

Roundtable Discussion: Perspectives on the Futures of Platforms and Democracy

Miloš Hroch

Charles University, Czech Republic

 0000-0001-6590-595X

Nico Carpentier

Charles University, Czech Republic

& Tallinn University, Estonia

 0000-0002-8996-4636

Marie Heřmanová, Václav Janoščík, Dita Malečková, Martin Tremčinský

Abstract: This is an edited transcript of the audio recording of the roundtable on *Future, Democracy, and Platforms*, which was organized at the EUMEPLAT project meeting at Charles University in Prague on 15 January 2024, in collaboration with the MeDeMAP (Mapping Media for Future Democracies) project. The current digital public spaces have been transformed by platformization, and besides the positive consequences such as democratization of communication or access to information, these processes driven by algorithms have brought political, cultural, and economic asymmetries. At the roundtable, we discussed challenges and threats to fostering more democratic platform environments in the future with experts from fields such as digital and economic anthropology or new media philosophy. Among the discussed platform related topics were public and cooperative ownership, the need to strengthen their democracy and imagination or pleasure as the key principles.

Keywords: future, democracy, participation, platform capitalism, public platforms, strengthening imagination

INTRODUCTION

As many aspects of our lives are now intersecting with the digital, and interactions with online platforms are manifold, we need to ask questions about what future prospects this setting has for democratic systems. What are the challenges and threats to democracy in the future? Semi-public digital/platform spaces have been marked by economic, political, and cultural asymmetries of power, but what needs to be done to secure the balance of powers between the corporate and the commons, between the private and the public, and between human and non-human agencies? How can we secure better work, life, art, and democratic

debate and avoid tech monopolies or ‘machines’ taking over? These questions were starting points for the roundtable discussion entitled *Future, Democracy, Platforms*, which took place at the EUMEPLAT project meeting in Prague on 15 January 2024. The acronym—EUMEPLAT—stands for European Media Platforms, and is a Horizon 2020 project.¹ The roundtable was organized by the EUMEPLAT researchers in collaboration with another European project, the MeDeMAP (Mapping Media for Future Democracies) project, which is a Horizon Europe project.

The following text is an edited² transcript of the audio recordings of the roundtable, which ran for 75 minutes and featured four experts: cultural anthropologist Marie Heřmanová, new media philosopher Dita Malečková, curator and philosopher Václav Janoščík, and economic anthropologist Martin Tremčinský. The roundtable also had two moderators: Miloš Hroch and Nico Carpentier, from the Culture and Communication Research Centre of the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism (Charles University in Prague), which was hosting the EUMEPLAT meeting.

The roundtable’s central concepts that structured the discussion—democracy, platforms and future—were defined in an open way, to provide as much space as possible to the roundtable participants to engage with them. *Democracy* was seen as an always unique combination of participation and representation. We did not limit democracy to its proceduralist approach, but connected it to democratic values such as freedom, equality, diversity, justice, and accountability. *Platforms* were understood as digital infrastructures, often facilitating multi-sided markets and mediating modes of production, consumption, and user interactions. We assumed a dialectical and contingent relationship between technologies and democratic-political practices. In order to think about the *future*, we used a horizon of ten plus years. It is important to note that the future cannot be considered without including the present situation as a reference point. This is similar to science fiction literature (which was a perspective embedded in our roundtable), which also takes the present as a steppingstone. In our case, this resulted, for instance, in discussions about public versus cooperative ownership of platforms, or pleasure as one of the platform principles.

1 The full name of EUMEPLAT is “European Media Platforms: Assessing Positive and Negative Externalities for European Culture”.

2 The speakers had the opportunity to review the transcription and refine their formulations, and—within reason—to incorporate subsequent thoughts.

