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# Beyond cyberutopia and digital disenchantment: Pragmatic engagements with and from within the Internet

by Mareile Kaufmann, Anna Leander, and Nanna Bonde Thylstrup

**Abstract**

In this introduction, we describe how this special issue [1] looks at contemporary digital political practices. It highlights the pragmatic engagements employed by political movements and subjects as they negotiate infrastructural entanglements with visions of resistance, subversion, and survival. The contributions to the special issue are characteristic of such engagements that operate beyond the spectacles of cyberutopia and digital disenchantment. They opt instead to embody or subvert digital infrastructures and offer new political imaginaries and realities.

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## Introduction

The early years of the Internet unleashed an immense utopian energy, expressed for instance in John Perry Barlow's (in)famous declaration of independence for cyberspace (Barlow, 1996). In the 2000s the pendulum swung in the opposite direction, giving rise to critical voices concerned about the Internet's authoritarian mobilizations and ubiquitous commercialization (*e.g.*, Mejias, 2013; McChesney, 2014). Opting out of the dialectical negation offered by these discursive waves, this special issue focuses on pragmatic engagements as they appear in everyday digital politics of resistance (Lobato and Gonzales), survival (Singh), subversion (Kaufmann), and negotiation (Tsinovoi; Maurer and Røstboll). These are engagements that neither celebrate the Internet as pure empowerment nor lament the emergence of an Internet-industrial complex (Flyverbom, *et al.*, 2017).

Significantly, this special issue sketches the contours of a new wave of political engagements that work pragmatically through and with the Internet, even while (or perhaps because) they

recognize the Internet as imbued with power (Kolko, *et al.*, 2000; Philip, 2005; Nakamura, 2008; Chun, 2008; Byrd, 2014). As the contributions to this special issue show, pragmatic engagements have emerged that respond to the embodied, embedded, and messy realities of Internet infrastructures by deploying a wide range of practices. These can be activist and expressly political in character (Gonzales and Lobato); they can be quiet (Singh); they can be playful, tech-oriented, and fiddly (Kaufmann); they can work with or against the visibility regimes of the Internet (Tsinovoi; Maurer and Røstboll).

## Staying with the trouble: Pragmatic engagements and risky collaborations

The acknowledgment that the Internet is imbued with power hierarchies — commercial, military, gendered, racial, and beyond — has forced those who engage in online politics to consider how to deal with this. On the one hand, this has led to political reflections and strategies to preserve a space for politics outside of such powers' grip. For some, the only — and therefore necessary — way to do this is to "disconnect" and "detox" (Dean, 2016; for a comprehensive overview of the various politics of disconnectivity, see Hesselberth, 2018). For others, the way forward lies in forms of revolutionary politics that radically challenge, redesign, and therefore redefine online politics (Lagasnerie, 2015; Akpunkt Schneider, 2013). And for yet others, "notopias" — abandoning utopian politics and stable political imaginaries in favor of a "speculative everything" — solve the issue by denying power any fixity or stability (Dunne and Raby, 2013, 2001). On the other hand, acknowledging the permeating presence of the powers that shape digital politics has also led to pragmatic political reflections and engagements that continue to work with the Internet. These strategies neither radically withdraw from nor reject digital infrastructures, but instead stay *with* them and work from *within* them. This has led to the development of a broad range of Internet politics that continue to "stay with the trouble," as Gonzales and Lobato put it, borrowing from Haraway (2016).

