Returning Control to the User: Digital Identity in a Post-Capitalist Future

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It is commonly said that social media platforms serve two sets of users: people and marketers. With both social and commercial obligations, unpacking the service of clicks, shares, and relationship statuses becomes complicated. Social media platforms engage in a hidden capitalism where people engage with these services as they enact their social lives, while the overtly commercial aspects are hidden, relegated to sidebars and sponsored posts, and are regarded as the necessary cost of maintaining these social spaces.

At the highest level, we are concerned with how people's identities and social lives are constructed, expressed, and represented on social media platforms. We have focused on how to bring "compassion" to major life experiences like death [1,2] and gender transition [3], while always seeking to foster technology as a site for self-expression [4,5]. However, a critical reading of this work might find that it simply serves as a corrective to the unintended and sometimes unfortunate consequences of these platforms. Some may argue that we are thinking too small. Prompted by the call of this workshop, we find ourselves asking: How might we take seriously the design of social media for a post-capitalist era?

Inspiration from Digital Identity's Past

We take inspiration from digital identity architectures of the mid-2000s. To address problems of cross-system authentication and the growing number of accounts for
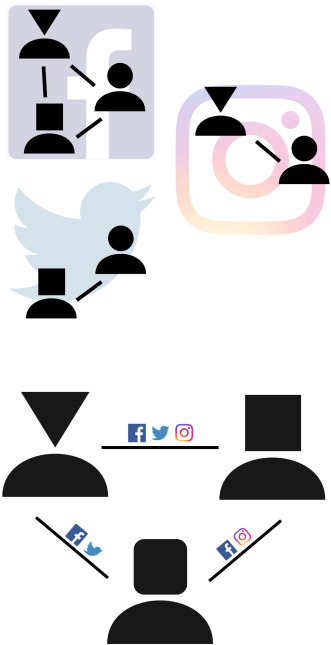
Figure 1: The current approach to social media (top), requires users to create multiple, independent identities across several platforms; in our approach (bottom), we explore how platforms might be re-conceptualized as extensible protocols that enable different forms of interpersonal expression.

any given person, "user-centric" approaches were proposed as alternatives to system or enterprise-centric status quos. We see implementations of this approach in systems like Microsoft's CardSpace, and projects such as OpenID, OAuth, and Higgins. These approaches sought to give people control over identity management. In the process, they also enabled mechanisms for multiple identities, granular disclosure, and authenticated anonymity. Perhaps most important, in hindsight, was the federated approach which kept identity and service providers separate.

What was underestimated was the immense value in collecting identity data. While organizations like Google and Facebook make use of these standards, they have also situated themselves as central identity brokers. In doing so, they have provided the conveniences of modern authentication and account management, while retaining control of people's personal data. In effect, they have made personal data proprietary.

Drawing From the Past to Design the Future
How might we design social media when control of identity is returned to the user and and commercial drivers are removed? While today's social media is about "us", that "us" only exists within the framework of commercially driven systems.

We are exploring a protocol-based approach in which users assemble their own forms of expression. Interpersonal relationships provide the context for interaction and identity construction, rather than platforms. With social media decentralized, modes of expression and identity performance could, much like software libraries, be installed, remixed, and extended endlessly. By reconceptualizing social media as a set of user customized and extensible protocols, we imagine

interactions that enable users to cultivate their identity and express themselves according to their relationships to others. We aim to motivate people to create their own modes of expression, and in turn enable identity construction without struggling against platform constraints. By privileging expression over platforms, we hope to empower edge users through an open approach that encourages tinkering.

Naturally, our work must consider how to ensure the legibility of various media forms, and the development of the standards on which social media relies. Currently, capitalism's scale provides the means to develop and maintain both. However, if our research on compassionate technology is only addressing the short-comings of platform-centric designs, we hope that by re-centering on people, social media will be better attuned to the social practices and realities of people's lives. In this way, a post-capitalist approach may enable technology that is compassionate from the start.

References

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