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Digital Archives as Resisting Displacement

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Abstract:

Amidst wider concern about the emergence of vast data archives that document, and instrumentalize, everyday user activities for the purpose of marketing, research, and governance, this article turns to a series of creative and activist initiatives that preserve heterodox Internet histories. Though a focus on three case studies – artistic engagements with GeoCities, traces left by Indymedia in contemporary activism, and emerging ethical frameworks for reusing social media data – we examine the political and ethical significance of attempts to archive specific instances of participatory online cultures before these cultures disappear. Drawing on, and advancing, Jodi Dean's conception of displaced mediators, or entities that set in motion the forces that ultimately displace them, we argue that the significance of these digital archives is in their capacity to resist linear, commercial logics of displacement that attempt to narrow user agency. Instead, we argue, the creative and activist argues we foreground generate questions about whether the infrastructures that govern everyday online interactions could be otherwise, through showing how they formerly *have* been otherwise.

Keywords: digital archives, displacement, displaced mediators, Geocities, Indymedia, hashtag activism, participatory cultures

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, a growing number of cultural theorists have sought to identify and interrogate the processes through which participation in everyday online activities are transformed into archival resources. Commentaries about digital archiving often assume a critical tenor. David Beer and Roger Burrows' (2013) influential critique, for example, argues that the "vast by-product datasets," which are generated by "routine everyday engagements with popular culture" can be productively conceptualised as archives that have a recursive relationship to the participatory digital cultures which generate them (67). As users' online engagements with popular culture generate data, through everyday acts of clicking, liking, sharing, and reviewing, this data, in turn, feeds back into prosumption practices (which inevitably generate more data). Even efforts to withdraw from

this recursive loop of prosumption, through digital detox and disengagement, have become imbricated in the very processes of consumer datafication that they are trying to oppose (Kuntsman and Miyake, 2022: 83). Moreover, the significance of these, ever-more-voluminous, digital archives goes beyond predictive marketing. As Nanna Thylstrup and colleagues argue in the introduction to *Uncertain Archives* (2021):

> In this era of big data, as the notion of the archive moves from a regime of knowledge about the past to a regime of future anticipation, big tech tells us that we have (or, rather, it has) gained command of everything from trends in culture and thought to potential epidemics, criminal acts, environmental disasters, and terrorist threats (1).

As evoked through the title of *Uncertain Archives*, however, like the partiality and exclusions of archives more broadly, gathering and organising digitised data is beset by errors, glitches and omissions. On a mundane level, commercial data archives might offer a partial or inaccurate picture of the consumers they claim to portray (Skeggs and Yuill, 2016). Indeed, even in the context of high-profile scandals such as Cambridge Analytica's illicit harvesting of Facebook data to manipulate voting patterns, the predictive power of data is often unclear (González, 2017). As Thylstrup and colleagues put it, these failures offer a refreshing reminder that "big data can err – just as humans can" (2021: 2). This observation resonates with wider calls to celebrate glitches, frictions and failures in digital infrastructures, as potential openings for critique (Goriunova and Shulgin, 2008; Russell, 2020; Leszczynski and Elwood, 2022).

Reminders about the fallibility of digital archives are important in light of far-reaching claims made by corporations, state institutions, and NGOs about the power of data to predict, and intervene in, everything from health outcomes to high frequency trading (Amoore, 2020; Hayles, 2017; MacKenzie, 2018), and predictive policing to human rights abuses (Benjamin, 2019a, 2019b; Bowsher, 2022, 2023). At the same time, omissions and inaccuracies in data archives are often used as a pretext for gathering ever-more data, in ever-more intrusive ways. Thus, in contexts where "uncertainty and risk have become functions of disruption complicit with power" (Agostinho, 2019: 425) it is important to direct ongoing critical attention toward the processes through which everyday participatory cultures are transformed into vast – and often lucrative – archives of data.

Accordingly, existing scholarship has applied concepts and approaches from critical archive studies to digital media, to argue that conceptualising big data in archival terms offers a means of gaining purchase on their cultural politics. While recognising the value of this scholarship, this article approaches debates about the relationship between participatory cultures, datafication, and archives from a slightly different perspective. Here we focus on archival practices – by artists, activists, and academics – to document specific instances of participatory online cultures before these cultures disappear. Often, these archives emerge at junctures when online communities are deemed commercially unviable by the corporations that host them, or just prior to their being displaced by commercial forces.