This latter form of "pragmatic engagement" is the focus in this special issue. Our contributors all describe and analyze political practices that remain online *and* take power seriously, striving for political change. This is the sense in which they are pragmatic. In the vein of Isabelle Stengers' (1995; Stengers and Despret, 2014) studies of the pragmatic strategies of "women who fuss" in universities and/or inventors of "modern science," the contributors to this special issue focus on engagements that acknowledge the power of digital infrastructures and work *with* and *within* them. Some do so with the aim of transforming the Internet from within, as Mareile Kaufmann explores in her article on hackers. Others engage with the Internet to create means of survival, as Rianka Singh points out in her discussion of quiet resistance. But why do they remain in contact with digital infrastructures? Perhaps because these groups cannot afford opting out — whether for practical or political reasons? Perhaps because the activists think this is the most politically efficacious strategy, like the realists epitomized by Niccol Machiavelli? Perhaps because they share the conviction of materialist theorists such as Annemarie Mol (2002) and Bruno Latour (2010) that pragmatic engagements are necessary to capture a politics beyond language? Or perhaps because, like many Black, feminist and postcolonial scholars including Patricia Hill Collins (2011) and Marisol de la Cadena (2015), they believe that staying connected to practice and experience ensures a sensitivity to multiple, shifting, and emerging forms of power and domination, and to the multiple worlds associated with them? The

contributions collectively refer to all of these answers, and often to more than one at a time, revealing the diverse grounds for adopting, tweaking, and discarding the pragmatic political engagements they discuss.

As other pragmatic engagements of this kind, some of those discussed here are therefore articulated within what Stengers calls the "Leibnizean constraint": as they seek to achieve change, they necessarily have to refrain from "hurting established sentiment" [2]. If they disregard this constraint, they risk remaining invisible, ineffective, marginalized, banned, or excluded. If they fail to resonate with established sentiments, they may be unable to continue working from within — or working at all. The Leibnizean constraint captures the ambivalence of engagements that work *within* and in that sense collaborate. For Haraway — who calls her own approach "relentlessly collaborationist" [3] — collaborations engage marginalized species and peoples and take forms such as her three SFs: science fiction, speculative fabulation, and string figures (Haraway, 2013). In contrast, the practices discussed in this special issue engage with a different set of digital infrastructures that are marked by power that is militarized, sovereign, racialized, gendered and beyond. This raises different questions about the political engagements our contributors describe, and the possibilities and ambivalences opened up by engagements with such power-imbued infrastructures.

Collaborations in digital politics are risky and ethically challenging, regardless of whether their aim is to negotiate, shift, subvert, play with, survive, or challenge constraints and hierarchies formatted into digital infrastructures. Those who work *from within* may be able to effect change, but they also run the risk of indirectly reinforcing the power structures they are striving to transform. In the context of pragmatic digital engagements *working from within* may become associated with infrastructurally conditioned complicity. Some of our contributors consequently discuss how pragmatic engagements with such infrastructures take courage, commitment, reflection, and patience.

In the context of the Internet, the ambivalence of working from within is heightened as complicity is often part of the *infrastructural design*: "Complicity is the intuitive but, crucially, invisible matter that creeps the lives of technology users, structurally implicating them (us) in ever new and apparently unchosen scenes of wrongdoing" (Ring, in press). Sometimes complicity is bluntly imposed. As Nakamura puts it in her analysis of a Jennifer Lopez video: "We are often put in a position in which we must watch a male watcher watching; we must witness his interactivity as our means to visualize the body of the woman" [4]. At other times it works more subtly, as when Google, Netflix, or Facebook "algorithmically curate the content they wish us to see" [5], or when complicity is designed into surveillance technologies (Ring, 2016). Some of the pragmatic engagements, such as the hacking practices explored by Mareile Kaufmann in this special issue, take the risk of engaging with ambiguous political infrastructures for the sake of subversion. Other engagements, like those of solidarity and resistance explored by Rianka Singh, emerge out of a "survival impulse" (Shah 2019).

