI certainly does. But the conditions through which it augments our human capacities, for me, in many ways, it's quite problematic. And if we are going to have some kind of AI, I think go back to Sebastián's point: how do we imagine it? Who's it for? Who actually benefits? It seems like the benefits are often side effects, where the real benefits are for Big Tech and big corporations to concentrate power and try to recreate even greater wealth.

30:02 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

You seem to be saying the problem is not necessarily AI in itself, but the socio-cultural and also socio-technical context in which it is produced. And another thing that you said that I really liked - well it resonates with me - is that sort of 'mystique'. There is some kind of magic for the ordinary user, like, "Look at what it did." And so I would like to hear from Tanaya also, because Tanaya will need to leave, so when you have to leave, just leave, okay? No problem at all. So how it is from the viewpoint of those that actually work with AI and create AI and code AI? What is the backstage of this 'mystique'? And how would you describe the way in which you, your colleagues, or

the industry - sorry if I'm not using the right word, I acknowledge that I don't master that jargon - but how do you see the relationship between the technical side, the mathematical model, and all the political implications that are there.

31:23 TANAYA GUHA

Okay.

31:25 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So my first question is: can we unveil the mystic?

31:30 TANAYA GUHA

Alright, so I'll try my best. Can we go back a little bit in time. AI as we know it today wasn't built in a day, right? So it existed before. I think around 1970s there was a big hype that AI is going to take over and everything, and then it went down because we couldn't go beyond - just using some technical terms, so disclaimer -beyond two layers of neural network.

31:59 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Beyond..?

32:00 TANAYA GUHA

Two layers of neural network. Now we have millions and trillions of parameters.

32:07 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And in the 70s, two?

32:11 TANAYA GUHA  
Let's say 10s.

32:12 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
10s. And now millions?

32:14 TANAYA GUHA  
Trillions.

32:14 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
Trillions. Okay, that's a huge step.

32:18 TANAYA GUHA  
Back then, AI also existed but nobody was interested in them.

32:23 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
Okay.

32:23 TANAYA GUHA  
There were researchers - they were just doing their work, they were solving problems, they were doing science - but there was not much interest from the corporates or from the big tech companies. And then there were big hardware innovations. Nvidia came in, and if you look at- I actually have a nice slide with a timeline of why deep learning and AI

became so big. It's also associated with hardware development. A lot of chips became very easily available. They became powerful. And that gave the power of compute. And now the computer scientists could do things that they could not do in the 70s, not because they did not have the mathematics, [but] partly because they did not have the hardware to do all this kind of computation. That's the first time AI - or AI machine learning - was shown to be doing something that is meaningful, or at least close to what humans can do. And that's when people started taking interest. So if I talk about my career, in 2007 I took my first machine learning class. I used to explain to everybody what it means. Nobody knew what it was, what it does. There was no interest. And now everybody wants to know why you are not doing machine learning if you're in computer science.

32 : 24 TANAYA GUHA

But what changed? Why do you think at some point it became interesting?

33 : 57 TANAYA GUHA

The hardware development, which triggered our power to do lot of compute, that was one thing. Another thing is data being available - because of a huge internet, and, you know, you have devices everywhere. Now you can get data very easily. What you could not get earlier... getting an image was not very easy. Now you have millions of images very quickly. It doesn't cost much. So now you can train both using your hardware and your data quite a lot. And that's when it started

showing some signs of result that could be useful for humans. Before that, nobody was interested. And that's when we started seeing companies getting interested in it, and then commercialization. I often say that when we were doing our PhDs - in early 2000s, early 2010s - that's a time when the companies were picking these things up, and there was still more innovation of AI coming from academia. But now, if you see, it's mostly companies, Big Techs, that dominate the big models, or everything that is being used, how they're going to be used. Even in academia, we end up using their models, which is a very different setting than it used to be 10 years ago.

35:19 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So what happened? Why is...

35:21 TANAYA GUHA

It started giving some results, and companies got interested. More money was bought in.

35:21 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, we scholars are good at things that don't produce results. That's our speciality. [Crosstalk] now that it's working!

35:37 TANAYA GUHA

[Crosstalk] labs to the reality. I mean, that's happened with most technology. It was in the lab for many, many years, and then when it started producing some good result, then it moved more towards commercialization. Big Techs got

interested. And then, in the last... after GPT, actually, everything just exploded.

36:03 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

The big change for the general public, so to speak, was with ChatGPT, right?

36:10 TANAYA GUHA

Yes.

36:10 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So I'm gonna ask another question to you, because I need to take advantage of the time that we have. What kind of technical innovation did ChatGPT bring about that it made a difference? Because at some point it became everybody's concern. Whereas up until that point, for instance, people like me wouldn't know about neural networks. Now I know. From the technical point of view, what's in there?

36:55 TANAYA GUHA

Again, it has been a long process. Researchers will know they have been doing these kinds of development to generate natural language for many, many years. But suddenly what was different in ChatGPT was the scale at which they were producing. The scale at which they were training these models, which are huge models, which takes a lot of money to train. We cannot basically train them in academia. That scale-up in terms of data and in terms of compute, that changed the results. Earlier, you could not generalise to unseen questions. You can ask ChatGPT any question [and] it gives you an

answer. It may not have seen the questions before. That sort of power comes from scaling-up in terms of data, also in terms of the models they could use because they have huge computational power.

37:53 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

I just wanted to add something. I completely agree with that description, but I think that at some point this specific type of AI - let's say machine learning, LLMs like ChatGPT, for example - this form of technical progress also found a business model, right? This scale allowed companies such as Google and Microsoft to create a business model out of it by providing the infrastructure or the cloud that would enable the analysis of these huge amounts of data. So you have researchers in academia doing very valuable research for decades. I'm not part of that discipline, but that's how I understand it happens.

38:35 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Because you are too young.

38:37 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

I hope so(!) But then until there was some technical progress that became profitable... It was when these technology companies got it and

scaled it, and made it public for everyone, let's say.

38:55 TANAYA GUHA

If you look at Google or Facebook, they didn't start as AI companies, right? Google was a search engine, then Facebook had social media, but they all saw the power and the profit that the companies can make. And as you said, the clouds were available from Amazon and basically Nvidia making all these hugely efficient GPUs, that was a big turning point. I think sometimes people miss that - how much hardware development actually sped up the whole process.

39:33 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

You don't need me to talk. It's not school. So if you want to add something at any...

39:41 JO GARDE HANSEN

I wanted, while Tanaya's here really, just for you to say a little bit about how film and television were important for your early work. Because I think part of our project is revealing the origin story and the memories [of] how film and television has been forgotten in that early manual machine-learning work that you were doing. I think it would be a really good opportunity to say a little bit about that.

40:06 TANAYA GUHA

Sure, yeah. It came up in the discussion yesterday. Before that, I did not know these things could be

important to anybody. Like, how [in] earlier days we used to train models, small models. One easy way of getting... I said getting data was not easy, right? One easier way of getting human data was using film clips and movies. We used to use those clips and movies, and painstakingly would draw the bounding box around faces that you see almost in every camera or anything, and they would do it frame by frame, and if it was audio, then we'll do the hand-marking, going seconds, microseconds level sometimes, like, who's speaking, what the gender is, things like that. We used to use a lot of film and television data for that to train those models. Of course, things have changed now, but computer scientists still use a lot of film and TV data to test their models. Even actions, like what actions are being performed. The entire video that you are creating now, we could use it for training models and validating models. Postures, actions, spoken words, accents, everything can be used.

41:31 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, so I'll let you go. Does someone want to ask a question that only Tanaya could answer? Like a technical question? Vincenzo, for instance, do you have a more... I'm asking Vincenzo because I know that he knows this part of the thing.

42:08 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

One thing that now is on my mind is that... One problem that is, I think, an hour... Because three, five hours ago, the team of OpenAI published an article that they exposed fraudulent groups [which] has publicised, as you said, data models to harm and direct public speech, to harm specific groups, or to monopolise the discussion in the USA. And it's

very interesting, because they like to explain all the movement that they use, and it's not so high technology. The system is created with the help of ChatGPT, with the use of the code. So now one question is, okay, OpenAI has the right to effectively block these profiles, but we have some limitations in this model, like censorship and other type of things. But is that the right way? Technically speaking, we have the moment to put some control in this system, or we have to maybe rethink how they are built, these systems.

43:55 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I love your Neapolitan English, because I have a Florence English. So I say 'because'. And you have the Neapolitan English, we would be a perfect duo. So basically, you're asking about AI and censorship, and whether these models should include some form of censorship or not?

44:16 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Yes.

44:16 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Referring to something that happened a few hours ago.

44:17 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

A few hours ago, it's the paper, but this is happening in at least in one year that some groups use ChatGPT for fraudulent action...

44:19 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

One year... For fraudulent action... Okay, so it's about regulation, and about how do we regulate these mathematical models?

44:39 TANAYA GUHA

I think that's a big question. I think everybody is asking this question. I don't have an answer for that. But as long as... I think I'll repeat what I was saying earlier, that it's not the technology itself, but the users - how we are using it - or the producers that need to be more mindful. I am not sure what exactly was the incident that you were referring to? I don't know the incident.

45:12 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

What was the incident that you're referring to? [Italian]

45:14 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

In particular... It's eight different incidents...

45:26 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Eight different incidents, saying on the microphone.

45:31 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Eight different incidents. One known as High Five, where group to the immigration in the USA to mobilise the discussion of immigration in the USA. The other ones like Vixen and Keyhole Panda, it's another group on the Chinese sphere of the internet...

46:01 TANAYA GUHA

What are they doing? That's what I did not understand.

46:05 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

It's not that they don't understand. It's that, okay, that OpenAI has this power to control effectively what the user do. It's okay that they can act directly to some malevolent, effective reaction, okay, this is like...

46:25 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So it's how OpenAI reacts to potentially fraudulent or misuse.

46:33 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Yeah, because the fact is that okay, this is a misuse, and...

46:37 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

This is a misuse, okay...

46:39 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

...print a correction, but it's not something that has to be directly on OpenAI. But in this case, it's OpenAI that operates directly on it.

46:54 TANAYA GUHA

As far as I understand from the technique, it's not like how technically we can combat that. You're asking whether, the platform that is providing this,

how they should be held responsible or accountable for that model.

47:09 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

I'm asking if it's okay to put [inaudible] in the model, to get the data from the user.

47:17 TANAYA GUHA

Getting the data from the user? The questions that they are getting from the users?

47:22 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We are getting lost in translation. [Italian]

47:45 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Italian]

47:45 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Italian]

47:47 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Italian]

47:48 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, so in these cases, what happened is that OpenAI the company detected the misuse by getting data from the users and triangulating with other available data. So has a company, a tech company, the right to investigate on their users? Or

should we introduce a technical limitation that makes this impossible?

48:20 TANAYA GUHA

Well, I'm not exactly sure. But I think when we sign into OpenAI and we agree to terms and conditions, it might be written there. And they are going to use the data that you put in. If you're not using the temporary one, where they explicitly mention that we are not going to use this data, otherwise they use your data. I think same for Facebook. If you upload your images, they will use your images.

48:50 SANJAY SHARMA

I can just chip in. I'm sure there's other people that'll come in. This opens up a bigger question about the proprietary nature of these platforms. Again, I was talking about how much control we have of this tech, and we have very little control. That's the same for social media platforms. If you roll back a little bit, how these models have been trained, as Tanaya was saying, they literally harvested data indiscriminately, and then they try to make it safe. So they use human reinforcement learning, which actually subjects - often - workers in the Global South to horrific content. This is both for social media and for AI, which is often completely hidden from view. We just see the shiny interfaces that we use in the Global North. And the question of censorship is interesting, because on one level, particularly say with image generation software, when people have looked at the data sets they find child pornography in those data sets.