/// **Miloš Hroch:** *What is the shape of democracy and platforms right now, in your opinion? How democratic are today's platforms? This question assumes dialectics between technology, politics and democracy, as a starting point.*

Marie Heřmanová: It is also very important how we define platforms and how we define democracy. I guess you hinted in one of your reports that the definition of platforms could be problematic. But in the very broad sense, I think the platforms that we use today are, or could be, democratic by design. The concept... the idea is that platforms could be a voice for democratization. But I think they are not democratic in the current political system and in the current economic system. There is a gap between what they could be and how they maybe were designed in the first place, and how they are really used today. But it is not a very sharp distinction. Of course, there are shades of gray in between.

Martin Tremčinský: I will follow up on that. From a political economy point of view, there is this double movement: Platforms, on the one hand, are inclusive. In the fact, they include people, providing them with a platform to be able to communicate, to become included into specific social processes, from which they were previously excluded or to which they did not have access, in the world of the old pre-digital platforms. But on the other hand, this inclusion often seems rather predatory. It naturalized an omnipresent platformization of our social lives, of our daily communication, of our reproductive work, of the social at large. It is also exploited by some specific agents or actors within the system who gain almost a near monopoly on platform communications or platform design. So, there is the question whether we can run platforms differently, and if platforms are not what economists tend to call a natural monopoly by design. In this sense, I see this sort of dialectic, as you mentioned in your question, Miloš.

/// **Miloš Hroch:** *Can we assume technologies are neutral?*

Martin Tremčinský: No.

Marie Heřmanová: No.

Václav Janošík: From a broader framework of democracy in the age of platforms or Web 3.0, I see several dynamics that we can resort to. One is that we know far more about our online presence, online identities, and online agency. And we are far more skeptical about these concepts. Before, we had these huge expectations of us going online and communicating in a more direct, straightforward, or unmediated way. I think this kind of dream of augmented social and individual agency within online environments is in fact disappearing. The other thing concerns the building up, or generating of the social consensus, which becomes ever more volatile. We can see that—demonstrated by various types of controversies—platforms promote a highly positional logic in respect

to being informed and expressing our opinions about various phenomena, events, controversies, We live in the bleak age of this harsh return to history. We have been told that history has ended and now we actually have platforms and the internet for more democratic societies and consensus building. And now we know we are back in history [in a sense that democracy – or platform democracy – needs to be built again]. And it is the history of this kind of positional identitarian logic.

Dita Malečková: First, I would like to apologize for the slowness of my [spoken] thoughts. When I listen to the others, they are all so fast. I spent winter in the countryside with my dog and a fireplace and now I am back in the city. For me it is like: Yeah ... platforms ... right. You mean the tools I use to connect to the world? They are fine. But they are of course different from [in-person] communication. The differences between us speaking together and speaking on social platforms are somehow shaping our society, or our future. It is something that we could easily see. This was for a long time the future that was awaiting us. And I want to ask everybody if you see, or if you think, that platforms and the future they co-create with us can be fully democratic. If it is not some kind of utopia. Which is fine as a backdoor of our hopes and dreams and so on. But it will never be realized. And then the question becomes, what is the realistic goals that we should have regarding platforms and the future that we are co-creating, in this environment?

Martin Tremčinský: More public control, and regulation... Of course, ideal democracy does not exist. It is an ideal type. By definition, ideal types do not exist, but they are a horizon which we can strive for, or move towards. And one of the steps would be making platforms public. Because now their control is deeply privatized. There is value that is created by us, using platforms. But we do not have suitable public alternatives. I do not have a suitable public Facebook, that I could use and not be punished by being excluded from social connections.

Dita Malečková: There is a reason for the fact that platforms are privately-owned.

Martin Tremčinský: But what is the reason?

Marie Heřmanová: I think it needs to be said out loud, we are situated in the political setting of neoliberal capitalism. That is the reason for it. It may be outside of the scope of this debate. But I think that what Martin is talking about, is that in order to move forwards – not even towards utopia, but to be able to change anything at all, we need more agency for the users. If you ask this question like: What can we do to make it better? I do not know what I can do because I do not have the agency right now. I do not make the decision, I do not have the power. And I think that the power imbalance is the problem. But then again, this is of course connected to the political system.