## The potentials and perils of infrastructural engagements

The claim that Internet infrastructures are fraught is hardly new. Stories abound of the role of the military, banks, and commercial service providers in the Internet's material and political development (Hu, 2015; Chun, 2016; Benjamin, 2019). Imagining a world — like the one Barlow

had in mind — where we can do away with origins, and with the original power-structures associated with them, has become ever more difficult. The abuse, manipulation, and structuring of digital politics by intelligence services and commercial organizations become ever more pressing as the socio-material consequences of digital infrastructures become ever more visible. Digital infrastructures “capture” (Chun, 2016) data subjects, often in highly discriminatory ways. Ruha Benjamin [6] points out that digital tools “capture more than just people’s bodies. They also capture the imagination, offering technological fixes for a wide range of social problems,” thereby creating a “carceral continuum” that operates through racialized ideologies and hierarchies. These consequences have led to a global rush to regulate the Internet. Yet with few exceptions — such as the Indian activist victory over Facebook (Purkayastha, 2016), or the European Union’s policy initiatives on tax and privacy — regulatory efforts to wrest control away from powerful companies and states, and to (re)establish space for other forms of politics, often fail. In any case, such regulatory efforts are triply fraught. First, they often reinstate the powers that be, including states and powerful corporations. Second, they tend to fumble with technical processes that escape their reach. In practice, much regulation works through and depends on code, protocols, encryption, system languages, and interoperability — that is, on technically entangled forms of agency that adapt and respond, becoming ever more elusive as regulation is extended. Third, regulatory efforts backfire when they misguidedly work through transparency devices that become new points of value exploitation and surveillance (Ananny and Crawford, 2018).

The social hierarchies of digital infrastructures are increasingly clear, but they are also “sticky” and difficult to break (Leander, 2019). Few people can afford to disconnect completely; most have no option but to work pragmatically with and within these infrastructures. While this situation is a source of frustration to many, it also holds political potential, however. We see digital pragmatic engagements as processes that link experiences of the digital to their social contexts. Some of them let go of the idea that their politics can even be grounded in a stable and fixed place, anchoring collective projects instead in shifting doings and engagements. As Hito Steyerl suggests in her reflections on the shape-shifting politics of the digital, this dynamic ground might even offer new potentialities: “What seemed like a helpless tumble into an abyss actually turns out to be a new representational freedom. [...] It helps us get over [...] the idea that we need ground in the first place” [7]. Along similar lines, some of the practices in this special issue engage with existing infrastructures, and in doing so also engage with what is already there, subverting and transforming current infrastructures to imbue them with new hope. Refusing the duality of accepting or denying today’s infrastructures, the pragmatic engagements in this special issue intervene and work with standardized digital infrastructures such as blogs, hashtags, and hacks. Moreover, as Rianka Singh’s careful analysis of community activism shows, engagements with and from within the Internet are never exclusively digital. Rather, they are enacted together with more traditional engagements, such as pamphlets, zines, and community meetings. These socio-material infrastructures of political activity have significant implications. As Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star [8] argue, standards, categories, and infrastructures “should be recognized as the significant site of political and ethical work that they are.”

This special issue shows how digital infrastructures become important sites of political activity, and reveals the pragmatic choices the infrastructures demand of those who participate in

political strategies online. Take the hashtag as an example. As Tara S. Conley (in press) argues, the hashtag has become a significant political and socio-material infrastructure (Myles, 2018) that can both produce and amplify social movements (Jackson, *et al.*, 2020). Luisa Cruz Lobato and Cristiania Gonzales' article shows how Brazilian feminist movements embody the "Westernized, patriarchal, and capitalist Internet" to create new, heterogeneous, and hopeful political activist infrastructures through hashtag-supported activism to do exactly this: embody the Internet to produce and amplify social movements. The same holds true for the hackers described in Mareile Kaufmann's article, who contest online surveillance by reinventing orders of worth within the digital infrastructures they inhabit. In both cases, the political actors engage with contested infrastructures, constantly navigating and negotiating them, while also transforming them through their practices. While some engage with digital infrastructures to amplify political action, others, like those Rianka Singh portray, forego the loud materializations of political spectacle in favor of the lower frequencies of care and survival (see also Agostinho and Thylstrup, 2019; Campt, 2017). Rianka Singh thus allows us to consider digital infrastructures such as Amazon's Wish Lists not so much as technological tools, but rather as socio-material "strategies employed in a digital culture" that for many have also become "forms of survival tied to digital culture."

