Beyond the Digital Promise: Virtual Communities and Democracy in Recent Contemporary History

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The promise of the Internet has morphed into a dystopia. When the digital world expanded from a nerd's playground to a digital extension of society at the beginning of the millennium, the web vibrated with hope. Web 2.0 promised — with its sleek interfaces and simplified handling — to break up the old ways of communicating and doing business, to evade monopolies. Today we can clearly see the complicated relationship between the economic blessings and the social challenges of a digital society. But there is a third level to this relationship — the political side of the "digital revolution." Elias Wessel's art series "It's Complicated" illustrates that these three layers cannot be separated from each other. Yet, the economic facet is far more apparent, thanks to the enormous market value of companies like Facebook, and the social dimension more obvious in their self-appointed missions as "social media" or "social networks" than the relatively elusive political aspect of the world's digital awakening. To elaborate this more precisely and to understand Wessel's series of works as a critical contribution to deciphering this context, it is worth taking a look back — though not too far, because despite all the ridicule aimed at Angela Merkel's statement to this effect, we are still treading "uncharted territory."[1]

Democratic Buzz?

The emergence of Web 2.0 was about nothing less than the democratization of public communication, the media, indeed the markets themselves. Despite all the complaints at the time about the alleged depoliticization of the digital generation, who were no longer participating in the usual forums, the buzzword of democratization has politicized the digital transformation from its very beginnings. The pursuit of democratization through digitization stood for the hope that public speech would soon no longer be filtered through the bastions of traditional media or corporations. Their hierarchies would be replaced by fast and direct networking — beyond the traditional channels of social and political contact, be they parties, citizens' initiatives or associations. Completely new industries were emerging and the working world was undergoing fundamental changes. Thus, the euphoria at the emergence of new democratic paths for participation in civil society was by no means limited to the talk of a few romantic futurists; it was at the heart of the promise of the digital society. Now at the dawn of the 2020s, Wessel takes exemplary stock of the results with "It's Complicated."

His starting point itself contains a thesis: The bastions of the old media and corporations may have been chiseled away, but they have been replaced by new, even larger companies. He turns our attention to the colossus that is Facebook. It's called a social network. But by allowing his scrolling behavior to congeal into an image in "It's Complicated," Wessel poses the question: What is the social action in the social network, really? The collision of two cyclists is not a social act, wrote Max Weber, but "a mere event like a natural phenomenon."[2] The former occurs only when the colliding people try

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[1] See e.g. Torben Waleczek, "Merkels ‚Neuland' wird zur Lachnummer im Netz," *Tagesspiegel*, 19 Juni 2013.

[2] Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1972), 11.

to dodge, scold, or fight each other. Facebook is thus not social per se merely because everyone can post all the time. Here, too, interactions have to be created. In this context, it would perhaps be pleasanter for people to skillfully speed past one another, in the sense of Max Weber, but it would be economically unattractive. It is not evasion but confrontation that guarantees social events here. It is thus by no means solely down to the users that exchanges on social media constantly result in communicative collisions. Producing such crashes is the true task of social media. In a sense, Wessel captures the individual tracks on the path to such collisions. Compressing individual statements into a moment, he directs our view from the events of individual posts to the structure from which they emerge. His purposeful de-contextualization of posted statements brings to the fore the specific context in which those statements operate. In "It's Complicated, No. 1," the superimposition of a shadowy President Trump, election forecasts in favor of the AfD,[3] and inflammatory headlines is no coincidence; rather, it illustrates how, when scrolling and reading, agitation condenses into a reality. This is, as this essay argues, no mere stocktaking of the present. In the images of "It's Complicated," shimmering out among the many layers of words, color, and light, we see the ambivalence of the history of digitization — and with it of Homo Digitalis.

Let's follow these tracks.

About two decades ago, platforms such as Myspace, various forums and the "blogosphere" opened up new dimensions of self-presentation far beyond the limited circle of computer enthusiasts who were already networked. Anyone and everyone could now make a public appearance and potentially reach a huge audience — and there was no need for certain privileges, such as personal networks or professional positions. Nor was there any need to recognize those with such privileges, for example, when it came to a talent for writing or making music. What could be more democratic, the thinking went, than everyone having direct individual access to the forums of the public sphere? Why should I strive to convince a music producer or an editor and then endure a protracted production process when I can make my work freely available online with one click? In this context, however, one may wonder to what extent statements are still recognizable as such, and at what point they become just the unnuanced tones of buzzing noise? It is this question that Wessel poses visually.