So my question would be, for these models to operate at scale, for large language models to exist and to be

so powerful, they can only do that by indiscriminately harvesting so much data, because they need that much data to train on. So fundamentally we're working with extremely unsafe systems, which these companies then are trying to make safe. I wouldn't use the word censorship. Because that puts up a whole other debate. I think it's more about [how] these practices, how they've developed, are quite flawed. But because these general models give us the kind of answers we want, we kind of live with that. Yet we all know the taglines of each model. "It might produce inaccurate answers, etc." But that's like a sticking plaster on something more deeply problematic about the very nature of the formation of these systems in the first place. Surprise, surprise - people are going to jailbreak these systems, people are going to misuse them. That's the nature of humans. We do stuff like that. We'll experiment. We'll try to exploit the systems. So I'm not surprised at all.

ChatGPT, interestingly, have got so much attention because they were the first to release these models which were relatively safe, where Google was holding back for a long time because they knew how damaging these models can be. But once a genie is out the bottle, everyone then races ahead, and so they're constantly dealing with the problem of AI safety, and I don't think it can be simply solved. There's no simple technical solution, because there's always contingencies and there's always unknown ways people might interact with these systems. So a lot of these companies have what's called Red Teams, where they actually try to jailbreak their own systems to see where the weaknesses are. But it's a kind of cat and mouse game, unfortunately.

And I think one thing else that I would add is: what is that red line that OpenAI would consider, or anyone, any person, would consider? When now we can see, in politics in the US, what is freedom of speech? What is censorship? What is safe? What is responsible? I think it's very different if you look at it from different points of view. From different people from different locations in the world, you're going to see things differently. Something that would be considered at this moment in time freedom of speech in the US would be something that is considered discrimination in another country and in a third country would be considered as the rule of law or as the expected behaviour from certain groups of society. So I think it's quite hard, unless there are the likes of international standards groups or open groups that can somehow influence these regulations, it is very hard to know which regulation is suiting which part of the society in which part of the world.

53:10 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

I wanted to add something. One recommendation, because I'm reading at the moment a book by Karen Hao, *Empire of AI*.<sup>[2]</sup> It's great because she's a journalist, she's not an academic, even though it's very deep, the book. But it really tells all the nitty gritty behind OpenAI. It's all about OpenAI, hundreds of pages, how it started... And something that I found

very interesting is that AI safety was super key for the project of OpenAI, that's what they wanted to do. That's why they started as a nonprofit, partly because Elon Musk in particular had this concern. He didn't want any company to release a model that would be too dangerous. So he came up with the idea of creating OpenAI, along with Sam Altman, and they constantly had this debate on when to release ChatGPT, right? Because they knew the risks. But then at some point - well, Elon Musk left - but the team of OpenAI decided that for some reason they were the best positioned to release these models in a responsible or safe way. But it's funny to see the evolution, right? How they have completely abandoned the agenda of AI safety, how they became a for-profit company, and that implied having less safeguards and so on and so forth. But it's a very good book, and because this is a show for non-academics also, I think it's very catchy and compelling to read.

54:38 TANAYA GUHA

I just want to add something technical about this. The most basic model that OpenAI, or any GPT these days are based on, is transformer.

54:50 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

What is transformer?

54:52 TANAYA GUHA

It's called transformer, which came from Google. And Google actually open-sourced it and they completely have it like free in just an academic lab. And that's the driver behind ChatGPT and all other of these technical models.

55:12 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

It's in the name, right? I think the name GPT means generative, something, transformers.

55:18 TANAYA GUHA

Pre-trained.

55:19 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

Pre-trained, yeah.

55:22 TANAYA GUHA

Transformers are the basic of all these LLMs and all the big models.

55:32 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, we have put on the table different areas already. We have the technical part. These are models. There's hardware, there's software. There are technical innovations. There is a socio-economic level, meaning these are products, services. There is an industry. There are people that make a profit from it. And then the moment that some technical innovation

become a widespread means become - we could say, in kind of an STS way - an actor on society. Then the problem of regulation comes in. How do we regulate because law catches up on technical innovations. Something is thrown on society, and then we need to understand how to regulate it. Let's think about all that the European Union did when it comes to data and privacy. So there are these levels. And then I would like to think a little bit more with you today about... Okay, if it is an actor on society, if we try to think about AI or even just ChatGPT as a co-agent of our world. Then how do you find their, its, his, her gaze? And I'm here drawing on the notion, the idea, of the AI gaze Jo, Sanjay and Tanaya are developing in their project. What do you think- Maybe Jo, you can answer this question or start throwing... It's not about answering, right? But why do we need to think about this AI gaze, because a lot of the time we think about how we see AI, but how are we seen by AI?

57:52 JO GARDE HANSEN

Yeah, I think our project has been really about accepting that, as Tanaya said, the models are pre-trained, and there's very little we're able to do about that in terms of computing power. But we can do something methodological, in the sense that we can bring some of that model and iterate with it, slow it down, make things a bit messier. In our work, by showing it or asking it to analyse film and television - and in particular representations of older women - we have noticed its sense that it's not always accurate, and it challenges the whole concept of accuracy in relation to trying to identify the different ages and the same person ageing in a film, and the creative aspects of ageing, de-ageing, prosthetic ageing, and then

perceptions of age, and then maybe even a concept of screen age, as it tries to reference other forms of media and scrape through all the life-logging and the other films that it's ever looked at. And so what we've tried to do is observe and think about the machine-learning 'looking at' these representations of ageing at scale, and then at the same time thinking about that as an intervention in itself.

But also I guess as academics who have closely read objects of study. Say your object of study is a film or television text. We've built entire departments of research around reading a text really closely and deeply in terms of its history, and that's a really important cultural and critical way of thinking - slowly, deeply contextually - and then trying to bring that methodological way of thinking alongside something that is doing kind of the opposite of all those things. And so working together with a non-human actor in terms of our team, and then critically reflecting on each iteration as well. We chose those film and television texts not only because, as Tanaya said, they're part of the hidden history of machine learning as well, because you couldn't simply just always go out without consent at the time and collect loads of images of people. So film and TV, rightly or wrongly in relation to IP, that's how they were modelling. We've really thought about film and TV as something that really challenges machine learning itself in its seeing, while at the same time, through Sanjay's work, revealing that the critical data justice aspects of this - in relation to what those models hold

within them - what they can't forget. They can't forget what they were trained on, and we can't extract that out. It has learned a lot of things around the kinds of faces that have been out in the world for the last however-many years that it can scrape from, and the predominance of those faces, or whatever they are. So we're not able to get it to unremember all that work. But what else can we do in revealing that can't-forgetting.

1:01:23 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

This is sort of going back to what Sebastián was saying before, the exclusionary patterns that are somehow embedded in the AI. Because there is a little bit of an idea that ChatGPT or AI in general 'knows the truth' because it is unbiased, because it is about data, and the myth of the 'raw data' is still very much there. Leopoldina Fortunati, who is an Italian scholar, did research lately on young people. I don't know if it is published or not, because she told me over a pizza in Naples, so I don't know. But she did this research with undergraduate students, and for almost the majority of them, they consider ChatGPT cleverer than themselves. Because it is unbiased, because it knows the truth, because intelligence is increasingly associated with computational capability. And so I very much like this concept of accuracy, because we we tend to think about efficiency, and the whole digital technology has very much produced an ideology of efficiency whereby everything that is efficient is normatively better. Because efficiency, it's all we need. But then what about accuracy?

So in what you're saying, and your project is showing, well, a machine learning model can be very efficient at recognising and categorising older women on screen - definitely more efficient than if you put me doing that manually, as Tanaya has said - but that doesn't mean it is accurate, and that has to do with the fact that the AI gaze reproduces the gaze of those

that produce it, and also reproduces the gaze embedded in the data. There's not such a thing as a raw datum, or at least so I remember from my exam on the philosophy of science. And when it comes to relationality.... So it's also about, okay, if AI is a co-agent, who is working with that? Who gets to collaborate? And so I would like to go back to what you were saying before, Sebastián, about the exclusionary pathway, and what what subjects are indeed excluded? And what can we gain from widening, in a way, the collaborators so that this AI thing can learn also from other people? Not the usual suspects.

1:04:22 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

Yeah, yeah. That's a very good question. I think you're pointing at my research in Colombia, I guess. But I wanted to say, just to... structure a little bit the conversation. I think your research looks a bit more at the outputs of AI, so to speak, like generative AI, the kind of texts or images that it can give you. In my research, I have looked more at the inputs that AI uses to create those outputs in the first place. So that's why I will talk about infrastructure like data centres or minerals that are used to develop AI, or even data workers in the Global South countries who are paid very, very low wages and also have exploitative conditions, [who] label the data that then AI machine learning systems use to train their models, blah, blah, blah.

However, in my research, I have looked at the environmental dimension of AI, which comprises two

things. On the one hand, the environmental footprint of AI. Basically all the resources or things that it uses in order to work or develop, comprising minerals but also energy, water and so on. And on the other hand, I have also looked at how AI can be used for sustainability. Because if you talk to people in the field about the environmental footprint of AI, some of them will tell you - this is something I have heard - "Oh, it's okay. It uses a lot of minerals, a lot of water, data centres, for example, energy. But then it also has like good uses, right? You can use it for sustainability." And you see that idea replicated in many international organisations and so on, saying that we need AI for climate modelling, for example, to fix the climate, as Sam Altman from OpenAI would say. So basically I've been trying to look at both sides of the debate. Something interesting that I have found - in February, I actually travelled to Colombia because I was interested in projects that might incorporate more people, more voices in these kind of uses of AI for sustainability. I identified like a very interesting project in the High Andes of Colombia, of scientists, mainly biologists working on plant conservation, but that were also increasingly incorporating peasants or farm workers. It's difficult to

translate into English. Campesinos, yeah, who were increasingly participating in this project. I found it so interesting because I don't want to say that AI is always bad, that everything done with AI is problematic for different reasons. I also want to see people trying to shape the development of AI in a different direction that incorporates more voices. So that's one example. And even though these peasants have not been super involved in the technical dimension of AI for different reasons, they are part of the project and they are shaping it in different ways. And you can see that the attitude of people using AI when you incorporate more voices is way more humble, right? Usually programmers - or sometimes computer scientists, sorry that the person who is a computer scientist is not here - but they tend to overstate, sometimes, the capabilities of AI or what it can do. But when you incorporate more voices, you become more humble and more understanding of the complexities involved. Sorry, if it was too long.

1:07:58 CAROLINA BANDINELLI  
Improvise!

1:07:58 SANJAY SHARMA

I'd like to just follow up on that. Is it the case then, that... Are they developing more local models which are specific to certain social problems they're facing, or political economic problems which might help them? A lot of the problem I have with AI is these general models which cost huge amount of money to produce, are unsafe, exploit the Global South in terms of the training and labelling of the training data. So when you when you talk about alternative voices, does that also include alternative ways of building the models which are more maybe more specific, more local to certain problems?

1:08:46 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

Yeah, yeah. It's a completely different logic and scale. You're right in that sense. I'm actually comparing this small-scale project with a project by Microsoft called Guacamaya that's seeking to tackle deforestation in the Amazon, but that's a way larger-scale project that looks at the entire Amazon, Colombian Amazon at least. Whereas this other project, the smaller one that I was mentioning, mainly it's trying to focus on one more specific problem. I think that also gets us into another discussion, which is very interesting - foregrounded by a colleague, Alison Powell - which is, it's interesting how sometimes we use the 'mainstream' and 'alternative' models of framing different projects. I think it would be interesting for us as researchers to mess the field [up] a little bit and try to come up with

projects that are very attuned to the local context, but that also have the ambition to be more large-scale eventually, and on the other hand larger-scale projects that can also be attuned to the local context. Because right now we have this very comfortable situation. You have large-scale projects by companies, and we criticise them, and they're like the bad actors. And on the other hand, we have small, beautiful projects, and it's very easy to foreground them as very nice and a model to follow. But then what if we mess this up? I do think that we need large-scale AI, maybe not generative AI for all users. But if you talk to climate scientists, for example, we pretty much need them, right? Because the scale of climate change is so big. Even if we degrow our economies tomorrow, we will need to remove carbon from the atmosphere anyway, with technology. So it's highly likely that we're going to need AI. The question is how we deploy those AI, or AI-driven or AI-supported projects, at scale in a way that's just and ethical, but I like your question because I think that's one of the big questions of the moment.