Documentary practices like digital archiving are resistant to the displacement of cultural practices brought about by technological advancements over time. Temporality is a key facet of understanding resistance (Baaz et al., 2016). Though time is central to a number of key interventions concerning resistance, such as de Certeau's conceptualisation of "la perruque" in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984)*,* Baaz and colleagues observe that there "is a tendency to forget that social relations, for instance, those shaping various civil societies, are imbued with time and not a space to visit or a thing to be understood" (2016: 146). Fundamental to the conceptualisation of archiving as

resistance, then, is the understanding that archiving practices attempt to transcend the fast-forward telos of late-capitalism by retrospectively preventing their subsumption.

Reworking Jodi Dean's concept of "displaced mediators," in this article we foreground how three attempts to archive participatory digital cultures – GeoCities archiving, Indymedia's ongoing role in activist media ecologies, and the creation of Twitter datasets for academic research – negotiate the displacement of the contexts through which these cultures emerged. In doing so, we do not seek to make bold claims about the scope, scale, or consequences of particular archival practices, but offer the more modest argument that these cases offer a counterpoint to the logics of displacement that characterise extractive engagements with participatory culture. In doing so, these archival initiatives open space – to borrow a well-worn slogan from feminist science studies (see Star, 1990) – to ask whether the infrastructures that govern everyday online interactions could be otherwise, through showing how they formerly *have* been otherwise.

Resisting Displacement

The backdrop to many contemporary reflections about digital archives is a wider set of concerns about the displacement of political and cultural contexts that informed early online participatory cultures. This narrative has animated media theory since the 1990s but gained force in the early 2000s with the ascendancy of social media. Before focusing on each case study in turn, therefore, it is useful to offer a brief sketch of how displacement has been characterised in critical scholarship.

In the first edition of *Cultural Politics*, Dean (2004) delineates the fantasies that underpin communicative capitalism. One of these fantasies, participation, speaks to longstanding debates about whether digital media are a conduit for meaningful forms of political agency, or only offer a fantasy of engagement that displaces the collective action that is necessary for sustaining social change. While Dean was not alone in adopting a critical focus on the commercialisation of participatory culture, what remains distinctive about her analysis is its in-depth analysis of how, precisely, political participation is displaced.

The first form of displacement, Dean argues, occurs within media scholarship itself, wherein the most mundane online activities are construed as the exercise of political agency:

> What the everyday people do in their everyday lives is supposed to overflow with political activity: conflicts, negotiations, interpretations, resistances, collusions, cabals, transgressions and resignifications. The Net – as well as cell phones, beepers and other communications devices (though, weirdly, not the regular old telephone) – is thus teeming with politics. To put up a website, to deface a website, to redirect hits to other sites, to deny access to a website, to link to a website – this is construed as real political action. (2004: 64)

For Dean, this displacement of politics onto everyday online interactions accounts for why so much hope was projected onto the Internet as a source of progressivist political change in the late 90s and early 2000s. Conversely, the conflation of politics with the act of simply participating in online discussion accounts for why academic hopes were misplaced, relying, as this displacement does, on an impoverished understanding of the work that is necessary to undergird and maintain social movements.

Subsequently, in 2010's *Blog Theory*, Dean deepened her analysis of how politics became conflated with participating in (mediated) communication, through developing the concept of "displaced mediators." This term is a reworking of Frederic Jameson's conception of the Protestant work ethic

as a "vanishing mediator," or phenomenon that gives rise to social change (here the transition from feudalism to capitalism) but is then rapidly displaced by the forces of that change. In Jameson's own words, "once Protestantism has accomplished the task of allowing a rationalization of innerworldly life to take place, it has no further reason for being and disappears from the historical scene" (1973: 78). Slavoj Žižek subsequently engaged with the vanishing mediator to characterize how Jacobinism played a similar role politically, through "universalis[ing] the democratic-ideological project" by suggesting it "structures the totality of social life" (1991: 183). In doing so, he argues, "its political radicalism prepared the way for its opposite, for the bourgeois universe of egotistic and acquisitive individuals who care not a pin for egalitarian moralism" (184).