Nico Carpentier: *I think you opened a wonderful can of worms. Platforms would argue that they are offering, and there is an audience accepting it. And platforms implicitly argue that maybe it is sufficient, and maybe—and I am playing devil’s advocate here—maybe the problem is us, citizens and we are just not easily satisfied. How do we deal with that type of argumentation? How do you counter a neoliberal discourse about platforms, that is basically saying: “Guys, this is what democracy is: We offer and you select.” In Media Studies we have called this ‘audience sovereignty’. I am not saying that I agree, but the formation of aggregated choices of the audience is considered to be a democratic process. I think that you believe that more is needed. But how do we counter that argument? To make your life a bit more difficult. Sorry (smiles).*

Václav Janošík: Historically speaking there is a very clear argument against that, coming largely from Marxist and post-Marxist positions. We not only live in a capitalist order, but we also live in a system that has a strong tendency to reproduce itself and to enforce the ideological positions. And even to conceal them, as something that is pertaining to human nature or human desire, grounded in some sort of universalist idea about us, realizing democracy through a free market society. We know it is not the case, and every society somehow builds up, creates its own conception of what human life is, what the meaning of life is, etc. Today we are very brutally impregnated with this ideological preconstruction of ourselves. This is what social media, and what the corporate culture, currently feeds into. It is not just like what ‘people just want’.

Marie Heřmanová: This is a very good theoretical, philosophical argument. There are also empirical ones. Let’s look at the data. Who really profits from platforms? What are the real effects on democracy and on society? We can support the theoretical argument by the empirical one.

Martin Tremčínský: I do agree, especially given the nature of platforms that we are talking about. For example: social media. Social media started to mediate our relations with other people, generating social identities and social processes, such as social formation or socialization in general. And when the free market argument of ‘just opting out’ is used, it creates problems. It is difficult to opt out from society, from relations that you have built, that you have cherished and that you have really spent energy on creating. We can see, for example, with Elon Musk taking over Twitter that everybody agrees that the quality of the platform is worsening. And they do not want to support the platform because they do not like the person who owns it, but at the same time, they do not want to lose these connections. That is one of the reasons why users/people are complicit with platforms. Because they are part of society. Society has structures and designs and abandoning these designs is always difficult. And it is not just a matter of individual choice or individual responsibility.

/// **Nico Carpentier:** *Somehow Thatcher comes to mind, and her famous quote: “There is no such thing as society...”*

Martin Tremčinský: And that was part of the design. She was trying to convince people about this and she was successful. That is the worst thing. She was successful in convincing people that they are independent individuals and only their choices, or only consumer choices, is what matters. But daily experience shows us something different, right? We do not make only consumer choices. We are not just consumers in society, even though there are TV adverts that are trying to tell us otherwise. In that logic, I am human, because I shop or consume. But that is part of the ideology. That is part of the structure, that sometimes people are somehow struggling against. Or living with.

/// **Miloš Hroch:** *We have mentioned this negotiation between public and corporate spaces. The idea of a public service platform has been mentioned. How do you think that this negotiation should be performed? And a related question is: How could this public platform look like in the future?*

Dita Malečková: If you have public control, who is the public and how does it act?

Martin Tremčinský: You have institutions. For instance, we have public service media. Why we cannot have a public platform, just like we have public TV and public radio? I am not saying that public TV, Czech public TV in particular, is perfect. But it is an existing institution. It exists. It can be better, but it is not some utopia.

Dita Malečková: Yeah, but why is Czech TV better than Netflix?

Martin Tremčinský: I am not saying it is better.

Václav Janoščík: It has a different function.

Martin Tremčinský: It has a different function, exactly.

Marie Heřmanová: It is an alternative to Netflix, and something we currently do not have in the realm of platforms. For me, this is a really difficult question. Often I would insist that we need public platforms, yet I do not know how to describe or imagine them. But I think that with a different type of imagination than what we currently have, we can picture how these public platforms could look like. In the Czech, or post-socialist—whatever that means—discourse, this would always be a difficult question [especially given the users coming from older generations, with experience with the communist regime]: “The alternative to corporate models would be some sort of state-controlled platform? That is scary.” And we have examples of how things work in countries like, for example Russia or maybe China. Russia is a scary alternative.