Yet the internet euphoria of the early 2000s did not stop at the limitless possibilities of self-distribution. Why should only my work be freely available immediately and everywhere? All works should be democratized! And so the exchange of ideas went hand in hand with the exchange of data and files. The art world entered an age of the true technical reproducibility of artworks — without loss of quality and with two clicks of the mouse. Right click: Copy. Right click: Paste. Done.

Here, too, a political promise was at hand. The appropriation of these works became an act of democratization. In this way, the promise was given a countenance: The concept of the pirate was transformed in a second turn from the buccaneer romanticized over the centuries into an icon of digital freedom. The enticing anarchy of the privateer was peppered with a mighty dash of Robin Hood. But whereas the first digital networks were closely tied to concrete acts of exchanging digital objects, Facebook amended things, suppressing the old kind of data-sharing. Things are different, though, when

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[3] Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) is a far-right German nationalist populist party.

it comes to sharing words and images, where the "damages" are even more difficult to quantify than in the case of music or film file-sharing.

We see the complexity of today's appropriation processes in Wessel's works: One's own words and those of others merge. Users are constantly sharing material from other authors. This happens, as in private everyday communication, partly consciously but above all unconsciously. Now, however, Facebook raises fundamental questions about the existence of private communication. Moreover, Wessel's images are brimming with aesthetic energy not least because they materialize, to a certain extent, the fuel of the digital medium Facebook: the creation of one's own profile and thus the individual capitalization of other people's work. Sharing a newspaper article, for example, ostensibly serves to disseminate it, but it contributes in fact to the profiling of those who share it and who react to it. Advertising and demarcation themselves become acts of appropriation and thus, borrowing from the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, part of a digital subjectification strategy.[4] One delineates oneself from other users by blurring the line between "sharing" and "stating." Yet, Wessel's cross-fading highlights that all of these neatly drawn self-demarcations are merely the foreground of a much larger process of digital appropriation, namely that of the platform. Facebook gains capital because users build their profile with material that does not belong to them.

The Digital Citizen

Thus, "It's Complicated" leads us to what Reckwitz describes as a core issue of modern societies: The individual and society are not opposites but reciprocally referential ideas. If Facebook, in Zuckerberg's words, is building "global community" as a new society, what sort of citizen is it shaping?[5] Here "sharing" comes full circle. John Locke long ago pointed out that nothing less hangs on the question of property than questions of personal freedom and civil society.[6] The digital sphere now enables the concept of ownership to be reduced to the right of access — at least as far as it concerns the increasing number of objects that can be digitized. This has transformed the question of ownership into one of access to communicative networks. Rousseau concluded at the height of the Enlightenment that the first person to draw a fence and declare what was behind it his property must have been the "true founder of civic society,"[7] but the idea of the digital citizen has inverted this. The digital citizen's founding act is the removal of fences. In Zuckerberg's business language, it sounds like this: "People sharing more — even if just with their close friends or families — creates a more open culture and leads to a better understanding of the lives and perspectives of others."[8] At the advent of

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[4] Andreas Reckwitz, "Subjekt/Identität. Die Produktion und Subversion des Individuums," in *Poststrukturalistische Sozialwissenschaften*, ed. Stefan Moebius and Andreas Reckwitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), 78.

[5] Mark Zuckerberg, "Building Global Community," Facebook, 16 Februar 2017, https://www.facebook.com/notes/ mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634/.

[6] John Locke, *Zwei Abhandlungen über die Regierung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), II, 89, 124, 127.

[7] Jean Jaques Rousseau, *Johann Jacob Rousseau, Bürgers zu Genf Abhandlung von dem Ursprunge der Ungleichheit unter den Menschen, und worauf sie sich gründe: ins Deutsche übersetzt mit einem Schreiben an den Magister Leßing und einem Briefe Voltairens an den Verfasser vermehret*, trans. Moses Mendelsohn (Berlin: Voß, 1756), 97.

[8] Mark Zuckerberg, "Facebook's Letter," *The Guardian*, 1 Februar 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/technology/ 2012/feb/01/facebook-letter-mark-zuckerberg-text

file-sharing, representatives of the free software movement were already warning about the difference between "free beer" and "free speech."[9] Zuckerberg, in contrast, continues: "As people share more, they have access to more opinions from the people they trust about the products and services they use. This makes it easier to discover the best products and improve the quality and efficiency of their lives." Thus, to put it shortly, Facebook blatantly transforms the private sphere into "free beer" for advertising purposes.