While agreeing with the mechanism of Jameson and Žižek's vanishing mediator as a "transitional figure – of an institution, practice, idea – that accounts for a fundamental change," Dean suggests that "vanishing" is not the correct gerund: "After all, there are still Protestants. There are still work ethics. The Jacobins' ideals of equality, freedom, and solidarity continue to exert a kind of signifying stress" (2010: 26-27). Describing mediators as vanishing, Dean contends, is not only inaccurate but has political consequences, because it "suggests a victory in situations in which contestation continues" (27). Instead, she argues, conceptualising mediators as displaced, rather than vanishing, preserves space for ongoing struggle rather than portraying processes of displacement as a fait accompli.

To elucidate this argument, Dean draws upon Fred Turner's analysis of the New Communalists in *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (2008) and Christopher Kelty's analysis of the Free Software Movement (2005, 2008). Resonating with allied critical histories that have fleshed out the relationship between the military-industrial complex and creative, counter-cultural movements (Beck and Bishop, 2020), Dean foregrounds the specific role of the New Communalists – a San Francisco Bay Area countercultural movement that emerged in the 1960s – in facilitating the transition from the computer being seen as "the technology of control, hierarchy, and dehumanization to computing as the technology of collaboration, flexibility, and utopian social change" (19). Eschewing the New Left's focus on antagonism as the motor of history, the New Communalists instead offered a "libertarian fantasy" that positioned individual access to information as the key to human freedom and digital networks as a means of attaining this goal. What the New Communalists failed to recognise, however, was the similarities between their practices and the military-industrial complex they understood themselves as lying in opposition to:

> Because they opposed the military-industrial complex, state centralism, and hierarchical corporate structures, they presented their efforts towards individual empowerment, information sharing, and networked collaboration as necessarily counter to these forms of control. In this way, they missed how the military, state, corporation and university were already functioning in distributed, decentralized networks. (21)

The Free Software Movement, Dean contends, extended these logics through enshrining ideas of openness, collaboration, and information sharing into the programming that underpinned the early Internet. The problem, she contends, is that these initiatives made presumptions about what constituted the public good and embedded these presumptions into communication networks in ways that have had lasting consequences. Thus, values held by a coding elite have gone on to dominate how publics communicate, interact, and engage politically, in ways that lack democratic oversight. These dynamics are problematic on their own terms, but still more contentious in light of how neatly practices of participation, collaboration, and engagement have subsequently been coopted by communicative capitalism. (Albeit, for Dean, this cooption was inevitable in light of the

libertarian values that were already inherent in utopian countercultural engagements with the digital.)

Other scholars have offered a slightly different emphasis to Dean in charting the commercialisation of participatory online cultures. Whereas Dean suggests that the Internet's militaristic origins were simply masked by the work accomplished by counter-cultural movements in creating the web, others saw genuine potential in early online communities and mediated activism. These hopes, for instance, were encapsulated by influential scholarship about the capacity of digital media to support networked counterpublics (Benkler, 2006) and horizontal modes of organising that mapped onto the (then) flourishing Global Justice Movement (Juris, 2007). In Joss Hands' terms, the underlying argument of these texts was that "the digital, networked age is one that can be, and is, amenable to […] horizontal, communicative action, and lends itself to a horizon of dissent, resistance and rebellion" (2010: 18). In these narratives, it is the critical-activist settings – which often formed the context for early experiments with digital media – that have been displaced by the commercial imperatives of social media.

Despite Dean's critique of earlier, celebratory, digital scholarship, it is important to note that - even in the 90s and early 2000s - scholarly celebration of the political potentials of participatory digital cultures were soon tempered. Hype surrounding user-generated content, appropriations of popular culture, confessional writing, new opportunities for exploring identity, and the anyone-can-publish ethos, soon gave way to critical commentaries about the way these properties were co-opted from users to feed into the design of commercial social media platforms. This critical narrative was evident, for instance, in the change of tone between Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen* (1997) and *Alone Together* (2011), or in popular media representations of the rise of apps and platforms and decline of user-led online communities: such as Chris Anderson's now infamous 2010 *Wired* cover story "The Web is Dead, Long Live the Internet." Indeed, these narratives also articulate a logic of displacement wherein attributes associated with early participatory cultures have continued to be associated with contemporary social media, even as social media have eroded these cultures through top-down commercialisation.

Thus, regardless of whether media theorists understand top-down tendencies as being masked by countercultural movements or contend that online subcultures reflect the Internet's genuine capacity to sustain new modes of community, solidarity, and protest, what unites different critical perspectives is the process of displacement. The counter-cultural movements, online communities, and alternative media, which flourished in the nascent days of the web, set forces in motion that ultimately superseded them.