Nevertheless, there are definitions of public in terms of being owned by co-operatives, for example. But I think that also the state, or the European Union, can

play a regulating role. We currently have examples of what these institutions can do. I think that the Digital Services Act (DSA) is an interesting step towards perhaps a more balanced future. We do not know yet how it will work out, and it is obviously not perfect, but I think it is an interesting step forward. Maybe, five years ago, I could not have been able to imagine it. But now it works, as far as we can tell, after the first six months (or so) that the DSA has been in operation. We do not know yet how it will play out. But someone had the imagination to develop this sort of regulation.

/// **Miloš Hroch:** *When you mention DSA: Can we imagine what will happen with it, in the future? How will it transform the platform environment, or public discourse, you think?*

Marie Heřmanová: I think it would be a good question for a lawyer, or perhaps for someone who has a bigger picture of the legal or policy frameworks. I am an anthropologist, so I study individual users and people... I am personally convinced, that the DSA does give us some levels of agency that we previously did not have, as far as I know. And I think it is interesting how we will start to use it. For example, even with the simple choice, do I use an algorithmic feed or not? This will be interesting to see. Will we find out that it is better without the algorithmic feed? Or maybe we will find out there are different problems? Like we need the algorithmic feed to have a functioning user experience. But maybe we need different algorithms. Maybe we need more control, more understanding of the algorithm. So, I think it opens a lot of questions, to which I do not have answers.

/// **Nico Carpentier:** *But eventually we also might need a new imaginary. We might need new ways of trying to think of the future. That is also part of that process. And that might also be an important step.*

Dita Malečková: Imaginary and technological knowledge.

Marie Heřmanová: Yes.

Martin Tremčinský: But the imaginary always comes from praxis, right. Nobody has an imaginary before we start doing something. You will never be able to imagine what you can do with wood until you start to shape that wood, and you feel it. You know what the material is capable of. And with algorithms, there is no reason to think it will be otherwise. So, the first step is to enable certain practices. And then we can see what imaginaries come out of this. So yes, having an imaginary is important, but it is usually not the thing that you start with.

Václav Janoščík: I really hate to be skeptical again. But there is actually very little in terms of hints or suggestions of directions towards, for instance, publicly owned or publicly controlled platforms. The first step that we need is to create

public demand or public pressure, for instance, via better media literacy... The second thing is regulation; we have seen that particularly the European Union can really push forward the line of what is controlled, regulated, negotiable. And the possibilities of this are basically endless. This might even imply more public control over the corporate space.

Dita Malečková: I am just wondering if it will work. The users and people, who we are speaking about, are they going to be willing to work on the tools they want to use? Or will they just take what is easy and what everybody else is using? Because I think this is a part of this logic of the governance of platforms, that everyone wants it, because it is easy and everybody else has it. And how do you want to overcome this? You have to deal with this situation. I mean, platforms have success for a reason.

Martin Tremčinský: But what is this success? Is it the social divisions that we see, the emergence of certain social bubbles? Is it the exploitation of workers in the global South? If I remove all the problems, then, of course, everything is a success, right? But this is not a successful platform.

Dita Malečková: Maybe there are problems, but there is also some success.

Martin Tremčinský: I am not saying if there is no success in these things, of course, they were successful in terms of including people, as you mentioned: Everybody uses them. But it is also part of the problem.

Dita Malečková: You know what? This is not only about our, let's say, our definition of success. I mean, they are a success. They have billions of users. And in their world, it is a success, you know.

Martin Tremčinský: That is a success, yes. But exactly. It is their success. Is it our success? Is it our success that we have to use private platforms to be full members of society? Is it my success? It is not success, I would say.

Dita Malečková: Is it not a part of every kind of governance? I mean, if you are a part of the state, you are part of the institution.

Martin Tremčinský: But in a democratic state, I am a citizen, and I have voting rights. If I am using Facebook, I do not have any voting rights.