While Facebook argues its way into the tradition of digital sharing networks, it also breaks with them. Looking at Wessel's "It's Complicated," the certainties of Facebook's sharing culture transform into questions. Who actually has access to the statements that users store on Facebook when advertising and appropriation merge, distribution channels are company secrets and the repositories of knowledge are dispersed internationally on company-owned servers? Who really owns the personal profile created through long networking efforts? Though it was a promise of the digital world to make ownership portable, Facebook's closed nature prevents this, even for something as genuinely digital as an individual profile. What, then, should a digital citizen look like according to Facebook's façon? This line of thinking ultimately leads us to the central question: What relationship actually exists between the subjects of the "digital community," who drift off into the collective din in "It's Complicated"?

Society as Competition

Mark Zuckerberg has openly declared his grand aim "to help transform society for the future" to be founded on the small scale "with the relationship between two people. Personal relationships are the fundamental unit of our society."[10] This sounds straightforward, but it is actually a far-reaching statement of social theory. For it leads him to conclude: "We think the world's information infrastructure should resemble the social graph — a network built from the bottom up or peer-to-peer, rather than the monolithic, top-down structure that has existed to date." Here, he is not only referring to the old hope of reducing hierarchy through divestment, he is developing an image of society in the language of system administrators. So what is this supposed to mean?

To decipher this idea, we need to look a little further back in time: In his research on the very first software pirates in the 1980s, historian Gleb Albert points out that even years before the Internet, the earliest cracker gangs were creating new forms of exchange, networking and digital social codes on their file-sharing platforms.[11] The response of the outside world was an attempt to criminalize the new, because exchange platforms did indeed undermine the traditional distribution channels for software. And behind these copying networks, too, ultimately lay the idea of a networked world in constant exchange. In the 1980s, as Albert points out, this also meant a clear identification with the Western side of the Cold War. It was about freedom. And that term was interpreted in the liberal-conservative

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[9] Frank Wolff and Bernhard Kaindl, "Zwischen den Zeilen. (Un)Renderung Thoughts: Freie Software als sozialer Faktor," *versa. Zeitschrift für Politik und Kunst* 4 (2004): 8–19.

[10] Zuckerberg, "Facebook's Letter."

[11] Gleb J. Albert, "Subkultur, Piraterie und neue Märkte: Die transnationale Zirkulation von Heimcomputersoftware, 1986-1995," in *Wege in die digitale Gesellschaft: Computernutzung in der Bundesrepublik 1955-1990,* ed. Frank Bösch and Martin Sabrow (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2018), 274–99.

tradition as negative freedom, i.e. the absence of barriers.[12] Crackers formed groups and divided their labor in an attempt to gain notoriety by outdoing each other in a battle for recognition. They were not competing against the market they were undermining, however, but creating their own, which adopted, deregulated and modernized many of the old rules. Not resistance against the monopolies but disruption by means of mimicry. Thus, the crackers considered themselves pioneers of a free democratic world, while creating a scene ordered according to neoliberal market thinking. Their currency was not dollars but "fame," which, unlike today, was not measured by "likes," but by the volume and reach of their digital copies. Conversely, behind today's "like," which Wessel's images repeatedly invoke, we also find little more than an acknowledgment of receipt from the digital capital represented by one's "friends."

Facebook is not the first attempt to transfer such digital organizational schemes onto society. The spearhead of this philosophy materialized in the Pirate Party. Its members dreamt, on the one hand, of Liquid Democracy and with it a dehierarchization of the party system through new digital voting tools. With that party and it's goals in mind, we can also perceive that the obscure mixture of statements and impressions permeating Wessel's "It's Complicated" themselves spring from a basic political structure of the social network. In terms of content, the Pirate Party strove for non-partisanship cast in party form, for example by refusing to make party-political decisions binding on its members. All opinions should be allowed in the inner-party marketplace. This was of course only logical in terms of digital democratization — but it ultimately also revealed that, contrary to all the rhetoric, their idea of democratization was rooted not in a collectively emancipatory project, but in the dissolution of collective and thus compromise-based idea formation. In this way, the Pirate Party represented a very specific aspect central to the interpretation of "It's Complicated": They understood political discourse according to the logic of networks, databases and digital tools as a "1:n" relationship. Every voice may be heard; it simply stands opposed to a multitude of other voices. Accordingly, the power of innovation would no longer coalesce around value orientation and guiding ideas, but through attention and disruption. It is therefore unsurprising that the rapid rise of the Pirate Party coincided with that of the social networks. "A network built from the bottom up or peer-to-peer," writes Zuckerberg, asserting moreover that, at "Hacker Way," the best ideas always win out.[13] Society as a competitive event.