Building on these debates, in this paper we turn to three examples of archival practices that – to varying degrees – resist displacement. In *Blog Theory*, Dean hints briefly at the potential of digital archives as a mode of resistance. Turning to Bruce Sterling's web-archive of "dead" media, which have been rendered obsolete by technical change, Dean suggests such projects offer a way of reintroducing the cultural settings through which technologies emerged and were displaced. This brief reflection hints at the significance of digital archives for unsettling linear processes of techno-optimism and relentless development, by portraying these developments as products of ongoing struggle rather than an inevitability. Preserving these struggles, we suggest, is important in denaturalising current regimes of digital governance, by maintaining histories that evoke alternative possibilities.

The practice of maintaining and preserving participatory digital cultures embodied in these digital archives can be conceptualised as a specific facet of the umbrella term resistance (Lillja, 2022). In

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their recent review of literature concerning the definition of resistance, Mona Lilja identifies constructive resistance as that which "moves beyond 'oppositional' forms of dissent in order to construct subject positions, institutions and norms" (2022: 211). Constructive resistance serves as a useful framing of digital archiving practices in this context as it points towards the way in which efforts to maintain and create data archives, so as to preserve cultural practices, endeavours to transcend the displacements that sustain communicative capitalism by returning attention to the past.

To develop this argument we turn firstly to artistic attempts to archive personal GeoCities websites, which reveal how successive social media platforms have appropriated the vernacular web in their design while limiting the creative affordances evidenced by early home-pages. Then we examine radical-participatory media initiative Indymedia, to outline how the activists have negotiated – and resisted – the displacement of DIY independent publishing with social media in activist media ecologies. Finally, we discuss emerging concerns about data archives from social media, and how archivists are developing new practices to resist data being abstracted from social and ethical contexts.

GeoCities and Displaced Web Histories

In 2010, Net artists Olia Lialina and Dragan Espenschied launched their project *One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age*. The blog, and associated visual archive on multimedia microblogging platform Tumblr, is dedicated to showcasing websites from the GeoCities web archive. GeoCities, a web-hosting platform at its peak between 1994 and 1999, is described by the artists as the "early Internet's agora of vernacular design" (Lialina and Espenscheid, 2010). Purchased by Yahoo in 1999 for a record-breaking sum (3.7 billion dollars), the number of active users swiftly plummeted and in 2009 it was announced that GeoCities would be taken offline (MacKinnon, 2022). In the wake of this announcement, the GeoCities archive was created by Archive Team; a collective spearheaded by archivist Jason Scott, who see themselves as "emergency responders" to prevent the loss of Internet History (Ogden, 2022: 117).

Posting one GeoCities screenshot every 20 minutes, sites featured on the *One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age* Tumblr contain all the hallmarks of early web aesthetics, such as comic sans text, animated GIFs, and ubiquitous under-construction signs. It is perhaps unsurprising that, as Lialina confesses in a 2019 interview for *Quartz*, she originally showed GeoCities sites to students as examples of "bad" design (McDonough and LeCerte, 2019). Now, however, Lialina and Espenschied's work celebrates GeoCities' vernacular design as emblematic of a lost age of user agency. Recent homepages documented on *One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age*, for instance, include a website dedicated to the author of Logan's Run, William F. Nolan, which invites visitors to sign the designer's guest book; a Leonardo di Caprio fan art site; and a page dedicated to supporting "leftist teens."

In her 2020 Transmediale performance lecture, "End-to-End, P2P, My to Me," Lialina reels off a list of homepage titles, which underscore the personal in personal websites: "*My* Stephen King, *My* Korn, *My* Page for Sandra Bullock, *My* Eminem…" (Lialina, 2020). The *my* reflects Lialina's reading of these sites as expressing individuals' agency over web-design, prior to the smooth user experience interfaces of Web 2.0 that automated what formerly had to be constructed (see also Lialina, 2018). The thrust of "My to Me" is that opportunities to express agency over design have been rendered near-obsolete, as successive social media platforms have shifted their funding model. Rather than amateur web-designers hosting advertising, users themselves have become the commodities whose data is sold. As Kate Miltner and Ysabel Gerrard describe in relation to nostalgia for another once-

derided – but highly popular – platform, MySpace, this observation is not limited to critics and loss of agency has also been articulated by users themselves as part of wider popular dissatisfaction with the platform economy:

> The view of Myspace as creative and customizable serves as a foil to contemporary social media platforms, which are seen to prioritize individuals' monetizable behaviors rather than their creative self-expression, and to engage in data extraction, expansion monopolization, surveillance, and censorship. (2022: 50)

In "My to Me" Lialina engages with Miltner's previous work on Internet users' MySpace nostalgia to express amazement at the perception that MySpace was ever a playground for coders. In practice, Lialina contends, html-use was constrained to decisions such as the capacity to decide whether background "sparkles were purple or pink" and wonders whether future generations will celebrate contemporary platforms – with still more constrained affordances – as sites of freedom. Understood in relation to this context of a steady decline of user agency, the showcasing of GeoCities homepages by Lialina and Espenschied thus pose resistance to the successive displacement of user agency by highlighting the creativity that existed prior to web 2.0.

However, this framing is perhaps overly simplistic. There is also another layer of displacement in nostalgic narratives of user agency, which mean that the apparent freedoms offered by the vernacular web should not be read uncritically. As Miltner points out, narratives about a decline in user agency are often underpinned by a "coding fetish" (Miltner, 2019 in Miltner and Gerrard, 2022: 50), wherein the necessity of learning simple html code is reinterpreted as a signifier of egalitarianism. In the case of MySpace, underpinning this praise of coding is the assumption that "those who learn to code will be hired into highly paid and stable careers that will act as a pathway to the middle class'" (Miltner and Gerrard, 2022: 52). Thus, while nostalgia for customisable websites and platforms offers a critique of the corporate Internet it also valorises pathways into it. To revisit Dean's arguments: this apparent contradiction can be made sense of through the displaced mediator of free software movements, whose countercultural conception of information, collaboration, and individual user agency as radically democratising bypassed consideration of ongoing socioeconomic inequities that shape access to (and are intensified by) the tech industry.

The question is whether a similar critique can be levelled at GeoCities archiving. To some extent, accusations of "coding fetishism" seem pertinent to GeoCities as much of the nostalgia surrounding the site hinges on skill-sharing networks to learn basic coding, graphic design, and GIF-creation (MacKinnon, 2022: 237). In addition, as Jessica Ogden underlines, digital "archiving is situated within particular cultural worlds which advocate for 'moral and technical orders' that materially shape how the Web is archived" (2022: 114) and it is notable that the explicit comparison she draws to the ethos of the original GeoCities archivers, Archive Team, is Kelty's analysis of Free Software cultures. As with the Free Software movement, Archive Team frame themselves as a counter-cultural movement wedded to values of information access. Rather than embedding these values through design, however, their aim is to save participatory cultures that emerged from the countercultural legacy of the early web, manifested here as the deletion of communities that are no longer commercially viable. Echoing Dean's concerns, in positioning these activities as antithetical to from top-down corporate governance what is missed is the compatibility of these logics with communicative capitalism.

Lialina, however, insists that revisiting GeoCities should not be seen as uncritical nostalgia – as this fails to recognise the attempts to constrain user agency even in the heyday of personal websites, or the ways that vernacular design was consistently derided and dismissed. In a more recent essay version of "My to Me" she points out: "The sarcastic 'They may call it a home page, but it's more like the gnome in somebody's front yard' was stated not by some social networking prophet, not by, metaphorically speaking, Mark Zuckerberg or Jack Dorsey, but by Tim Berners-Lee himself" (Lialina, ND). Revisiting GeoCities archives, for Lialina, is thus not about a nostalgic celebration of the early web in general, but of recognizing specific cultures of personal expression that were often antithetical to the libertarian software movements criticised by Dean. This is elucidated on *One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age,* through examples such as "Graphics by Shawna," which document how prominent amateur users created buttons, designs, and themes for webpages to be shared and used by others. Shawna, and other amateur designers described by Lialina offer a reminder that: "Contrary to the common belief that the amateur web was built by 13 year old boys, it were mostly much older people who took care about making, collecting, and organizing interface graphics" (Lialina, 2022).