Marie Heřmanová: We cannot vote Mark Zuckerberg out.

Martin Tremčinský: I do not have this agency. That is what Marie said.

Marie Heřmanová: I do not think it is either this or that. You can have the good things, but not without the bad things, because that is not how it currently works. We need to be able to imagine it some other way. How can we keep the good things but build them in a more ethical, responsible, and democratic way? And obviously, the answer is not to replicate the corporate model, but to try to imagine a different one, whether it is co-op owned or publicly owned or... I do not have the imagination right now, so I do not know what models there are, but I think it is good that the debate, at least in academic circles, started a few years back. There have been efforts to cultivate this imagination

and offer different models. It has been happening during the last couple of years, the last five years. It is a new thing and we have to give it time. I think we will get there, optimistically. Or maybe the planet will burn before we get there, but that is a different question (smiles).

Václav Janošík: Maybe we are too focused on either social media or already existing platforms. And it is hard to change something, for example, within the mind of Elon Musk or the Facebook [Meta] corporation or whatever. But there are, of course, completely new technologies. And I presume we all know what happened with Open AI this fall. There was quite a reasonable hope, that this particular project can establish a new model of how to work with new technologies, and how to deploy them for public benefit or non-profit. This experiment, with its hope, somehow ended with Sam Altman and his corporate line of the management first being expelled, then being quickly reinstated, followed by the non-profit branch of the company resigning from its board. However, it is not final yet. But again, we see how the corporate culture is aggressively incorporating whatever it feels is the next new thing.

I really want to have at least one positive remark, and that is about gaming. Because also gaming is becoming more and more platformized. Particularly younger generations just use it as social media, to get in touch with their peers, etc. And, of course, the whole industry became very large and successful during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was marked, not only by the commercial success of the triple A titles, but also by very significant mergers: Microsoft buying Activision Blizzard, or acquisitions around Tencent, Embracer Group, etc. So, we see a very aggressive move of capital into that direction. But on the other hand, and this is the positive thing, we have Unreal Engine and Unity [cross-platform game engines used for game production and development], which are still for free. Not only are they free, but they are basically community-based. Of course, there are tons of problems—particularly with Unity and their managerial decisions last year. But we see that a service can be for free, not using the Facebook model of just harvesting our data. And if the service is for free, we can have different models of capitalization, then there can be a community that has a very informal yet public control over the medium, over what happens with that medium, and over what you can do with that medium.

/// **Nico Carpentier:** *Marie has brought in the environment, when you were threatening to burn down the planet (smiles).*

Marie Heřmanová: I did not. Not me (laughs)

/// **Nico Carpentier:** *I think that that is one of the areas we need to discuss.*

/// **Miloš Hroch:** *Yes. What do you think of the future of platforms in relation to their environmental impact and environmental issues. Is there really democracy on a dead planet? (smiles)*

Martin Tremčinský: (laughs) Well, yes, if everybody is dead, that is very democratic. That is a risk society, the risks apply to everybody.

/// **Miloš Hroch:** *How can we create platforms that are more environmentally sustainable? How can we minimize the damage that is done?*

Martin Tremčinský: If they are not profitable, there is no reason to exploit resources for them, or to exploit the Global South.

Dita Malečková: It is like cancelling information channels. You cannot do it.

Marie Heřmanová: I do not think we need to cancel the information channels. I mean, obviously, I think it is a question of infrastructure, and I am not an expert in that. So how much, really, in a technological sense, how much energy do we need to sustain the platforms? If that energy can be sustainable or renewable? I am not an expert in that area. But I think it is also about how sustainable the model is, and it depends on what kind of platforms we are talking about. Because if we are talking about social media from a user perspective, then I do not think that it is a question of sustainable infrastructure. But if we are talking about platforms in the platform economy, then I think it is a huge question. Maybe it was just the marketing behind it, but still, there was this idea that by being a worker in the platform economy, it can be more sustainable, because you might not use your own car to commute to work, for example. I think this was the promise. But this is not happening, not because it is not possible, but mostly because it is not profitable. So again, it is the same question, but I am not an expert in the area, I just share the general doom feeling that we will burn.