In both cases, structural individualization accompanied by randomness of content represents not the result but rather the starting point of their visions for social mutuality. Flowing into the color gradient in "It's Complicated" is a rejection of the idea of social relationship by means of the social network, or rather by means of a company that knows how to use the term "social network" obfuscatingly. By binding our gaze to his feed, Wessel condenses what we otherwise perceive as sequential: the supposedly equal presence of any and all statements, whose ordering pattern is hidden in the trade secrets of the algorithms. Here, on the one hand, Facebook proves itself an heir to early digital romanticism and the notion of a society of aggregated individuals. On the other hand, it does not use the emancipatory

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[12] Charles Taylor, *Negative Freiheit? Zur Kritik des neuzeitlichen Individualismus*, 3. Ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999).

[13] Zuckerberg, "Facebook's Letter."

potential formerly expected, instead bundling its fragmented participants into sheer market power.

On the Market of Scandals

Wessel's message that it's complicated transfers a relationship statement from Facebook onto society. On the platform, this is one of the predefined options for defining one's relationship status. This sigh, which supposedly rejects the question, reflects the internal economy of the network: The statement serves to invite questions, which do not have to be answered at all, whose sole purpose is to attract attention.

Thanks to the network's hidden rules of operation, attention alone ensures presence. Here, a family adventure is brought to market in just the same way as agitation over a political event or an absurd explanation for said event. Ultimately, what ostensibly began as a tool for keeping in touch with friends could only become economically successful by becoming political. At the same time, social media companies use precisely that randomness of content that was the Pirate Party's undoing as a market opportunity. Solely for the purpose of self-preservation, these opinion conglomerates masquerading as platforms promote attention in order to produce reactions (and thus the currency units of "retention period" and "click intensity," which can be converted into analog money). They are molding a digital society that conceives of communication as market behavior. A digital society thus organized reduces its citizens to an individuality constituted in the new forms of ownership in the form of digital currencies — recognition in shares and likes. Facebook, Twitter, and their younger successors have ultimately raised Margaret Thatcher's declaration "There is no such thing as society" into the social reality of the 21st century. With this in mind, we can elaborate a little on the opening sentence of this article: It is not the Internet itself that is becoming a dystopia; rather, that process is inherently dystopian, by which we are gradually elevating the communication spaces of social networks, shaped as they are according to neoliberal dreams, to the status of a digital society.

The key to the success of these networks is their suggestion that the users themselves possess the power of disruption. It is not the self-worth of networking that attracts users, nor so much the often criticized normalization of constant self-presentation, but rather the associated feeling of having the power to effectuate something, to take hold of scandals and perhaps even to produce them. In this sense, social media fits neatly into our broader media history in which, since the dawn of the mass media age in the 19th century, media power has largely emanated from the production of scandals,[14] except that social media now supposedly uncomplicates this and makes it possible with the click of a mouse. This has profound implications for real society. For, to the extent that we commercialize our statements on the social media market, in order to be noticed at all, public communication is likewise deformed into a market. The more communication moves in the orbits of social media, the more statements become the commodities of that attention economy. One of the great merits of "It's Complicated" is how it treats statements as scrolling moments, thus revealing the absurdity of the

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[14] Martin Kohlrausch, "Medienskandale und Monarchie: Die Entwicklung der Massenpresse und die ‚große Politik' im Kaiserreich," in *Das 19. Jahrhundert als Mediengesellschaft*, ed. Jörg Requate (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2009), 116–30; Frank Bösch, "Kampf um Normen: Skandale in historischer Perspektive," in *Skandale - Strukturen und Strategien öffentlicher Aufmerksamkeitserzeugung*, ed. Kristin Bulkow and Christer Petersen (Wiesbaden: VS Springer, 2011), 29–48.

interactions involved. Readers could respond to the statement "The next right-wing massacre will take place at an institution of the lying media"[15] in two ways: "Like" or "Comment." It is completely irrelevant whether further click possibilities are hidden behind "Like" in the interactive space - it is not the variety of reactions but the mode of communication that normalizes this statement as well as all others in the corresponding image. It simulates an exchange and creates only the market.