What Lialina and Espenschied's rearticulation of the GeoCities archives accomplishes then, is foregrounding a different displaced mediator in Internet histories – a culture of marginal figures in web-design – whose demographics mean their presence is often omitted, silenced, or derided, even in critical narratives. Through careful contextualisation of the GeoCities archive, their work offers a different vision of what the Internet was and complicates the sense of there being only a singular displaced mediator between early computing and the commercial social media landscape. In doing so Lialina and Espenscheid resist the erasure of a culture which is often submerged by linear narratives of commercialisation instigated by the forces unleashed by Silicon Valley pioneers. Perhaps most significantly, foregrounding multiplicity and struggle does not just preserve GeoCities' histories but troubles the inevitability of the corporate Internet.

Indymedia and Displaced Politics

Founded in 1999, Indymedia were part of a cluster of alternative publishing initiatives associated with the Global Justice Movement and became central to early narratives about the democratising potentials of digital media (Gillmor, 2006). Indymedia themselves consisted of a network of local DIY publishing collectives, Indymedia Centres (IMCs), who ran their own news websites that were free of any form of gatekeeping to publishing (Pickard, 2006a; Pickerill, 2006). Essentially, anyone could publish anonymously, about any topic that was broadly aligned with leftist and/or anarchist values, with no process of moderation. The core ideology underpinning the network was thus that open, transparent, and networked communications were the means of realizing radical democracy. As Jeffrey Juris puts it in *Networking Futures*, Indymedia was a form of prefigurative politics wherein: "Activists not only employ new technologies as tools; they use them to engage in horizontal collaboration, expressing their utopian ideals through technological practice" (2008: 268).

This ideology was enacted through each collective committing to Indymedia's overarching "Principles of Unity," a set of collectively defined values that were designed to resist local centres becoming hierarchical or exclusionary in membership (Pickard, 2006b). These principles included commitment to "equality, decentralisation and local autonomy" through resisting centralised bureaucracy and adhering to the "principle of consensus decision making and the development of a direct, participatory democratic process that is open, egalitarian and transparent to its membership" (Indymedia Australia, ND). All publishing had to be non-profit, as manifested not just through open

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publishing and transparent editorial processes, but ensuring source code was open and eschewing proprietary software where possible. Crucially, the Principles of Unity also emphasised the ideology that "open exchange of and open access to information [is] a prerequisite to the building of a more free and just society" (Indymedia Australia, ND).

The Principles of Unity were, inevitably, challenging to enact in practice and Indymedia was regularly framed as an ongoing experiment in developing infrastructures and practices to enact radical democracy, rather than consistently realising these values (Garcelon, 2006; Pickerill, 2007). Ongoing challenges included the persistence of informal hierarchies during local IMC meetings (Uzelman, 2011) and the unwieldiness of reaching decisions by consensus at a global level (Giraud, 2014). The challenge of consensus decision-making elucidates perhaps the most significant element of Indymedia in the context of archival politics. As well as using consensus decision-making to govern local IMCs, to maintain unity across the network each centre had a representative member who participated in discussions at an international level via the email list IMC-Process (Wolfson, 2013). Discussions from this listserv were archived and made available to maintain transparency about how consensus decisions were reached (Downing, 2003).

Indymedia, moreover, did not just archive their own processes, as their open publishing format enabled local activist groups to self-document their own histories in a manner that prefigured Beer and Burrows' conceptions of the recursive properties of digital archives. In previous research projects with UK-based food activists, for instance, Indymedia was used as a means of promoting protest events, documenting these events in local news reports, then linking back to these reports when promoting subsequent protests (see Giraud, 2018, 2019). Activists, in other words, articulated their work as a cumulative, ongoing process, by using Indymedia as an archive of past events which contextualised and narrativized future actions. Unlike the archives of marketing data that are central to the conception of recursive publics, however, this form of recursive activism was the product of local, grassroots, self-archiving, which framed digital governance as a site of ongoing struggle rather than attempting to foreclose this struggle.