Václav Janošík: Maybe just one comment about an epiphenomenon. Particularly social media, but other platforms as well, give us false hopes about our agency: The individual ability to communicate to the world about what we do, about what kind of lunch we had, In parallel, these platforms somehow enforce responsibility, or individual responsibility, towards environmental issues. But of course, we really must act responsibly. Of course we must recycle, upcycle, but the key decisions, the key agency, rests at the corporate level. And there we should regulate these issues.

/// **Miloš Hroch:** *And what responsibility can the European Union take for the environment, in relation to platforms?*

Martin Tremčinský: There are so many levels to this, right? The very existence of the infrastructure itself is ecologically unsustainable. Every datacenter is basically a coal mine. So, there should be some regulation on which kind of energy is used to power these things. How much energy from the global pool of energy can they actually take, the same way other factories have these limits? What kind of minerals can be used, and in what conditions do they have to be extracted and from where; on whose behalf, who is going to benefit from these minerals? The tool [smartphone] in our pocket has the entire global capitalism in it. It is there. This is the peak of the global supply chains and all the inequalities that come with them. And we carry them in our pockets every day. So, it is really difficult to say one thing, because one thing is never enough. In complex issues you must have different angles that complement each other.

Dita Malečková: Yeah, I think that there are so many misconceptions that are globally shared, like that artificial intelligence will solve the problem, or that artificial intelligence is the problem. Because it is extremely energy demanding. So, creating artificial intelligence for answering the questions of climate change is actually creating the cause of climate change. I agree with all these issues and answers, and problematic visions. But for me, it is difficult to see how to really deal with it. We can understand that global capitalism is somehow eating itself and the planet with it, but it appears impossible to stop it. The practical question then becomes: How not to be benevolent to the planet and the people on it? I do not know if we will see any realistic solution in the near future.

Martin Tremčinský: But I think we already have that. That is the sort of saddest thing, that we—as a global society—already have the computational and logistical capacities to tackle at least part of the problems of global climate change or human poverty, etc. But we do not use them to do that. We use them to accumulate more capital. So, why is it okay to use these systems, platforms and logistical tools to provide Walmart with cheaper products and cheaper workers, and more effective central planning, etc.? But is it not okay to use these tools to tackle deforestation in Amazonia? Why is it okay to use these huge capacities to create silly pictures of—I do not know—Joe Biden hugging Donald Trump? But why not use it to do some planning for better resource distribution in Central Africa, or even in Europe? Social inequality is increasing. Also the goals, and how our system is designed, determines how these tools are being put to use, so if you live in this neoliberal venture capitalist society, then these tools are used to create spectacle. To convince Mark Cuban to give you more money and not to solve a real-life problem. Or to trap poor workers from the Global South in your warehouse and turn them into cogs in the machine, and not to improve their working conditions.

Marie Heřmanová: There is one more dimension to it, because we all get this question quite often. When you criticize something, instantly people ask: What

is the solution? And I have thought about it a lot, and I do not think it is specifically my task to come up with a solution. I am a researcher. I am entitled to criticize because I have data to back up my criticism. What I want is a political representation that will come up with the solutions and that will listen to me and listen to my problems and other people's problems. I do not think we should be responsible for coming up with solutions. I think we can criticize the platforms and the model that they are operating without necessarily giving them guidelines on how to do it better. Because I really thought about it a lot and I felt like, okay, maybe I should just be silent if I do not have the solution. But I do not think that that is true, in the end.

Dita Malečková: I totally agree. But do you think that on the level of political representation, there is a sign that something like this can happen?

Martin Tremčinský: If we would change our political institutions, yes, to a degree. We would bring people from different backgrounds and different kinds of knowledge together. This might happen, right? It might be a political body that can propose certain changes. But it is difficult to have one person do it all – to say what is wrong, what one needs to keep, and how to do it. That goes against the modern division of labor. That is what the whole Durkheimian approach was about, right? Everybody knows something, and together they create society. And so, trying to have one person, or just one group of people, to do that, is difficult. Even impossible.