1:10:44 JO GARDE HANSEN

There's something else that we haven't really mentioned, but there's something about the

talent and the kinds of people - like Tanaya, who's not here - staying in the public sector, staying in the university sector and continuing to produce, or at least work with, socially just projects. What we found with our project is that it's really difficult to get really talented researchers to stay in universities. AI researchers and machine learning, they're highly technical work. They get taken up by industry and they want to go into industry. It pays a lot of money. That's the other part of it. To what extent do we, as universities, support financially as governments really invest in this kind of research, and some of it has those origins in really fair, socially-just uses. It wasn't highly corporatized at that time in those early uses. I do think that's one of the significant problems we're facing as researchers on these either big interdisciplinary projects or public third-sector public university projects is that it's really hard to get the talent because they're not attracted to stay in universities or be part of university projects, and they're moving around all the time or they go straight into industry where it pays a lot more money.

1:12:15 BAHAREH HERAVI

I think I would echo what you said. I think even the ones who are interested... At some level it is becoming more and more difficult as life is basically becoming more expensive and the universities are not able, or they are not supported, to support that. It's the same with the journalists. Journalists are also some of the lower paid part of society. These two groups of

people, academics and journalists, are those who are critically looking at these problems, write about them, research about them. And if, in a sense, they're not funded to an extent that is comparable to the funding in the industry, they are going to go to the industry, and we are going to lose more and more this critical aspect of this AI problem that we are looking at now.

1:13:08 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So again, it's a problem of who is involved and to what extent [they're] involved. Who is an object of AI, and who is a subject of AI? Who is produced and who is more a producer? And so it's about the web of power, to use a Foucauldian notion because I read Foucault in my PhD and never get out of that moment. But I would like now to hear some more voices from our either embodied or disembodied audience here. Please.

1:13:51 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

I was wondering, because I know you mentioned you work with the BBC, but then really this is a question to all of you, which is just the use of AI in kids' media. Because we've seen throughout the years that a lot of the more interesting and innovative kids' media, or especially kids' educational media, has been, on one hand, you could say it has functioned - insofar as media technologies are seen as harmful - as harm reduction. Like, okay, if you're going to be watching TV and you have young kids it's better to watch Sesame Street. But okay, also the whole idea of Sesame Street was like: kids remember ads that come on TV; can't we use this to teach them the alphabet or something like that? And of course, some of these things later had provable educational successes. And of course, questions

about educational technology always relate to like: what is childhood for? What is education for? Is the idea of playing Baby Mozart to your kids that they're gonna wake up and they're gonna know how to use all of these things as marketable skills? But I guess one question is: have there been major attempts by the BBC or by other people to use AI in educational, especially young educational, young kids' media, in any reasonable context? Has this been able to be done in a way that the AI isn't just used for cheating on tests or something like that, which is the bane of all of us here? Have there been any efforts in that regard? Is it okay at all to mix kids and AI? Is this inherently, ethically, a big problem?

1:15:17 BAHAREH HERAVI

Is that question for me? I have one small or short answer that I know that the BBC has been working on an AI tutor project to help with the - I'm not sure what age of children, but children at school - with some of their work. But at the same time, I don't know, I don't have children, so I'm not very familiar with the children's lingo and the programmes that they watch and the ways they learn, so maybe somebody who's more familiar can respond.

1:15:48 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

But can you say something more about this AI children tutor?

1:15:53 BAHAREH HERAVI

It's basically [that] from the content the students learn - maybe at school or from the programmes that are available to

them - they can ask questions and the AI tutor can help them with their work. That's the level I know of the project, but there is some information available online, I think, about the project if you look into it. But there are a lot of universities, which is something that I know more about, or even schools, they're all looking into these AI tutors and how to help the students with tutors. Also that comes up as a discussion in less-privileged parts of society, that they're not able to get private tutors and so on, how they can get help from AI tutors. Is it a good thing? Is it a bad thing? Is the content suited for them or not? That is not something that... Maybe Sanjay has something.

1:16:42 SANJAY SHARMA

Yeah, I've got a daughter of school age, so I see some of the tech that she's bringing home in terms of software her school is using. For example, there's a programme called CENTURY Tech, which helps in English and maths, for instance. I looked it up and it's a black box in terms of its testability, how efficient it is, or how much does it improve a child's learning. Because basically it's a diagnostic tool. A child enters work and then it figures out where the weak points are, then it'll point the child [to], "Oh, you need to improve on this." That's this basic model. Sounds really good in principle. In practice, I don't know whether it actually works or not. It's not my field or area, but there's a whole industry around EduTech that's developed. Massively profitable. Some of the research that's been done on it basically suggests that there's no evidence it improves children's learning. Even bringing a tablet

into a classroom does not necessarily improve children's learning, partly because - against the question of labour - what happens is they can invest less in face-to-face teaching and let tools then replace a teacher in the classroom, so there's less contact for kids. And I think at that age, you need teachers. There's a whole issue about Foucault and education, and education is a prison. We don't need to get into that debate. But technology necessarily isn't a solution, but it's sold as a solution to help kids, and there's very little evidence - empirical evidence - that actually that's working. But it's kind of scary because we're all sold, by EduTech, that it's effective.

1:18:34 BAHAREH HERAVI

[I'll] just maybe add something. Again, I don't know about children. But from my interviews at the BBC - I'm talking to different journalists or creative people at the BBC on how they use AI and how they engage with AI training and AI literacy, and how they upskill themselves, or whether or not they feel like they need to learn AI. One of the things that I've noticed is how the younger journalists learn - and like to learn - is quite different. The older journalists maybe like to have somebody in the room or online, but live. Or even some content that they can go and look into. More structured, more formulated. Some of the younger journalists that I've talked to, they're not really interested in that. So I think the way of learning between children, younger people, and it varies in age - the expectation is a little bit different, and

they don't really have a lot of interest to take one course from beginning to end. They've told me, "We have learned it ourselves and from YouTube and within our own time." So just as a comment to Sanjay, that maybe children have different expectations. Whether or not it makes education better or has a better result, I don't know, but I think they're just different tools.

1:19:49 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I think it also has to do with the degree of intimacy that we have with the machine, with technology itself. That's the idea I'm flirting with lately, which is this idea of artificial intimacies. Because it looks like the ways in which people use AI, it is quite intimate indeed. So we ask them - I'll give it a "them" - to be a tutor. It's a tutor, it's a master signifier in the life of a kid, but also of an adult. A tutor, a mentor. And then another field in which generative AI, ChatGPT, is really having a huge impact is mental health. Now, for the NHS, I was told by someone I trust - I didn't fact check [laughs] - but the entry level is an AI therapist. And then you can 'work up' to a psychoanalyst-ish, but that really takes months, so if you don't kill yourself before then you'll get there, but the entry level is that. And again, on the one hand, it's kind of scary. I mean, I've been over 10 years in Lacanian psychoanalysis, so for me Lacanian psychoanalysis is really different from an AI, because they don't say anything, and ChatGPT says a lot. So they're very, very different.

1:21:24 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Laughs]

1:21:25 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

But also, on the other hand, there's a question of access and there's a question of cost, because who can afford - how it's called? - mental health support? And can a national health system under increasing financial pressure offer? What kind of salary can it offer? But then I think another level is also what you said - for me, it may be weird and even uncanny to think of having ChatGPT as a shrink, but maybe for another person that is not necessarily true, so it's also how we relate to AI as a subject, and what we ask. We did a project with with the masters students this year on love and AI, sex and AI, and most of them were looking at educational uses, so sex therapists or a sex educator, of a 'love educator'. And that also points at the lack of so-called affective and sexual education. I think that, again, the AI gaze tells something about the state of society, even before. And on the other hand, by the way different people look at AI, we can unveil a lot of dynamics. So this idea of artificial intimacies is the one that goes around my mind. Do we have other voices? Other question? David.

#### 1:23:14 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

I'm not sure I had a question, but I'll formulate one. I thought this was a really interesting discussion. Thank you. I was struck earlier before, when Tanaya was giving her account of the history of AI. It felt almost synonymous with - or was, essentially - a kind of history of computing power. That it was kind of about the development of computing power. And I'm wondering generally - and she touched on this - whether there's a moment... How can we distinguish between... What's the distinctive 'AI' bit of AI, which distinguishes it from just the powerful, logistical, instrumental reason of computing power? I seem to remember in the history of AI, in the imaginaries of AI from science fiction, etc, but also I think immanent in some things like the Turing test, there was a moment when machines would become sentient in some way - touching on some of the things you've just been talking about - that

there'd be a sense of the AI taking a role, a kind of benign role, in looking after people in various ways, in looking after us, in solving problems for us. Where did that go? Where did that promise, that sort of utopian promise, go? And I guess I wonder, is the sort of things that we're seeing now in and around the problems around ChatGPT - the hallucinations of AI, the fact of the mass production of basically incorrect information - what the implications of that are? Given that it's established itself as this particular kind of trustworthy voice within various forms of public discourse? That wasn't bad, was it, for being sprung on me?

1:25:15 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

Thank you. That's a very interesting question about what happened with this, or what's particular about AI - what makes it intelligent compared to regular computing. I always think that people, different groups, within the field will give different answers. I would say that the field, if you look at the history, has been split between two big groups called symbolic AI or connectionist AI. If you are a symbolic AI person, you will say that what's intelligent about it is that, as humans, computers can, for example, learn high-level rules and apply to different contexts. So you don't have to explain or describe the entire world, but just give the computer some insights, and then it's going to be able to deploy it in other places. For symbolic AI people, that's what will make it intelligent. On the other hand - which is I think more like the hegemony, if

you want, within AI at the moment - is the connectionist paradigm. For that paradigm, learning is not - or being intelligent is not - about having high-level statements and then applying it in the world, but rather learning from observing, from having data and being able to create categories without any previous input. The model that we have right now, for example, the idea is that you give computers a lot of data - which is why we were talking about data is so important, the amount of data that we have at the moment - and it's able, without any human telling them anything, to create categories. So you will give the computer images of cats and dogs, and it's going to be able to tell you "these seem to be two different kind of animals" and eventually describe them without much human input or with little human input.

The thing about data and computing - why it's so important - is because first, the amount of data that you have to give to the computer, and second, the analysis of each pixel of that image requires a lot of computing power. So that's why computing is so important for the paradigm that we have now of AI. Now something I wanted to say: that's not the only type of AI that we can have. One of the problems with the connectionist paradigm is that it

has some issues with accuracy, as you were saying, right? Hallucinations. Some people have been saying maybe we can experiment and try to come up with a mix between symbolic AI or connectionist AI or try a different kind of path. But the problem - and I'm going to connect this with another thing we've been discussing - is that the connectionist model is very profitable because the same company that provides you with AI - Microsoft, for example, either directly or through its partner OpenAI - is the same one that provides you with cloud computing, and storing and processing data is very expensive, so that's how they make money, right? Basically telling you "use more AI", and the more AI you use, the more dependent you become on their infrastructure. So the problem with not having many AI experts in academia is that, right now, most AI research is shaped by companies which have profit motives, which is fine, but we're missing research that might try to change the paradigm, maybe one that's less profitable, but better for society in different ways. I don't know if that answers your question.

1:28:45 JO GARDE HANSEN

I don't think we have lost it entirely, because I think that we've talked a lot, and we do talk a

lot, about the harms. But the reverse of that is the care and the caring modalities. And I think perhaps we haven't lost it in the cultures of caring that AI replicates that we want access to. We all want access to our PA or concierge or the butler service or the air stewards, kind of rhetoric of "I will come and help you, and it's really turbulent right now, but don't worry, look at my calm exterior and I'll get everything for you." So there's that service model of how it's giving us a culture around caring, and that might be through an entry-level care that is free, and then you get up to the real caring that costs. But I think there's something in there about... we are still getting it discursively when we go into ChatGPT or Claude or any of them, it's, "I'll care in an obsequious way and serve you very quickly." And you can actually see it written, it's always apologising for something. Whenever I ask it a question, it's usually apologising. So I think there's something about that that we want, and we need that intimacy of someone talking to us in that really super caring way that AI is giving us. So some of that promise is there just in the culture of it.