On that market, meticulous research created with substantial material resources has just as much raw value as an explanation, angry and based on limited knowledge, of things that one has always wanted to explain. Since the market value of these commodities comes not from the content itself but from the reaction to it, communication molds itself around the pursuit of positive or negative reinforcement. Thus, the socially transformative position of social media in the form of Twitter and Facebook is based by no means solely on the narcissism of those who cavort there, nor on their desire to be continually connecting anew, but ultimately on the promise of the power of emotionalizing and scandalizing that is handed over to users. Everyone becomes his or her own gossip rag.

When anything is worth discussing as long as a decisive number of people engage with it, everything that triggers sensitivities and excitement becomes content. Thus, in the realm of social media, the digital citizen is detaching from that ideal of the self-responsible, self-disposing and self-restricted modern citizen which has been pursued since the Enlightenment. Civic representation is replaced by individual reach, measured in fictitious currencies and bound to externally determined communication channels. Thus, the end of that late Enlightenment project lies dormant in the largest players of today's Internet, whom we celebrated just a few years ago as the ultimate expression of a democratizing modernity. If it awakens, things will become really complicated.

The Appropriation of Appropriation

How should we confront this? Wessel offers one possibility in his images. As in "The Emperor's New Clothes," he takes a close look to see what is being lauded as the new world of media. A media world in which self-promotion seems to be the most content-rich element can justly be called empty. Lamenting it would not be art. Wessel's art draws yet more attention to Facebook. In the spirit of Marshall McLuhan's "The Medium is the Message," he directs that attention from the individual statements to the form of the platform by visualizing the absurd co-presence of thought, babble, and violence.[16] At the same time, his statement "It's Complicated" reflects his own relationship to the digital. In several series of works, he has addressed its dynamics critically, while simultaneously drawing from it not only his raw material but also the medium of his art. In doing so, he does not reproduce the results of the algorithms, however, but renders them new and strange. It is not the loudest statement that wins the competition for visibility in his images; that race is decided by other factors external to Facebook's algorithms, such as brightness values, scrolling speed, or aesthetics. He does not interrogate the truth of individual statements, but rather the form of their wrappings.

Thus, his art also shows that it would be a mistake to revel in a culturally pessimistic lament and flatly

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[15] Original: "Das nächste rechte Massaker wird in einer Lügenpresseeinrichtung stattfinden."

[16] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

curse the new. In conventional analog democracy, too, the possibility of self-elimination is ever present. It would be wrong to equate the digital world or the Internet with the social media operating in it. After all, this is precisely what the platform operators want us to think. Important to note is the insight that talk of society's democratization through the blessing of the Internet is ultimately based on a misconception, namely the conflation of decentralization and democratization. The new freedoms of the Internet, which undoubtedly exist, are based on structures of networking and exchange that inherently harbor strong disintegrative forces. Thus, decentralization is Janus-faced. On the one hand, it allows communication and innovation, opens up niches and facilitates scenes which can become cultures. On the other hand, it can also prevent all of this when enormous economic power meets a space largely unregulated in terms of social law. Norms must be applied to such spaces from the outside. Here, a look at history can be encouraging, because norming the new, reining in its forces, was also considered an impossible and illegitimate undertaking at the beginning of the industrial revolution, at the advent of mass media and in the course of the welfare state debate at the beginning of the 20th century.[17] And yet it was inevitable.

The new social media pretend to decentralize communication, but they actually condense communication channels, first, structurally through the incompatibility of the platforms and their virtual currencies, and second, through the gigantic accumulation of real capital by their operators. In this way, they are not only appropriating the basic structures of the digital space. In fact, they are shifting the nodes of social organization from analog institutions, such as parties or associations, to commercial software providers; they are reorganizing power.[18] A second option for countering this trend therefore lies in the question of whether we align our ideas of democracy with these platforms, or whether we constrain them democratically, i.e. impose social obligations on their network character. By complicating our view of Facebook through superimposition, Wessel leads us to a crucial insight: The emperor may possess an abundance of gold, but he is naked.

Berlin, December 2020[19]

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[17] See e.g., Thomas Welskopp, ",Wir nehmen unsere Angelegenheiten selbst in die Hände ...'. Die deutsche Arbeiterbewegung vor 1863," in *"Durch Nacht zum Licht." 150 Jahre deutsche Arbeiterbewegung. Begleitkatalog zur baden württembergischen Landesausstellung im Museum für Technik und Arbeit* (Mannheim: TECHNOSEUM, 2012), 30–55; Mark Bradley, *The World Reimagined: Americans and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[18] Critical voices are mounting on this issue, see e.g. Shira Ovide, "How Facebook Entrenches Itself," *The New York Times*, 30 September 2020.

[19] Trans. Shelby Long-Gräuler, December 2021