Nico Carpentier: Just to go back to the issue of the spectacle because I think that that is one of the valid points. What I think platforms are providing is pleasure, which is the logic of the spectacle. And as long as that pleasure is sufficient, there might not be a political will to move into the direction of change. So should we then problematize or critique pleasure? Should we say this pleasure is wrong? But how do you move out of that trap? Because, I believe it is a trap.

Marie Heřmanová: I am talking about social media specifically because that is what I research right now: Do you really have the impression that people talk about social media in terms of 'it gives me pleasure'? Because from my research, that is not really what they are talking about. They are more like: "It gives me a headache, and some sort of weird addiction, and lots of problems in my personal life. And maybe also, I do not know, a sense of not being good enough." It also obviously gives us a lot of good things and it gives us connection. It gives us access to information. But I would not say that the general grassroots understanding of social media is that this is something pleasurable. I think at this point, it is something like: It is good for me in terms of connection, access to information, inspiration, maybe, so I must be there. But there are significant downsides to that.

Martin Tremčinský: It is like cigarettes. They give me pleasure as well, but they also give me cancer. Capitalism hacks into that. That is Deleuze and Guattari: You have loads of desires, and capitalism hacks into those and creates barriers that stop and accumulate these desires, and that is how the system gets rich.

Dita Malečková: Also, they all come together and say, it gives me a headache, but they really use it because there is this dopamine trap. Which is somehow beneath the level of consciousness, below what you can control. So basically, you cannot control it.

Marie Heřmanová: That is one thing, but I think I also just like to use it. Again, it is not black and white. It is fifty shades of gray. There are many good things that we can do online. I talk with my friends, I watch funny cat videos, I learn a lot of things on social media. I do research on social media. I do really like social media. I do not want to lose these possibilities that it offers us. But that does not mean that it is always—to come back to the metaphor that you used—a matter of pleasure. And I think we can also see, empirically, that the big platforms have reached a breaking point. Some of them are losing users. We see this fragmentation, with people looking for different platforms, and for different experiences. I think this is all part of the process, that we are starting to deal with the less pleasurable consequences of being on the big platforms.

Nico Carpentier: I think we still have the issue of free labor left. We might want to zoom in on that theme. It gives pleasure to work for free for platforms, right?

Miloš Hroch: The question is, how do platforms change our understanding and performance of labor? What about the automation that can come with platforms, and that could free us from labor, so that we could just enjoy ourselves? Can we really reach a fully automated luxury platform communism?

Nico Carpentier: We can have a fully automated roundtable (smiles).

Martin Tremčinský: Not without a fight ... The literature that tackles this topic has two branches. One branch deals with this acceleration and believes that we will have this fully automated luxury communism. Everything is going to be great. The other is saying that this is not going to happen if we do not fight for it and the technologies are not going to do it by themselves. That is like Gaving Mueller and his book *Breaking Things at Work: The Luddites Are Right About Why You Hate Your Job*. And there are other books that are now currently tackling the history of the luddite movement, for example. It shows that every time there is an improvement in the communication process, production process, and other processes that capital uses to reproduce itself – even though it promises the betterment of the workers – it actually disposes of, or de-skills, the workers.

It takes away their autonomy within the production process, or within the communication process.

If automation does something, it does not make work easier per se, it only makes it more dull or stupid. I think that AI and its deployment in cognitive labor, in fields like journalism, is interesting. It does not mean that if AI does some work for you, you will have less work. It means you will have less control. And your work will be duller. You will just write the instructions for the AI, so it can write the articles. You will end up doing it all day, just as the worker in the factory. So that is one thing. With cognitive labor or unpaid labor on platforms, I think, that is the work of communication that we do. That is the work of caring for each other and being a society, living in a society, that is being now appropriated, or its value is being appropriated. This brings back the feminist critique of capitalism and Marxism in the 1960s and 1970s: People like Silvia Federici, who were demanding wages for housework, and who were demanding to be paid for reproductive labor. Being either a housewife, or a user of a platform, does not mean that you per se expect to actually get paid, but this argument shows that what you do, is work. Once you establish this knowledge, you can say 'no' to it. Or you can negotiate about it. It creates a political arena. When this unpaid labor is naturalized, and when it is seen as human nature, either for women taking care of their children and of their families, or for people communicating with each other and using platforms, then it will always be stuck in this limbo. This is typical for the modern paradigm: Nature is not political and cannot make political claims. So, once you move away from nature, as a category that covers this behavior, this situation or this position within the social matrix, only then you can make political claims. So that is the strategy. I am not saying that this strategy is necessarily successful, but this is how it works.