01:30:45 SANJAY SHARMA

But I guess what I would ask is, what's missing in our society that ChatGPT can fulfil in a certain kind of way? So there's that issue. You probably think I'm completely anti-AI - I'm not. But say in the case of mental health, if I was ever to use a language model, I want to know how it's been trained, and I would never want to try to use a general model because we have no idea about what kind of answers it might produce.

There's been some very remarkable cases of kids asking AI about their parents, and the AI eventually saying you need to kill your parents, that will solve your problem. Maybe it's very Freudian, I don't know. But literally that can happen. Okay, they might be edge cases, so often they're dismissed. But it does go back to the questions of how responsible are these models, and how are they being rolled out? Because they're seen as more efficient, it's cheaper than employing real therapists. That's my question. This automation of society and acceleration of automating all kinds of things. There's one hand like, say you're a farmer, a tractor is really useful, it helps you become more efficient. But when you when you start applying it to certain other fields, like education or mental health, they're more brittle. They're more fragile, those spaces. AI is like this train that's left the station and regulation is way behind the curve of the development of AI, and then there's the whole corporate structures of lobbying governments and constantly pushing back the question of safety and regulation for profit. I would like to see non-profit modes of AI development. I think we'd have different kinds of AI and maybe we'd have - like you're saying, Sebastián - models which might not be as efficient, but they're more accurate, potentially they're safer, and they're more transparent. They're less opaque. Because one of the problems with current connectionist models, particularly in neural nets, we don't really know how they work. The software developers don't know how they work. They tweak the weights of them, the inputs/outputs. So we don't know how what the AI gaze is - what is it seeing itself? We just see the results of that. And for me, I find that quite problematic. I think we need to be able to know what these technologies are and how they work and in fact we don't.

01:33:48 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Can I ask the question of transparency and accountability to Bahareh?

01:33:50 BAHAREH HERAVI

Yes, what about that specifically?

01:33:51 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

What do you think from your viewpoint?

01:33:53 BAHAREH HERAVI

Transparency and accountability are obviously huge problems when it comes to AI and when it comes to journalists' use of AI. One thing that the journalists often need to do whenever they're reporting on something - there's different guidelines and rules, but for example at the BBC it will be - they need to have two original sources if their own reporter is not on the field. And this story with technology, when journalists use it, is treat any information from the internet as any other source that you would. Same with AI. Treat AI as any other source and don't rely on that. But the problem is, when it comes to accountability and transparency, we don't know how it is generated. There is no transparency there, and then when we don't know how it is generated, what is behind it, what data has been involved in training this model, we can also not

necessarily be accountable, because we don't know what's been happening there. So if somebody needs to be accountable, then using AI could be problematic. Or, if they are using it they need to be very specific and very clear rules and regulations and disclosure agreements, and so on, on how AI has been done, to what extent, in what process, and what is communicated to the user and to the audience.

01:35:17 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

I just wanted to point out two things. First, that the main AI company, it's called OpenAI, so that's so interesting, and it's not very open, right? We know how opaque it is, but it's interesting because at the moment - I don't know how it has developed, I read this a few months ago - but there seems to be two paradigms within AI companies. On the one hand, you have OpenAI which doesn't really disclose much information about the training of its models, like the parameters or the criteria, so to speak, that it uses or 'weights'. It's a very technical concept, but let's say criteria that it uses to train its models. And on the other hand, Meta, the parent company of Facebook, they say that they want to go farther into openness and transparency, so they want to provide the weights or the criteria that they're using to train their

models. The problem is that people from OpenAI and other circles, they say that that's actually dangerous, because you can have malevolent or maleficent people using those... It's related to the discussion we had before - we have some actors that might misuse that kind of information. So that's why OpenAI, according to them, are not releasing all the information of their models. Now this has been also - again, I want to point out Karen Hao's book because it's so good - it has been a constant question for OpenAI, and I love- because at the beginning they had this promise, the promise of openness and transparency. But then, over time, they came up with different justifications, excuses or arguments to become more and more closed to fulfil what they consider to be their mission, which is to provide safe AI for humanity.

01:37:04 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

This is what Vincenzo was saying before about safety and censorship, accountability, transparency, regulation, freedom and that incidents can unveil these contradictions.

01:37:22 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

The conversation has been very focused on this infrastructure of what we put inside the AI, and how then the machine learning works, etc, etc, and how safe it is, and then how people make decisions or use AI. But I really

wanted to... Because take out AI from the picture, the way that many companies work - and if you talk with people who work in private businesses, they call consultants like Bain and Company and McKinsey, and for them it's also like [how] someone would use ChatGPT. You know, it's a black box. "Should we do this project? McKinsey says so. McKinsey has all this knowledge and know-how, so yeah, let's do this project." With Covid as well - it doesn't matter your position on lockdown, I think lockdown was the right decision - you can't argue that many of the political actors, their judgement was very [much] based on a scientific... like on scientism, which really handicapped their political judgement on if lockdown or no-lockdown or what should be our strategy to deal with this pandemic, etc. So, the fact of how we're going to use AI, etc, it is, of course, in the infrastructural models and how we make AI, but it's also in our culture which is very rationalist, which is very scientific, which has all these biases and if academia can't make its own large models - such as OpenAI or Anthropic or other AI companies can because they have all this access to private capital, etc - we can try to make a difference in the culture and show how... In the summer in Lisbon, I went to an AR workshop and someone showed me this visual representation of a neural network that I believe Google did. It's basically two plagues, and there's all these strings of - I don't know the technical term, because I'm not a computer scientist - but the neural network itself. Even the best computer scientists in the world won't be able to explain to you exactly what happens, right? Because you have all this data, which, the last time that OpenAI published what they use for the data, I think 30% was basically Reddit posts, so that's the level we're dealing with. But they themselves don't know. Humans or students, 18 year olds, use ChatGPT and we judge them. I mean, Warner Brothers currently selects their roster of films with this AI software. So how are we expecting that people are going to be responsible when it's a cultural problem? It's an

ideological problem. The technology will continue, but if we make this effort to try to tell people it's a black box and you're not getting too much value out of it, maybe that can make more of a difference than all this infrastructural talk that we don't have resources for, and people are not even going to hear us because they have all these biases.

01:41:38 BAHAREH HERAVI

I just have a question, who's "we" and who's "the people"?

01:41:42 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

"We" is... So you're trying to do like an AI collective, and we're the responsible ones; people in open AI....

01:41:50 BAHAREH HERAVI

They're not, right?

01:41:51 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

They're really not, no.

01:41:53 BAHAREH HERAVI

We are not either. So there's no "we" to go to tell the people what is right and what is not right, or what is good and what is not good.

01:42:01 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

I mean, I think "we" is the people who... I mean, you're in academia or we have less power over this. And the

technologists do.

01:42:19 BAHAREH HERAVI

So you mean people who are not Big Tech...

01:42:22 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Yeah.

01:42:23 BAHAREH HERAVI

...or the ones outside of... Yeah, well, the idea is it would be very good if "we" could make an impact. But the problem is, the "we" that you're talking about are also the "we" that's not heard as much. It's the "we" that doesn't have as much power. So then the question becomes, how this "we" can be heard at all when it comes in front of the power, when it comes in front of the Big Tech, when it comes in front of the big capitalism.

01:42:55 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

But, you know, we've been seeing political shifts of people who had no power at all, were at the outskirts of public discourse, and suddenly people who had lots of power and had basically a monopoly of discourse and information, etc, have way less power than in the 1990s, and the other ones that were in the outskirts of society now have a lot of power, and are not wielding it responsibly. I would say that everyone in this room is probably more responsible than many people in OpenAI, etc.

01:43:36 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So in this room, we haven't lost faith in the revolution?

01:43:41 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

No, I do have faith in revolution when it comes to AI.

01:43:45 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I know that you have.

01:43:47 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

Something I wanted to say, related to what you were saying, is how to resist AI. Or how to provide more agency to ordinary people when it comes to these kind of things. I think that there are very promising things going on, and we need to highlight them. There are artists who are mobilising against intellectual property theft. There are - in the case I studied, a case in Santiago in Chile - opposing the construction of a Google data centre that got cancelled in the end after local opposition. There are data workers unionising in Africa and so on. So there is a lot of agency. And I think looking at the infrastructure is super important. It also depends on when you're where you're standing. I went to a conference on AI recently to South Africa, Cape Town, and the

main topic was critical minerals. In the Global North, we don't see critical minerals. We are based here right now, but it's taken for granted, right? It's not considered... I went to a conference once, and I told them, "I look at AI, critical minerals." And they were like, "Oh, no, AI itself." And I was like, what does it mean, minerals don't count as AI? But then you go to the Global South and it's the main topic. You mention AI and critical minerals come to the fore, for example. What matters and what mobilises people changes according to the location, the context and so on. What I think might be the next step - and something we can help as academics and acknowledging the power that we have in this kind of Global North university, for example - is to try to facilitate the generation of solidarity among these groups so we can better see the connections between them, and create maybe a bloc of people affected or mobilising in relation to AI. But I think that's already happening. I think that would be my message. We have to foreground those voices instead of thinking what we can do as researchers. It's already happening, and the question will be how we can help, how we can support those groups.

01:45:56 BAHAREH HERAVI

Just one thing I want to say. I think the reason that I highlighted the "we" is that we should not forget that - you mentioned that most of us, or all of us, in this room are more responsible than other people outside of here - I don't think that is the case. That's a very supremacist, elitist view to assume that we sitting here know better than people outside of this world, or know better than people outside of academia or outside of this country, or whatever that we are putting our "we" around. So I think we should not forget that we are not better, or we are not in any way... We cannot be the voices of certain people who are living on the ground and be here as a hero or as somebody who wants to save the world, pretending that we can multiply their words. But we can create venues, perhaps, to facilitate or to make our own small effort to have some people heard without forgetting that there's no such thing as we who's saving everyone.

01:47:14 JO GARDE HANSEN

Yeah, I'd echo that. There's something about... in the AI debate of certain parts of universities becoming splendidly isolated in some way, or somehow safe sanctuary spaces. I don't think that's the direction we'd want to think of ourselves or go in. As I've said in other fora, around this in particular, I think that the public - if it is outside of academia, if we want to say that, and of course we are all members of the public, just so we know - the public probably

does have to understand the role of universities. I think I always feel it has to- right now, anyway, particularly with the attacks on universities, or the criticisms of universities across the world, or particularly in the Global North and the West and America and the UK and Europe, is that the general public does have to fall in love with universities again and understand what the purpose of a university is. And we also have to understand, or at least explore or express our purpose more than we do, and the purpose of research as well, and teaching and educating. We are educating generations of people, and that's one of the most impactful ways... I've probably had more impact by teaching one student in my life than I've had by all my research. And face-to-face interactions with one student have probably had more impact for me than all the research I've ever done and all the books I've ever written, so being an educator in that personalised way is really, really important. That's what I'd say. Some cheers in the audience [laughs].

01:48:59 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Jo, at the beginning you asked me, "Are we really going on for two hours?" Yes. Yes. We made it. I know that there might be other questions in the room. And then perhaps we can have a chat now, but then you can stand up and drink and eat and do whatever you want. Thank you very much. I hope that this experimental format gave you the opportunity to have an interesting chat. Surely, it was very interesting for me, and I think also for the people that are here. And speaking of patterns and formats, somehow we always end up with this question, "Okay, so what do we do?" And who are we? And

what role do we play? And I think this is the right question to end this kind of conversation. So thank you.