While pragmatic infrastructural engagement holds potential, it is also risky — not least due to the ways in which veillance and visibility are deeply ingrained in the digital architecture (Naughton, 1999; Zuboff, 2019). Digital infrastructures, including digital information, are designed to support traceability, storability, and searchability (Kaufmann and Jeandesboz, 2017). Their purpose is to make social flows visible and governable (Bauman and Lyon, 2013). Thus, any engagement with digital infrastructures can also be relevant for infrastructure providers. This means that even critical engagements or nonengagements can be traced and analyzed for new insights.

The practices discussed in this special issue reflect these ambiguities. One obvious risk examined in this issue is the risk of being identified while critically engaging with digital systems. This is discussed in detail by Gonzales and Lobato below. As John Gilliom (2005), they highlight the risks women take when they try to circumvent the intrusive surveillance infrastructures. In Gilliom's case these risks stem from a computerized information management system that tracks their eligibility for financial aid; in Gonzales and Lobato they stem from the manipulation of social media communication by political, often state based, agents. A different risk is that digital engagements will be embraced by commercial logics. For example, critiques of algorithmically curated music playlists (Ratliff, 2017; Prey, 2018) have led big music-streaming companies to combine automated curation with hand curation to enhance the quality of their services (Tiffany, 2017). Thus, attempts to criticize digital infrastructures, redefine visibility, or develop alternative visibilities are risky because they always entail personal, social, or systemic consequences.

## The pragmatic engagements at work in this special issue

All the contributions to this special issue describe such risky and entangled engagements. While analyzing progressive engagements, each contributor also reflects on the perils of the technologies described. Referring to Adriana Cavarero's *Inclinations* (2016), Rianka Singh describes what it means to stand up against the disempowering and destructive politics of online platforms while at the same time "inclining" toward them so as to give a voice to those who need

solutions for survival. Both the inclination toward and the (re)appropriation of online technologies are instances of what Haraway (2016) calls “staying with the trouble.” Luisa Lobato and Cristiana Gonzales make this point very clear. In their examples of feminist engagements with online infrastructures, they portray women who — instead of turning away from the Westernized, patriarchal, violent, capitalist, and commercial materialities of online infrastructures — decide to re-approach and reembody them. These female actors acknowledge that the very infrastructures that lead to attacks on their digital and physical selves also enable them to fight for their cause, reclaim their digital selves, and build online as well as off-line mobilization. By acknowledging this ambiguity — including the consequences that this acknowledgment has for their bodies — these actors create new digital space for female political action.

Similarly, Mareile Kaufmann describes how “staying with the trouble” is also performed by hackers who dispute online surveillance. Like anyone who takes part in shaping online infrastructures, hackers do not abandon what they have created. They do not “detox” from digital environments, which is why they also tend to engage with their systems from within — whether by creatively overcoming the restrictions of online infrastructures, or by repurposing such systems to find practical solutions or make statements about their inherent surveillant capabilities. Engagements that expose acting subjects to surveillance — with embodied consequences — are especially risky. Kathrin Maurer and Christian Røstboll’s discussion of Dave Eggers’ *The Circle* analyses a literary imagining of how technologies that can build utopias and further democratic values can also easily tip over into dystopia — especially in the context of governmental intervention. In an analogous vein, Alexei Tsinovoi’s account of social media campaigns shows how digital diplomacy strategies have to account for the “dark side of visibility” and the production of invisibility, while also describing options for new visibilities and embracing visibility as a “reward” (Bucher, 2012).