/// **Miloš Hroch:** *Martin has been talking about negotiating space between humans and non-humans, which also relates to cultural work, artistic production, and so on. So, what will be the challenges for the future when we talk about AI and the production of art?*

Dita Malečková: Of course, with the rise of AI now, there are so many new questions. For instance, there are questions about the role of creativity and the rights of authors and artists, and so on. Again, there are at least two starting positions. The first is: Everything is alright and if you are an artist, you have new tools to use. The second one is that we are all doomed. All artists will be exploited, because we can just use their work and then you do not have to have a human artist. Because they are slow and costly. You can just type something and the algorithm generates your own image or text.

If you use these generative systems now, you can see clearly that it is not that simple. If you just take a name and put it in the system, it will generate something, but everyone with a pair of eyes will see that quality is elsewhere. And there are new kinds of artists using these tools in creative ways. When they work with AI, you can see, at the first sight, that it is something original and that it does not matter if you use these tools, or not. That is my position. But of course, the whole scene is changing. Not only for individuals but also for institutions. One example is all these channels where you can ask for an artwork to use as a future value. So, there are changes, and, for example, one of the really difficult questions for the future is the energy costs of artificial intelligence. For the moment it is something which is so radically unsustainable that it probably will not be able to last. Even when there are so many people that think that AI will add value to humanity, from this point of view, it cannot continue, because we will end up using all the energy to generate silly images.

And yes, I derive pleasure from it. I love it. Again, how to deal with a situation where we all so much like to generate silly images, while we know it is bad for our planet. How to deal with it? And this is a question that really can start a fight. But at the same time, the conditions need to be met. The context needs to be ready somehow. For example, women's positions improved during the 20th century wars, because women were needed to work and not at home. The context was ready for feminism. Had the context not been ready, it would have been so much more difficult to improve women's rights. So, we must fight, but you cannot start a fight out of nothing. You must know the situation very well, and it needs to be ready. And then you can find the key points where you can act upon, and decide with whom to fight, and so on. It is very strategically demanding situation, I think.

/// Nico Carpentier: *On this Gramscian note, I think we can wrap up this discussion. I would like to say thank you so much for being here, for also engaging in this conversation with us. Thank you for being with us.*

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BIOS

Miloš Hroch is an assistant professor at the Department of Media Studies at Charles University in Prague. He is a researcher at the Culture and Communication Research Centre (within the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism) and his research interests are in the fields of participatory media studies, platform studies and cultural studies.

Nico Carpentier (Culture and Communication Research Centre at the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Charles University & Baltic Film, Media and Arts School, Tallinn University) is a communication and discourse studies scholar, working on the social construction of politics, participation, nature and conflict.

Marie Heřmanová (Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences) is a cultural anthropologist researching communication on digital platforms, questions of gender and authenticity.

Dita Malečková is a new media philosopher and researcher associated with the Faculty of Fine Arts (Charles University) and FAMU (Centre for Audiovisual Studies). Dita specializes in artificial intelligence, not only theoretically, but she and her team have worked on projects using neural networks (see the Digital Philosopher and Digital Writer projects).

Václav Janoščík is a lecturer, curator, philosopher and gamer from the Academy of Fine Arts (Department of Theory and History of Art).

Martin Tremčinský is an economic anthropologist (Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences) specializing in cryptocurrency communities and the anthropology of (digital) labor.