01:50:11 SEBASTIÁN LEHUEDÉ

Thank you. Thank you.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Yarden Katz, *Artificial Whiteness: Politics and Ideology in Artificial Intelligence*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. ↑
2. Karen Hao, *Empire of AI: Inside the Reckless Race for Total Domination*. London: Allen Lane, 2025. ↑



SPEAKERS

**Keith Bloomfield**  
**Embodied Audience**  
**Cecilia Ghidotti**  
**Craig Gent**

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KEYWORDS

Resignation  
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student movement  
work dissatisfaction  
intellectual engagement

strategic refusal  
post-Fordism  
spiritual crisis  
academic dissatisfaction  
mutual aid  
social reproduction  
temporality.

GUESTS

Cecilia Ghidotti

Craig Gent

00:00 CRAIG GENT

Hello and welcome to CDI-TV.

00:03 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Welcome everyone.

00:05 CRAIG GENT

Welcome everyone. We're beaming in to you today. Unfortunately, Carolina [Bandinelli] has broken her ankle. We're sending our thoughts to Carolina. Michael [Dieter] is otherwise engaged, so I've taken this opportunity to hack into the CDI-TV system, tactical-media-like, and bring you this unsanctioned broadcast. My name is Craig Gent, you might have seen me on the Cyberboss stream or in the comments section below before, and I'm joined today by Cecilia Ghidotti.

Cecilia Ghidotti 00.35

Good afternoon everyone. This is, I think, my first time on this side of the camera, officially.

00:40 CRAIG GENT

For sure. How you finding it so far?

00:42 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Slightly intimidating, but I'm sure it's going to be fine by the end of it.

00:46 CRAIG GENT

I think we'll be fine. Today, we're talking about refusal, quitting, resistance, resignation, all of the good things. And to celebrate we have our Prosecco. Cheers! How do you say cheers in Italian?

01:02 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Salute!

1:03 CRAIG GENT

Salute. Cheers to our in-person audience, and cheers to the billions beaming in.

01:09 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Thank you to the in-person audience for staying here on this summer afternoon and not just leaving ourselves alone to talk to each other - and to the people on the streaming, which are there I suppose.

01:20 CRAIG GENT

Well actually that's a great place to start, because this conversation that we're having here... I should explain. We're letting people in on a conversation that's actually been a long-running conversation between Cecilia and I, which began - we were just discussing before, off air - we think maybe with a previous episode of CDI.

01:38 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Yeah.

01:38 CRAIG GENT

Yeah? So this was the episode with [Alessandro] Gandini, if people remember, on digital disruption, and Cecilia asked a question about neo-Luddism and refusal and these sorts of frameworks, and I went back then to look through Cecilia's work and found that she had done a research seminar in the CMPS here at Warwick sometime before on quitting in the creative industries. And this led to a conversation between us and a few Zoom calls about the ideas.

02:12 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Yeah, and then we decided to expand this conversation in this mixed digital and in-person forum, just to set up another conversational event outside the setting of the Teams meeting that may feel a little bit impersonal sometimes.

02:31 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, exactly. And I think this is an extension of the work we've been doing in CDI more broadly, to try to use livestreaming as a research format. So today we're not presenting some piece of work we've prepared to talk about, like a research seminar. This is very much an ongoing conversation between us that I'm sure will continue off-camera as well. But today we want to let you in on it.

02:54 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Yeah, we are kind of taking the liberty of having a dialogue, an open dialogue, without having a very strict presentation, like something to deliver, perhaps because the topic we are engaging with is somehow sympathetic to this type of more loose presentation. But yeah, this is an attempt to make this space perhaps a little bit more spontaneous, a little bit less rigid. Let's see how it goes.

03:19 CRAIG GENT

It's a strategy of refusal in action. We'll get there. Cecilia, the first thing I want to ask, and maybe we can ask each other, is we talked a bit before when we were discussing this idea that as well as having an intellectual engagement with quitting, with refusal, with resignation, with resistance, we each have a sort of personal history with these ideas, not necessarily because we're quitters or refusers, but these we've gravitated towards these ideas somehow over a period of time. Maybe because of some political sympathies or also some observations. Do you want to go first? Let me hear about how you came to quitting.

04:03 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Yeah, absolutely, because when we started thinking and designing this, I went back and thought how I have been, let's say, receptive to the topic of quitting. And I had to recognise that it doesn't come from a theoretical lineage, but from like a few specific experiences which have to do with my biography. And I think that as academics sometimes we don't have the opportunity to connect some moments of our biographies to our intellectual interests, so I wanted to take the space of this forum today to open up a little bit on that, even if there is an element, for me, of vulnerability to go on camera and telling you a bit of my intellectual biography, but I hope it's not too boring or too meaningless.

Basically, my connection with quitting traces back to one experience when I was a student at the University of Bologna around 2007-08, and that was the moment of one of the many university reforms brought about by the Italian government in a very neoliberal sense, the change of the recruitment for researchers and so on. At the same time we were, as students, into a module which was all about studying some American writers, and among them it was the case of [Herman] Melville and the history of *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. So somehow the protest against this reform of the university merged with this ideal type of character. This Scrivener in Melville's story is a character who is committed to a continuous act of refusal. He

keeps saying "I would prefer not to" to any type of task which is assigned to him, and this leads to a downward spiral which has not, let's say, a very positive outcome. However, as a part of the student movement, we took that character, which then became the name of an occupied space. It became the name of a place of resistance, because it was actually an occupied space in our university building. And, on a level, we used the figures of Bartleby and his resistance as a space of negative resistance to build something oppositional and positive. We hosted concerts, lectures, and this type of thing.

So I think that my idea that quitting - it's not necessarily giving up, it's not necessarily a space of negativity, it's not a space of not being able to do anything, but actually a space of opposition that can lead to something - traces back to that experience in my university year in Bologna. Obviously, that space doesn't exist anymore because the university took it back because they wanted to do some sort of residence for the students. The space is actually still very much empty, and very much taking up the example of someone who said no, they ended up building something, and then in the end, those who were institutionally in charge of building something into the space didn't. So, yeah, that was perhaps my original interest in quitting, and then there's all the lineage of being in Bologna and the connection with what was left of all the autonomist tradition, but we can talk about that later. What about you?

08:04 CRAIG GENT

For me, interestingly, a similar experience. Maybe a few years after you I went to university. Well, I went to university in 2008, I dropped out, I worked for a couple of years, I lost my job, I decided to go back into higher education. So from 2010 I was a student in higher education, and at this point in time, there was a growing awareness of what the cuts proposed by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition [government] were going to mean for civil society and for education. Like many students, I participated in quite ordinary demonstrations and things that were happening around that time.

But it was an interesting political movement because we started off with demonstrations and then we moved into occupations also, and this was a real space where you're surrounded by fellow activists 24/7 and you're exchanging ideas with them. And we were very much waiting for the labour movement to catch up with us. They did in 2011, in the March of that year, with a big demonstration organised by the Trades Union Congress, and the framing of the march was a big disappointment to a lot of students because it was all around marching for jobs and this kind of thing, and at the time we were beginning to encounter ideas around anti-work politics, or the autonomist tradition in Italy, which many Italians I speak to find it amusing that autonomous Marxism...

09:58 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

The type of reception... Yes, yes.

10:02 CRAIG GENT

[Laughs] ...has had such a life in the imaginations of so many British leftists. But we had begun to say, "we're not marching for more work; we're marching for a liberation from work." We were trying to imagine a different kind of society which would be the polar opposite of austerity cuts, but nor would it rely on a certain kind of social democratic settlement that clearly had, particularly by the time of the global financial crisis in 2008, had crumbled and seemed never to return. And so around that time, I ended up meeting a lot of activists from previous generations of a longer political struggle who were broadly leftwing libertarians, many of whom had been involved with activism in Italy in particular. This is going to be a recurring theme. It was an archivist and militant called Seth Wheeler, who has documented many critical moments of political upheaval in this country, who introduced me to the ideas of *autonomia*. *Autonomia* was a political movement really beginning with *operaismo* or workerism in the late 50s and 60s in Italy, and by the 70s had become a street movement with a big student presence, and - as was happening across all shades of the

political spectrum in Italy at the time - also [had] a sort of paramilitary faction to it as well. All these different factions were sort of fighting for the soul of Italian society in one way or another. Through becoming exposed to these ideas, they shook up for me, as was the intention back in the 70s, a certain orthodoxy around what, for example, trade unions are for, or what left wing parties are for, or what kind of world we want to exist. And these were very much dissenting from an orthodox Marxist perspective. Instead of saying we want to valorize our role as workers within a working class, they said if we want to abolish class society, that also means abolishing ourselves as workers and disengaging from these categories instead of romanticising them, which was obviously a very radical thing to do at the time. And I won't say there were enormous numbers of people doing it in the 2010s but there were a few people giving it a good shake. Shortly afterwards, I became involved with a project that was founded right out of that movement called Novara Media. People often ask where it gets its name. When I speak to Italians, they say this is like calling a cool leftwing media project 'Dagenham Media' or something, because Novara is an industrial town in northern Italy, in the Piedmont region. But it was the location and setting of a film that was very, very influential for us called Lulu the Tool in the US, or The Working Class Goes to Heaven - *La classe operaia va in paradiso*. How did I do?

13:24 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Very well!

13:25 CRAIG GENT

Very well(!) Okay, so this is a film about a worker with a strongly Stakhanovite ethos who goes about his work as if it's his whole entire being. And we see through the film how even his libido has been attuned to the rhythms of his work when he's working on his lathe. One day he loses a finger, and it completely upturns his worldview when he realises that the management, that the union, that no one cares about the fact that he's lost his finger in this role

where he's been giving his life. And outside every day, there are these autonomist students who, rather provocatively, are often arguing with the trade unions. They're saying to the workers, "You go into this factory when it is dark, and you come out when it's dark - the sun will not shine for you." And, you know, is this the world we want to live in? Now, of course, this is a very romantic notion, but within this is the idea of refusal. I suppose we can get into the ways that we've engaged with these ideas so far, but that was it for me.

14:25 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

We are taking our time to share our genealogies, but also I want to acknowledge that there are people in this room, so in case you want to intervene, you want to ask questions, you want to make your contribution, we don't necessarily need to wait until the end for that moment of silence where we ask for questions and there are no questions, and someone then builds up the courage to say something. So please, if you want to add something, feel free to and we'll share them with great pleasure. I wanted to respond to you. You clearly traced a genealogy which has to do with the social movement of the 70s, and with a sort of setting-up of work which was very different from nowadays. The way in which I engaged with this topic of not wanting to work, disengaging with the idea of work, or the ideology of work, for me was a very marginal interest, because there was nothing really happening out there at a societal level. And then boom, it's 2020, we are in the aftermath of the first Covid wave. Then, all of a sudden - at least from my perspective - quitting work, refusal, 'the great resignation'. It's up in the newspaper. It's up on the media. And it seems that the relationship with work as it has been built during the 80s, the 90s, and until 2019-20, has undergone a seismic shift and is not there anymore. People are starting to say, "Oh, I don't want to do this anymore." And there are waves of resignation, especially in the US, but also in China, in Italy. And despite those people not having any better alternative open, and absolutely not evolving into our existing

sociopolitical movement, they are quitting anyway. So I was like, "Okay, there's there's something there yet." Those ideas around strategic refusal and saying no to a certain type of embodiment of the ideology of work, there's something there that is now resonating again, so I went back to this constellation of interests of mine, and then I focused on aspiring creative workers giving up their idea of becoming workers. But that's a different strand. So, I was taken by surprise around 2020 around this wave of quitting. Was this the same for you? Were you more prepared? And what do you think about the present circumstances?