Each case presented in this issue takes the specificity of the infrastructure and the social situation into account while it reflects on potentials for engagement and disengagement. The specificities of reembodying technologies are a central theme in Lobato and Gonzales’ article. The authors place the online violence they analyze within the Brazilian context, where there are high rates of unmediated violence. In addition, with the #NotHIM campaign they also focus on women using an already male infrastructure (Souza, 2019) to campaign against presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro, who expressed misogynist attitudes (Mohallem, 2017). However, Lobato and Gonzales’ analysis goes further. They demonstrate that infrastructures are not static, but can be reembodied. They discuss, for example, how hashtag technologies were re-appropriated by people who hacked the initiative and sought to reconfigure women’s “bodies” to align with the candidate, but they also show that the women using the hashtag thought *with* the technologies at their disposal. As a result, the activists subverted hashtag infrastructures to reinstate their own presence on the Internet. This goes to show that the specificities of each technology have to be understood first in order to be reembodied: “Women understood that algorithms in platforms increase the visibility of terms, expressions or words that are the most mentioned, so MUCB started to use the hashtag #EleNao to increase their visibility without making Bolsonaro ‘famous’ in social media.”

While Lobato and Gonzales show how infrastructures can be subverted to amplify the presence of women and the politics of misogyny, Rianka Singh pays attention to quieter modes of resistance at the interstices and margins of the digital. Singh’s article makes a much-needed

intervention into mediacentric approaches to digital activism. She reminds us of the tensions and contradictions involved in quiet modes of resistance — for instance, by describing how activists negotiate “modes of inclination”, and stand up against infrastructures and the devalued labor such practices are premised on. Despite the commercial and degrading design of the digital technologies she describes, her interviews attest to the possibilities of intervening “in a minor key.” These forms of engagement use the platforms’ relative accessibility and distribution to offer willful modes of survival, for instance by deploying Wish Lists for the deprived.

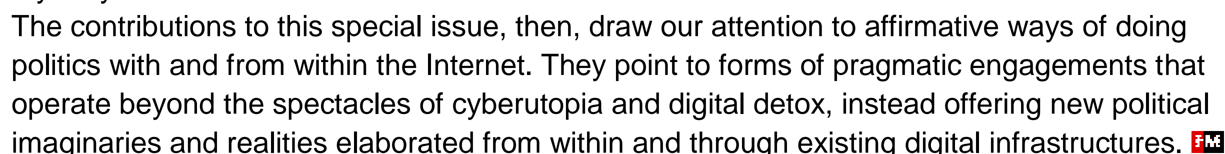
Where Rianka Singh’s article tunes into minor keys as a form of subversion, Mareile Kaufmann focuses on the quiet and loud forms of dispute performed by the hackers she interviews. Countering the spectacle of transparency that characterizes some of the more famous hacking platforms (*e.g.*, WikiLeaks), Kaufmann interviews hackers that endorse neither transparency nor secrecy. For these hackers, leaks are a form of critique that responds to digital politics with revelation and more veillance, ultimately feeding dualistic politics. Kaufmann describes discussions among hackers regarding different strategies for disputing and hacking online surveillance. These engagements take account not only of the specificities of surveillance techniques, but also the political effects a hack should have, ranging from “do not disturb” to “we disturb you” types of activity. Not always organized around a specific cause or motivated by deep-seated political resistance, these hackers often engage pragmatically with infrastructures to develop them further on a technical level, to create new discourses around them, or to redefine visibilities within their related regimes of veillance. Thus, these infrastructures afford not only modes of survival, but also modes of playful tinkering “to figure out what they do” (Sicart, 2014), which over time can then become the basis for critical engagements (Kaufmann, 2018). Indeed, as some hackers in Kaufmann’s piece describe, they experience “pressures,” “fear,” and even “creeping pain levels” when they observe how surveillance expands within the infrastructures they engage with. Hacking is in turn associated with “self-empowerment” and “being constructive,” but also “egoistic self-protection”; it elicits the joys of “being awake” at the same time as “venting anger” (Kaufmann, 2018, also Gonzales and Lobato in this issue).