17:49 CRAIG GENT

I suppose one of the things that happened with the pandemic was that it clearly made a lot of people realise that life is certainly short and limited, and obviously sadly a lot of people were directly affected by the enormous death count, but it also made people focus on either their work because they were an essential worker and they had to go out to work, or their work because they were forced to work from home, and suddenly they had to reorganise their home space around work and be hyper-aware of whether they're connected, or able to disconnect or not. Or, of course, people were - in this country - on furlough, and I'm sure that there were similar parallels in other countries as well, that gave people access to what is outside of work, which I think, particularly for many people who had maybe over-identified with their work, was quite liberatory. But I suppose this gets into an area that I know is important in your work, where people begin to - I'm going to use the word 'resist' again, for want of a better one - but [resist] almost the categories of certain types of worker, particularly in certain types of industries. Because I think what we saw with the 'great resignation' was a few different things. Some people are choosing to, essentially, quit one job in order to bargain for a better market position within what is actually a very similar job, but also people choosing to adopt a different career direction entirely and to jettison the connections they had made, or the identity in life that

they had made for themselves with a particular type of work, in favour of something that was more favourable to them. I wonder how this maps onto your work [in which] you've looked at workers in the creative industries who have almost rejected a certain kind of idealised model or character of, for example, 'the writer'. And I wonder what that has meant to them too?

20:01 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Yeah. I mean, I didn't look directly at workers, it was always aspiring workers. There is a level of disconnection between, let's say, people who are actually employed and paid for doing a job and those who are still in the process of trying to make it, so perhaps it's different from what you've seen in your research, where you were looking more at actions of sabotage. So perhaps this idea of not still being a worker opens up different pathways for them. But in general, what I've noticed is that in the scholarship on media and creative industries, there is a lot of research on the subjectivities of cultural workers, the working conditions, these ideal types of intellectual worker who have to comply to a series of unwritten rules which have to do with being flexible, being ready to accept any type of condition in the name of desire or desired identity as a 'creative worker'. Since the early 2000s onwards, research has shown how tech workers are flexible, how TV workers accept [exploitative working] conditions in the name of their creative identities. What I found interesting was that I've encountered some people who said, "Okay, I don't want to do this. I don't want to do this anymore" even while they were still in-the-making, when they were still trying to do something, they stepped out of this game, and for various reasons - because they didn't want to adhere to [being] either type of creative worker, quoting the matrix of running across projects, and somehow their refusal was related to "I have a different attachment to my idea of culture." So these people, they were saying, "I want to take pleasure in reading books. I want to take pleasure in writing. I don't find that the type of jobs that are

available to me are giving me that." It's a very privileged position. And in the end, they didn't end up succeeding in a traditional sense, because some of them, they could do this because they were from the upper-middle class, so they had other means, others just gave up their more creative identities, and according to some studies just the idea of enrolling in a creative degree is proof of the intention of developing a creative identity. However, I still find deserving of attention these type of acts. They are not immediately productive. They are not like ingrained into any political or union-type form of activism. But I think by the very fact of existing, they remind us that there are spaces of resistance, even if, in the end, as *Bartleby* ends up in the graveyard (metaphorically) part of these end up being a little bit destructive. There is a book called *The Queer Art of Failure* that says there is a value in 'unbecoming', in making mistakes, in poking holes in the toxic positivity of everyday life. <sup>[1]</sup> And this is what I resonate with. So I'm not saying we should all go out and just quit everything, because I know that's not likely, but paying attention to this phenomenon as well as other phenomena, I think is something that should find space in the intellectual discussion, in academia, just to open up and remind ourselves that there is a way out, even if we are all deeply ingrained in late capitalism's structures - we are all witnessing as passive testimonies what's happening in Gaza; I mean, I'm just opening up a little bit because this has to do with cultivating spaces of resistance and recognising where resistance is happening. I don't know if this makes sense at all for you, or for anyone in the room, or for anyone in the streaming. Also we are not monitoring the chat of the streaming. Keith, is there is anyone in the chat asking things. Please let us know in case.

25 : 05 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, begin putting your questions in the chat and then we can also get to them as well. What you're saying at the beginning there is interesting because it really resonates. And also bring it back to

Bartleby, the Scrivener, it makes me think of my experience of coming to these ideas for the first time, particularly as a student activist, when a very popular refrain or idea at the time was the idea of the 'graduate without a future', and the idea that essentially the graduate jobs promised to a whole generation of students were evaporating before our eyes. And of course, it's not that there were no jobs as such, but they were very precarious jobs. Our totemic figure, for many of us, was actually from Italy, again, which was the figure of San Precario, the invented patron saint of precarious workers.

26:00 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Yeah, I think that comes from the EuroMayday Parade in the early 2000s when fashion workers in Milan, I think they came up originally with this San Precario figure, and it was also given out during the demonstrations.

26:16 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, I have one of the original badges. We were also taking this on our demonstrations into the streets of London, there was the Precarious Workers Brigade who would carry through the streets an enormous paper mache carrot to symbolise the carrot that was constantly being dangled in front of artists and other aspiring creatives. I also think the latter part of what you're talking about there makes me think maybe I can explain a little of what Tronti was speaking about with this idea of refusal. Mario Tronti in the in the 60s becomes this very influential figure within operaismo and autonomism, and is most influential in this country for essentially two essays, because for years and years, until *Workers and Capital* was translated just a couple of years ago,<sup>[2]</sup> they were the only pieces of his writing that were actually translated into English. So they were 'Lenin in England' and 'The Strategy of Refusal'.<sup>[3]</sup> And in 'The Strategy of Refusal' - well, in both these essays - essentially he's inverting what was the Marxist orthodoxy, theorising the development of capitalism, which basically said that capitalists

decide how they want to innovate, and then it's up to trade unions or Labour parties or workers' parties to catch up and try to mediate the worst excesses of this system, and this is how capitalism develops. He inverts this. It's called the Trontian inversion, or occasionally the Copernican inversion within Tronti's thought, which is to say that it's the working class itself and working-class struggle and refusal that creates crisis, a crisis of accumulation within capital, then capitalists are forced to innovate and to develop, and so on. Now, clearly, this just creates a cycle of never-ending capitalist development, and the idea behind the strategy of refusal is to try to find a way to create forms of life outside of capitalist work and to somehow break this, but he says that it begins with workers expressing, even at the individual level, their active dissatisfaction, through which maybe - and this is the real leap of faith, of course - through which maybe they can begin to collectivize this dissatisfaction and refuse en masse which, in his essay, demonstrates, visibilizes the dependency of labour on which all of capital relies. But more than that, this idea was taken up - particularly in the 70s - to mean not only refusing necessarily capitalist work itself, but also the temporalities, the rhythms, the colonisation of the minds that happens when subjected to forms of capitalist work. In this sort of lineage of thinking, to say "I would prefer not to" becomes something that's a radically political act rather than merely a selfish one.

29:35 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Yeah, absolutely. When you said that Tronti's writings have been translated only recently, you seemed to imply that, for instance, there is a lineage of an Italian reception which was more efficient at keeping those ideas alive, but I probably would say that's not the case. Also, the microphones are quitting something, even technology is not with us anymore.

30:14 CRAIG GENT

[Laughs]

30:14 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

No, that's what I just wanted to add. That heritage, that lineage of ideas was not really something that was kept alive in Italy, because all these efforts of the late 70s were obviously very disruptive for society, and somehow they ended up being absorbed into the not even competing two forces of heroin by one side, and also the armed formation and terrorism [on the other]. A lot of these ideas were somehow dismantled by these two forces. And what was potentially revolutionary or disruptive of this idea that the working class is somehow taking the lead in the opposition against capitalism was very much something that by the end of the 70s, the early 80s, was not there anymore. So the late reception of these line of thoughts in the British sphere is even more curious from the Italian perspective because the general narrative in Italy is that those social movements ended up being destroyed [by] drugs, heroin, or being put in jail because [of the] perceived association with the 'red terrorism', pretty much.

31:55 CRAIG GENT

Maybe I can say something on that, which is it's important to say the grave irony of all this is that Tronti went on to become a leading and not particularly leftwing social democrat, and when it was his turn in government, was actually advocating for austerity and all sorts of things. It's a sort of bitter irony. But I think I can say something about how those ideas entered into the British context, which is that there was, since the 70s, a movement of initially - if you can imagine such a thing - dissident Trotskyists, particularly around the groups like Big Flame, who had been organising within workplaces and began to have a serious engagement with feminist praxis that led them to critique the more productivist and masculinist forms of organising that were happening around British Trotskyism at the time, and led them to thinking seriously about the realm of social reproduction. They then begin to engage with ideas

of the social worker, or the socialised worker, within the thought of people like Antonio Negri. This begins to die out until the 90s, when it's reignited by a growing movement around the Anti-Roads Movement in Britain and then the Alter-Globalisation Movement and its British contingent here. Then, of course, we get Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's book *Empire*, which becomes a very, very unlikely bestseller in the year 2000 and then it seems to snowball from there. But I think it's important to say that although many of the activists involved in Italy at the time did, because of political repression, end up in very bad situations, in prison or on drugs, many of them also ended up in the academy.

This is maybe a good point at which to segue into our final section before we open up, which is to say that what was happening in Britain in the 90s, at the time when these ideas were being retaken up, was that many people who saw themselves as refusing a capitalist mode of work were signing onto the dole. And they were signing onto the dole because it was just about liveable, and they could pursue both political activism and artistic creation through doing so. Clearly, as we go into the 21st century, the conditions living on unemployment benefit are no longer able to support that, and many of them at this point in time are pleased to find out that the higher education sector is rapidly expanding, and so many of them become PhD students and academics, and they join higher education as a means to pursue their intellectual pursuits in a relatively shielded environment. I should say that Novara Media began and was viable in the very first case not because of any sort of seed funding, but because a number of the core members, myself included, had PhD funding that allowed us to essentially work on an alternative media project more or less full time until our final years. Obviously, the circumstances of academia now seem somewhat different to how they [were] for many of my older comrades and colleagues who were joining academia in the 90s and 2000s, but maybe this is a good point at which to turn the lens back onto ourselves.

Yeah. We were thinking about if academia still offers space to cultivate dissent and space for thinking about quitting, because our line of analysis around quitting also comes via the analysis of academics, especially in the US, which at some point decided to quit and produce a variety of autobiographical essays, around the year 2015, about not being able to put up anymore with the neoliberal condition of contemporary academia, the need to write grants, the 'publish or perish' system, all the bureaucracy involved into academia. At some point when we were having this conversation about quitting, I was saying, "And what about us? What about us as people who are involved in processes of critical thinking who are not particularly happy about how academia is at the moment? Is there any space for this type of action of subterfuge, quiet refusal? What type of shape this action could take? Should we - I don't know - sabotage some type of institutional demands? Is there a way out there?" And so we thought that this could be a question that was happening for us, but also for someone in the streaming or for someone in the room.

37:35 CRAIG GENT

I'm imagining a global cabal of pissed-off academics going to find MS Teams servers and giving it a good jiggle inside, and saying, "Stop robbing me of hours of my life."

37:51 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Yeah, you know what happened with the Waymo cars in San Francisco or in Seattle? Somewhere in the US. LA, sorry. People went out and physically destroyed those self-driving cars. So, yeah, something of the like.

38:12 CRAIG GENT

In fact, they were calling the Waymo cars to their location en masse, so then you would have 10 Waymo cars turn up to one place.

38:22 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

And then they proceeded to sabotage them. Let's put sabotage into brackets. Unfortunately, we cannot call Teams up physically here to do something and to act on that, despite [that] it would be probably a great act of a smaller sabotage. Basically this was what we ended up thinking [about]. Also this initial idea of neo-Luddism has to be an interrogation about quitting. Does it need to be productive, or is it enough just to open the conversation in the room? Should we do something more on top of this? Or just naming the names, a certain someone said that naming was a creation act, so it was enough. There was also a matter [that] I think stemmed from another seminar that you led: What's the point in sabotaging, refusing? What's the point if it doesn't evolve into something else? Is it enough just to open the conversation? Or should we do something else as individuals, as academics? So, this is where we are coming from and where we are opening our questions.

39:44 CRAIG GENT

Precisely. Well, with that, we can go to any questions we may have in the room or online, Keith?

39:51 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Comments also.

39:51 KEITH BLOOMFIELD

No questions online just at the moment, so I'll hand the microphone out into the audience.

39:56 CRAIG GENT

All right, any questions from the audience? This is an interesting question while the mic is going around Cecilia, because I think that in the 60s and 70s, it was enough to advocate for trying to find the exit, I think, and then certain propositional ways of living outside of the system were maybe attractive to a minority of people, but primarily it was about trying to expose, trying to use quitting or refusal to demonstrate something about the way that work is organised in society. Clearly, a certain amount of work will always be needed for society to keep going. That's never in question. But the way it's organised within capitalism is in question, and for those thinkers this was a way that they could achieve that. I myself never quite know, and particularly at the moment when we're living in a sort of renaissance of neo-Luddism, as unlikely as that might seem to some people initially, I wonder whether the tendency to want to propose something - well what is the alternative? - is coming from a place of political desire and efficacy and that's the right instinct to have, or whether that is simply imposed onto the conversation as a condition for having the opinion dissenting from the thing in the first place.

41:27 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

I wish I had an answer for this...

41:29 CRAIG GENT

Me too...

41:30 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

...but I don't think there is one.

41:32 CRAIG GENT

...but David may have an answer.

41:33 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

I most certainly don't have an answer to that. This was a really fascinating discussion. And thank you for laying out actually some quite complicated theoretical ideas in a really accessible way. I felt that was really helpful. I'm conscious I might be about to out myself on the internet as a dangerous moderate, but I'm going to do it anyway. I'm just wondering about actually pushing you on these things that you were talking about towards the end about what do you do after you quit? What are you quitting from and to? And is quitting, in this instance, really just an evaluation between different types of work for different kinds of purpose, in a context in which we need to work to survive, right? I mean, there's a basic kind of flaw attached to that. I think these ideas are really attractive and really good to think with, but I'm also conscious that not everyone feels that way about their work. It is entirely possible, as much as we might be sniffy about it, or as much as it might be possible for Marxist theorists to be disappointed by it, it's entirely possible for people to like their work and, indeed, to use work as a source of dignity in the world. And I'm just wondering what we do with that sense that work itself might be a source for the distribution of a certain kind of justice.

42:27 CRAIG GENT

Thank you, David. Cecilia?

Thank you, David. I think it's super interesting. I wanted to start by answering the first bit, but now I want to start from the end. What we do with people who enjoy their work and they find a moment of self-fulfilment or partial self-fulfilment? I think it's great. I don't think that any of these strands of reflections is saying let's just focus on that. It's a matter of having different discourses opened at the same time. When I say that, for instance, in the creative industries, the focus is on those who are doing the work - you've done a lot of work on that - I don't think the two things exclude each other. They can coexist at the same time. And thinking about time, you said, what do we do with quitting now? I'm not summing up your question and [doing] it justice, but what I'm trying to point out is temporality.

When we discuss about quitting, the way in which I think about it is that it is not a definite condition. It is not a final condition. To me, talking about quitting, refusal, resignation, this type of constellation, has to do with flexible temporalities. We increasingly live lives which are no longer ordered in that fashion: study, work, permanent job, marriage, etc. My approach to quitting has to do with that porosity of the condition, with the reversibility of that. So it's not that quitting is once and for all. It can be back and forth. If you think about life's temporal lines, it can be a portion of time of someone's biography, and then it can be something else. A notable example is Simone Biles, the Olympic athlete - I make an example which is an excellence - but she's notably an example of someone who very visibly quit citing her mental health, whatever, but then she came back. The way in which I approach quitting is very much flexible and very, very much related to the, let's say, precariousness of contemporary working life arrangements. I also recognise that there is a class dimension in quitting which we didn't engage with. There is an intersectional dimension of quitting. Also you can quit from work, but what about non-paid work in everyday life. There is

all the lineage of feminist thought about quitting domestic work. There's also that. What about people not living in the North of the world? What about people living in - I'm saying this very badly - in the Global South; they don't have the same type of ingrainment with the job, and they don't have the same approach to quitting. However, there are studies about, for instance, like migrant workers quitting despite their precarious life conditions. So there's a lot to do to unpack this notion, to open it up to different temporalities, different geographies, different subjectivities. We are very much at the beginning of quitting here.

47:02 CRAIG GENT

[Laughs] I had a flashback to my childhood then, which is [that] I feel like my whole childhood, my mum - who was a single parent - organised her entire life really around the refusal of work and doing as little work as possible so that she could focus on socially useful things, such as volunteering and raising children. I suppose there's an historical answer to what many of these activists - particularly in the 70s - did, which is that for many of them they did try to explore alternative forms of living on the conviction that capitalism itself - this way of living - depends on people doing stuff. Right now, we have to do it for a wage. But we can imagine a world in which we can still do the stuff, but it doesn't work within capitalist social relations. Obviously, you know [Mark] Fisher quoting [Slavoj] Zizek, quoting [Frederic] Jameson, etc., etc. say it's easier now to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Which is not a conviction that they think needs to stop there. People always get them wrong on this. The world and the social relations we have now already depend on our labour, but the organisation of labour under capitalism is not within our control. I think it's a really pertinent point Cecilia makes to say that maybe this is not about a strategy of exiting capitalism as such, but actually one about a certain form of leverage. Not with any particular employer, but in terms of regaining a sense of control over one's own life and the ability to exit conditions that are not favourable to us. The question, of

course, is when that happens, what is the support in place to do that?

I would think that is where, for a lot of autonomists, they would say, "Well, this is why we organise politically in addition to whatever we're doing. This is why, during the Covid pandemic, we do run mutual aid groups, and things like that, so we actually organise at a social level." And this is many intellectual traditions, right? You know, the Black Panther Party people like to refer to their breakfast scheme for kids and so on, which was self-organised, rather than some sort of benefactor giving them money to do that. The other thing I would say, maybe in response to the point about not everyone feeling this way about their work, and maybe feeling a sense of dignity in it. With Cecilia, I don't see a problem with this. But I suppose, in the spirit of making visible the social relations of work and of capitalism, maybe part of the idea that's underpinning these is about making visible the fact that work won't love you back. That is a title of a great book by my friend and in a different part of life, my co-host on a podcast I run, Sarah Jaffe. <sup>[4]</sup> In her book - she's a labour journalist - she spoke to many different types of workers, creative workers and non-creatives, but all in forms of work that almost typify the idea that "if you can do something you love, then you won't work a day in your life." And of course the reality of that is really complicated, including for people working in the academy as well. But it is the truth, and I do believe this, that work won't love you back. And we can probably all think of people in our lives who have absolutely committed themselves to work only to find at some crucial moment - a redundancy or something else - that actually they are dispensable. They're fundamentally dispensable, which is a very crushing experience. So I suppose there's a point in here about making that social relation visible so that we can have a certain - I wouldn't say necessarily a class consciousness - but a certain consciousness towards the social relations of work.

51:15 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

I don't have anything to add to this, except how much of this is related to the work of Sarah Jaffe, *Work Won't Love You Back*. Also, there is another book which was really influential for me, which is Francesca Coin, *The Great Resignation*, which was out in Italy a couple of years ago and I think it's going to be published in October in the English translation.<sup>[5]</sup> There is a set of books that are working on this topic.

51:46 CRAIG GENT

Great, I haven't read that one.

51:48 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

I think we can try to host her for one of our meetings next year. Jonathan?

51:57 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Fascinating discussion, which is bringing back some memories. I've got a half-baked comment/question, and it goes back to an essay I read years ago, as a student probably, by Adorno, called 'Resignation'.<sup>[6]</sup> He wrote it in the late 20s, because at the height of the student movement in Germany, he was becoming pilloried as the representative of the Frankfurt School who students thought were becoming bourgeois in their old age, old scholars sitting in offices when they should be on the streets at the barricades, actually changing things. Adorno became a target, but he was locked into his Hegelian theory of history, where he did believe that there was a time when collective action could have brought about the collapse of capitalism back in the 20s, but that time had passed, and that he accused the student movements of collective action of exhibiting all the social behaviours of the kind of Nazi and fascist groups that he had witnessed 15 years

before. And so there was this huge row, this huge public debate over 'what are the conditions for freedom?' This is the interesting question about quitting. It's a kind of an emancipatory call, isn't it? It's another call for freedom. And he would say that the material conditions for freedom no longer exist, which is why you attempt any collective action, you will simply mimic forms of power and domination that are endemic to any kind of mass politics. Populism is as common on the right as it is on the left. So his response in the essay 'Resignation' was to say, look, all we have left is the centre of modern subjectivity, which is the critical reflexivity of the intellect. So the lone intellectual becomes the last gasp of collective politics. But he does work it out with this essay, which is all about the relation between theory and practice, praxis, you know, and what's the role of the intellectual? Is there a role for professors and academics and intellectuals? Not on the streets, but in the universities, sitting in their offices, writing. He would say that because the material conditions for collective action no longer exist, they will only re-emerge as intellectual forms, so the materiality of intellectual production can provide those conditions. But not yet. It's going to take a lot more work on behalf of intellectuals and thinkers and artists to construct those.

Now, that train of thought, to me, is kind of inflected by a lot of cries for quitting on behalf of American YouTubers in the so-called productivity genre of 'quiet quitting' and - how would you put it? - my favourite phenomenon in this is the 'slow professor movement' [laughs], and that is, "let's go slow, everyone". Which was an old factory/union technique, but there's a lot of versions of so-called 'quiet quitting' and 'slow production'. And I'm wondering whether you think

those are just, as Adorno would think, kinds of therapeutic imaginaries of effectively pretending we can make capitalism humane, and yet it can't be. The flipside to Adorno's critical autonomy of the intellect is all the people who don't engage in intellectual production, which is probably 98% of people, all they have left is just trying to make their lives more comfortable and endure everyday work by making their life humane, using the resources they have, by going slower. You mentioned temporality, subverting the temporalities of capitalism, or subverting the aesthetics of capitalism, because that's all we can do. Sorry, jumble of thoughts.

57:52 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

No, no. Thank you for this. I don't know if I have anything very meaningful to contribute to this because I think this part of the conversation was to build a space where we can have a dialogue about this. I think that the 'quiet quitting' bit - this is something obviously that I've looked at, but also what I've noticed is that people who are into quitting somehow, they tend to love very much their work or [are] not loving it. The 'quiet quitter' side seems to call for a sort of detachment from the work, which is perhaps not really possible for those who are quitting from a position of love for the work, because they don't feel represented in it anymore, because it requires a lot of constraint just doing the barely necessary. There was a song from the 70s in Italy called 'Lavorare con lentezza', 'Working Really Slowly', [which] went on saying, "Without making any effort, who works faster injures themselves. They end up in the hospital." But to do that, you really don't have to have that attachment to work or to the ideal of work that somehow, for me, is behind the decision of breaking up directly with work. It's not an answer to your comment, but this is what it made me think, so yeah.

59:42 CRAIG GENT

Well, I suppose the first thing to say is that we're all about the half-baked. We are indeed baking. This is, this is the baking. In CDI-TV, we don't want to present the final idea. We're always already in the process of baking.

59:48 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Let's hope we are in the oven and we are not the snails in the pot who don't notice how the water is getting warmer and warmer, because that would be a problem.

1:00:13 CRAIG GENT

My actual first thing is that I think Adorno should have joined his students in the street, and that didn't preclude him ever being in the office either. You can do both. Other theorists we can think of have done both. Foucault did both. Franco Piperno did both. I think that the point about whether or not... Tronti would say that - and I say "Tronti would say" not because I think he's the authority, but because this is an essential idea that underpins a whole kind of intellectual tradition - but that tradition would say that capitalist development never gives us freedom. It's not about a point in time at which we missed the opportunity for freedom or not. There's definitely an assertion of agency over this idea of a Hegelian structure to historical development.