Pragmatic engagements such as those discussed in this special issue are premised on infrastructural literacy. Having a good understanding of infrastructures in order to appropriate them is also a theme in Tsinovoi’s analysis of digital diplomacy. Tsinovoi argues that diplomatic social media campaigns should be analyzed as a question not only of content — as is often the case in international relations — but also of infrastructural connectivity. This is his vantage point to discuss the successes and failures of the strategy of self-hypervisibilization in the context of the Israel <3 Iran Facebook campaign, and the strategy of the invisibilization of others used in the later 4IL app. Both strategies were developed for specific forms of visibility and social media types, also performing distinct tactics of visibility management for diplomatic purposes. While Tsinovoi sees the failures and missed opportunities in each strategy, he also argues that both of them are indicative of a new digital mode of international relations that may have sustainable diplomatic effects.

Finally, Maurer and Røstboll draw our attention to challenges associated with the cultural imaginaries of digital technologies. Analyzing Dave Eggers’ novel *The Circle*, they show how the aesthetics of the digital involves steel and glass, suggesting the “instant and spontaneous engagement, reconnection, and participation enabled by ICT.” These aesthetics represent the “hyperconnectedness” that allows the equal and direct participation of all those who are

connected. It also involves speed — that is, instant recognition and "being seen." The aesthetics of hyperconnectivity invites pleasureful, playful, collective, and energizing experiences as well as a form of dynamism and "taking" the societal temperature [9]. At the same time, hyperconnectivity shrinks the space for pause or deliberative politics. It turns politics into a totalitarian project with little room for opting out. In addition, the aesthetics of glass represents "transparent communication" and "accountability" — a claim that also characterizes contemporary debates about online technologies. Within this imaginary, transparency conveys the utopia of a world without violations and with transparent knowledge, as well as technology's progressive potential to inform people and not just informationalize them. At the same time, this imaginary also shows how transparency risks tipping over into an authoritarianism where everything must be known, where there is no room for reflection, no debate, and no space for mystery.

The contributions to this special issue, then, draw our attention to affirmative ways of doing politics with and from within the Internet. They point to forms of pragmatic engagements that operate beyond the spectacles of cyberutopia and digital detox, instead offering new political imaginaries and realities elaborated from within and through existing digital infrastructures.



**About the authors**

**Mareile Kaufmann** is a post doc researcher at the Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, University of Oslo. A large part of her work focuses on surveillance practices and technologies, but also how people engage critically with these from within surveillance systems. Mareile uses qualitative research designs that combine theory with innovative angles and strong empirical components.
E-mail: Mareile [dot] Kaufmann [at] jus [dot] uio [dot] no

**Anna Leander** is Professor of International Relations at the Graduate Institute in Geneva with affiliations at PUC, Rio de Janeiro and the Copenhagen Business School. She is best known for work on practice theoretical approaches and methodologies and for her work on commercial security. Her current research focuses on the politics of digital technologies and their regulation.
E-mail: Anna [dot] Leander [at] graduateinstitute [dot] ch

**Nanna Bonde Thylstrup** is Associate Professor of Communication and Digital Media at Copenhagen Business School. She is author of *The politics of mass digitization* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2018) and is co-editor of the forthcoming anthology *Uncertain archives: Critical keywords for the age of big data* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2020). Her work has appeared in journals such as *New Media & Society, Big Data & Society*, and *First Monday*.
E-mail: nbt [dot] msc [at] cbs [dot] dk

**Notes**

1. The title picture of this special issue is taken by Mareile Kaufmann. Please contact her for possible reuse.
2. Stengers, 1995, p. 25.
3. Haraway cited in Gane, 2006, p. 138.
4. Nakamura, 2008, p. 19.
5. Finn, 2017, p. 111.
6. Benjamin, 2019, p. 1.

7. Steyerl, 2012, p. 27.
8. Bowker and Star, 1999, p. 329.
9. Eggers, 2017, p. 397.

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