But more than that - and we haven't really said the word very much - an identification of autonomy, a fundamental autonomy. This means two different things within autonomia. The first is a recognition of the working class's ability - and by working class these guys mean all of us; people who have to work for a living, and who aren't able to make money because they own property or because they employ workers - [to] act directly, without representation from trade unions or from workers' parties or Labour

parties, and doesn't need to wait for them. They have a complicated relationship to those things; they're not completely independent - people like Tronti, etc, were in their respective socialist, or at that time communist, parties. The Communist Party of Italy, which was anti-Stalinist but had a million members, it was the largest Communist Party in Western Europe, and a real social force. So they would have it the other way around: that the working class is able to act already. But more than that, they also think that in terms of the Labour relation, that workers' autonomy - inherent autonomy - is fundamental to the possibility of freedom. Because labour does retain a fundamental autonomy. That is also, I should say, recognised by labour process theorists, who - alongside the operaista Raniero Panzari - refer to the 'unplannable element' of capitalist organisation. So when putting together the enterprise, certain means of production need to be acquired, certain commodities, etc. And one commodity is labour-power. Labour-power is a commodity unlike other commodities in that it is a potential and needs to be actualized in the process of work, and therefore it's a fundamentally unplannable element, and that's why we have bureaucracies within work as a means to try to tame and ensure what the labour process theorists call 'certainty of result'. I think on the role of the intellectual... I mean, I think there's always a role for the intellectual, but I don't believe the only intellectuals in society are those who are professors. I don't know if this is a popular opinion or an unpopular one, but I think that Professor, etc, these are fundamentally job titles that describe a certain amount of, primarily, administrative responsibility within universities, and don't necessarily speak to the weight of intellect behind the person. We know that from the people who have been running Dundee University, for example, who are all professors. Shout out to everyone who's been fighting for their jobs at Dundee University. But many of these thinkers themselves were intellectuals too. They were worker-intellectuals conducting co-research and workers inquiries in not just heavily industrial factories, but also downstream manufacturing plants, they were working in creative industries and so on. They were artists and dropouts and all sorts. So I think there's a role for intellectualism, and I certainly decry the

anti-intellectualism of - as they were - decrying the anti-intellectualism of the orthodox Marxist parties, who would say, "You don't really need to be able to think for yourselves about the kind of life you want, because the Central Committee is going to sort that out for you." From the left, they were dissenting from precisely that kind of mentality that was like an anti-intellectual tradition in favour of a much more liberatory decolonization of the mind from the kind of constraints of capitalism. I think we have time for one more question maybe, because we're running against time. João, please.

1:05:28 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Apologies if I'm slower and more incoherent than usual because of a bad episode of insomnia last night. To be honest, what always fascinated me in Marx wasn't his materialist writing which Engels, I think, in the third preface to either the Communist Manifesto or The German Ideology, says that...

1:05:51 CRAIG GENT

We're being tested now [laughs].

1:05:52 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

...it was an over-determination by Marx to be so materialist, because it was a reaction against the Idealism which was prevalent at the time. What really attracted me was always the thing in his Eighteenth Brumaire, like "the ideologies of generations past haunt the..." you know, that kind of writing really riveted me. So my question is perhaps a little bit provocative, and I think it puts us a little bit in a tangent. Because my question isn't really about changes in the job market, or really about post-Fordism and how that affects the capitalist dynamic,

etc. I think that many times what is lost in leftwing discourse is - I'm sorry, this is such a cliché: I'm a man and I'm 19 years old, and I'm talking here about Nietzsche, but - what Nietzsche called a spiritual crisis, right? Which is a very important dynamic in not only [the] Western side, but throughout the globe you see all that. There's a technological dynamic which is affecting all of us, which is progressing no matter what the Luddites do. There's, of course, capitalism, so a more economic dimension, and then there's a social-cultural dimension as well. In the beginning, you mentioned resistance and there were some references to that. Cecilia and Craig, you probably mentioned resistance in a more leftwing way, but I am actually perhaps more familiar with resistance which is more conservative or even reactionary. Every Sunday, I speak with people in my parish who have a tremendous desire of resistance and you can call something else but resistance against the modern world, and against this spiritual crisis, or this social-cultural dynamic, whatever you want to call it. I think that this phenomenon of 'the great resignation', etc, etc - everything that you mentioned - abstracting it from all the categories - David was saying like, "Oh, I'm quitting this job to maybe find another job or another type of job." - I mean, it's a bit deeper than that, and I'm sorry that I'm really taking this into a very idealist dimension, but I think it's important to share this more epistemic outlook sometimes, which is important. And I think it's missed out a lot in leftwing discourse. It's something that really sometimes annoys me. So I want to have both your opinions on that. To what extent is this phenomenon of 'great resignation' and these changes in the capitalist structure affecting, you know, the spiritual lives of people. How does that affect people raising families, for example? How does post-Fordism, or whatever you want to call it, affect

the creation of families, our lives? You know, how we lead our youth? That's been changing a lot in the last decades. Whatever you can think of. But more in that dimension, and not just sometimes in a very materialist way that... It's really what attracts me in Marxism.

1:10:03 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Wow. I am always fascinated by the level of depth that you manage to add to the conversations, because - I mean, yeah, you are 19 years, idealistic, something - but we've seen you over these seminars contributing with this kind of depth, which is, I think it's a gift, having the possibility of talking at this level.

1:10:29 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Not on camera [laughs].

1:10:31 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Not on camera, okay, we'll delete that, right Keith?

1:10:37 KEITH BLOOMFIELD

It's out there now!

1:10:41 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

I don't know if I'm able to give an answer at this level of complexity, but I think what came to my mind while you were talking was that the processes that we were describing about the more recent 'great resignation', or doubts related to the way in which lives are organised in post-capitalist society, they mostly are not framed under a theoretical framework which is specifically leftist, I would say. Perhaps that's more our framework, our approach to these phenomenon. But even in

the books - the Sarah Jaffe books that we mentioned, Francesca Coin books that we mentioned - those processes, I think, are happening at a more let's call it spiritual, let's call it personal level. Then let's say politically informed level, because - quoting again Francesca Coin's book, because it's the one I read more recently - she framed the process of breaking up with work as like a broken marriage, so a relationship that doesn't work anymore, and it's not specifically seen under a political lens. I don't know if your question comes from place of slight discomfort related to your political positioning in these processes, but I would say that there is space for your sensibility, for your perspective in the analysis of this phenomena, even if you don't feel that you are necessarily aligned with, let's say, a more or less orthodox leftist position. Because I think that in reading the process of quitting or sabotage, you don't need to pledge faith to a certain type of political direction. If you have the sensitivity, if you have the eyes to see those phenomena and they interest you, there is space for you to interpret and understand that, even without necessarily adhering to a certain theoretical framework. I don't know if it has to do with your question, but this is what hit me from your question. This would be my answer. I know it's not completely an answer, but this is what I can intellectually produce this afternoon in June [laughs].

1:13:41 CRAIG GENT

I have a few things I want to say. One is this. I suppose there's a point here which is the political point. I think particularly because Marxists - and I am a Marxist, sorry to everyone, sorry to my parents, I am a Marxist, I haven't grown out of that and I'm 35 years old, nor will I, in fact I will probably harden as I get older, who knows - but I'm also a big fan of Socrates, and so I think in the spirit of our Socratic elenchus here, I feel like my politics got better, more interesting, more receptive and more engaged with other people's ideas when I began (and for me it took quite a long time - you're 19, I think I took until about 28) to admit that I didn't basically know

about everything. And for many people, they never learn that skill. But I think, fundamentally, that is where wisdom lies. I think it's also important to say that the language deployed by Marxism - because it is a conflict theory - often sounds like struggle that must be won at all costs. It seems like a set of theories that have strife at their heart and are sort of bellicose or whatever, and sometimes the language can seem that way. However, what these ideas are about, for me certainly, is about making life better for everybody. This is why the horseshoe theory of politics is bullshit. Because I do think that fundamentally the ideas of the Italian autonomists, for example, are about making life better for everyone. Now, I don't believe that it's purely the case that only the people from radical, heterodox Marxism who call themselves autonomists are the only people who want to make life better for everyone. Far from it. There are a lot of people, across the political spectrum - maybe not at that very far end, but quite often people across the political spectrum - who fundamentally want to make life better for everyone. So I certainly wouldn't dismiss the ideas of anyone who was thinking in very different categories. One of my closest interlocutors about precisely these issues is my most elderly friend, who is a Catholic priest who was imprisoned under the KGB. He's very interesting man. We'll talk about another time on another stream.

1:16:24 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

We should invite him.

1:16:25 CRAIG GENT

We should invite him, yeah. But in terms of the ideas you're talking about there and the role of epistemologies within this, I want to point you to a really great book. And this actually brings us back to what we were talking about in terms of our very first engagement with these ideas. When I was involved with student occupations, we were engaging with the ideas of *Autonomia*, but we were also devouring the online lectures of the geographer David Harvey

talking about *Capital: Volume One*. He goes through it chapter by chapter, and you read it with him and he riffs off it. He turned this into a book, I think it's just called *Reading Marx's Capital*, and he's done three volumes.<sup>[7]</sup> I suggest the first one, really. It's not that David Harvey is interested at all in telling you what to think, and certainly - as a geographer - he has a really interesting perspective on a lot of these ideas, but he's just riffing on them and kind of improvising around it. It's this almost a jazz interpretation of what Marx is talking about that goes in lots of different dimensions and brings in questions of temporality or spatiality and so on. But he gets to this bit where he draws our attention - and this sounds like the most wanky Marxist conference thing to say, but it is worthwhile in the book - he draws us to this footnote in one of the chapters of *Marx's Capital: Volume One*. He dedicates basically a whole chapter to this one footnote and explains why he thinks it's important. What he says is [Marx is] basically talking about the various factors that work together to dynamically generate momentum within society, to provide avenues that might close down and open up new paths forward. What David Harvey talks about within this is six things that Marx lists very quickly, and then he adds a seventh of his own. I've tried to write down the seven things on my notepad here, and I've managed five of them. So you'll have to go and look up the book, and everyone at home will as well. But some of those factors in this dynamic that are working together are our relationship to technology, our relationship to nature, the forces of production, the conditions of social reproduction. And one of them that always sticks in my mind is mental conceptions of the world. David Harvey says that these work together in a dynamic assemblage, which is different to a Hegelian Marxist dialectic that's either purely Idealistic, in the capital-I German Idealism sense of the word, or rigidly materialistic. And of course, Tronti is guilty of this too. He reverses the dialectic, but it's still fundamentally a very heavily structural dialect for him and his thinking. I think what Harvey does here is introduces a kind of sensitivity to different [mental] conceptions of the world and different forms of life that is both inclusive of a broader range of

ideas than we might find within traditional Marxist thought, but also actually more politically interesting and productive for it.

1:20:18 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Alright.

1:20:19 CRAIG GENT

Alright. We're at time.

1:20:20 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

I think it's time to wrap up.

1:20:22 CRAIG GENT

It's time. We're gonna to get back on the prosecco. We've both run dry.

1:20:26 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Thank you for those who were online and to those who were in the room with us, chatting and listening. See you, I suppose, in the autumn.

1:20:37 CRAIG GENT

I guess is the end of season one!

1:20:39 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

This is the end of season one! Thank you everyone. Thank you Keith!

1:20:43 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Applause]

1:20:43 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Keith, please come on this side of the green screen. Okay, thank you so much. Thank you and see you soon. Bye. Have a great summer of quitting and refusal!

## FOOTNOTES

1. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. ↑
2. Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital*. Translated by David Broder. London: Verso, 2019. ↑
3. See Mario Tronti, 'Lenin In England' [1964]  
<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/it/tronti.htm>; Mario Tronti, 'The Strategy of Refusal' [1965], <https://libcom.org/book/export/html/439> ↑
4. Sarah Jaffe, *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone*. Bold Type Books, 2021. ↑
5. Coin, Francesca. 2025. *The Great Resignation: The New Refusal of Work*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025. ↑
6. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Resignation,' in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism. Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 289-294. ↑
7. David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital: The Complete Edition*. London: Verso, 2018. ↑