Indymedia were not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a political milieu characterised by uses of digital media to document and sustain the work of anti-capitalist movements, while prefiguring non-hierarchical open values in their organisation. The McSpotlight website, for instance, was launched in 1997 – prior to McDonald's having a UK website of their own – as an archive of transcripts, pamphlets, and resources associated with the so-called McLibel trial, which arose after UK activists were sued for criticising McDonalds (Vidal, 1997). More pertinently to the structures of Indymedia, early uses of the web to document the Indigenous-led uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN) had resulted in a wellspring of popular and scholarly attention. Commentaries about EZLN media-use foregrounded the capacity of the Internet to foster transnational solidarity in support of local resistance against neoliberal economic policy. Indeed, it was the processes pioneered by the Zapatistas – of openness, consensus decision-making, and leaderless, horizontal organisation – which had directly inspired Indymedia's Principles of Unity (Wolfson, 2012). A particularly influential narrative about the Zapatistas' use of the Internet, moreover, was that it had not just generated a digital solidarity network, but that – in the process – they had created a digital archive about how this network had emerged. Harry Cleaver, for instance contended that:

> …the various conferences and lists in cyberspace have generally archived all this
> material, making it permanently available for reference and study […] Whereas

> throughout most of this century old newspaper stories or published reports had to be painstakingly dug out of microfilm files or book stacks by the few dedicated people who could make the time, this material has been kept available – for reading, downloading, or forwarding-- via a few keystrokes. (1998: 8)

In the contemporary moment, the framing of online materials as *more* stable and accessible than archival collections in state-funded institutions seems overly optimistic at best and, unfortunately, the travails of Indymedia underline that this optimism was mis-placed.

After its peak in the early 00s, Indymedia faced a catastrophic decline in active IMCs and users (Wolfson, 2013; Giraud, 2014). Amidst broad speculations about the reason for this decline, a recurring theme was that activists' commitment to using their own servers, maintaining open code and software, and reliance on volunteer-labour, meant sites struggled to compete with the (seemingly) frictionless experience and broad reach of commercial social media. It is important to note that these concerns were recognised and grappled with at the time; to revisit our previous food activism research, for instance, in 2010 the local Indymedia page used by activists was replaced by a newer site, designed to be more user-friendly in its interface. Yet, initiatives such as this did not ultimately prevent the wider decline in the Indymedia network.

Echoing narratives surrounding GeoCities, then, Indymedia's story illustrates a displacement of the radical-participatory media making of Indymedia by the rise of proprietary platforms. Framed in relation to Dean's critique, however, another displacement is also legible, of radical-participatory publishing becoming a displaced mediator. This displacement is evidenced, for instance, by the way that narratives set in motion about the radical participatory potentials of the early Internet to support activism at different scales, remain associated with social media platforms. Indeed, these narratives have persisted even as commercial platforms subject activists to ever-increasing surveillance and data-mining, or hashtag campaigns fail to materialise as sustained protest movements (Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles, 2020; cf Schradie, 2020).

Another parallel with GeoCities is the importance of resisting overly neat narratives about Indymedia's displacement, because, in the decade after its decline, the network's legacies have shaped the ethos of subsequent media initiatives, in a range of global contexts (Aikawa, Jeppersen and Media Action Research Group, 2020). Likewise, the archives it created have had unexpected legacies in the stories activists narrate about their histories. In the case of food activist groups mentioned earlier, for instance, throughout the course of the original research, social media gradually displaced Indymedia as a means of documenting, communicating about, and promoting protest events. Yet the network was not entirely displaced from the wider activist media ecology, and instead became testament to the movement's longer history. On local websites of activists, for instance, while embedded social media accounts promoted forthcoming protest events, old Indymedia reports continued to be linked to as illustrative of longer histories of local protest. These distributed archives thus echoed the decentralised ethos of Indymedia itself. Ten years later, however, the archive is only partial as the older version remains online, while its replacement has since been taken offline and activist history erased.

It is here that a key difference with GeoCities is evident, as Indymedia's decentralisation poses a more profound challenge for systematic attempts to save it. The loss of initiatives like Indymedia does not just leave gaps in local activist narratives, but also underscores the questions raised in Ogden's (2022) critical engagement with Archive Team about which Internet cultures are preserved

and which are allowed to fade away. Indymedia underlines that the political stakes of these displacements are high, in terms of the alternative futures that might be evoked if radical Internet histories are able to be preserved and curated. What is significant about Indymedia and other DIY initiatives is that they are another important displaced mediator in understanding *why* politics and online participation became so firmly conflated in the scholarly and popular imaginary. Unlike the libertarian software movements criticised by Dean, however, Indymedia's political setting is rooted in protest movements who sought to develop technological infrastructures that actively resisted neoliberal governance. The well-known slogan of the alter-globalisation was 'another world is possible'; while this hopeful narrative might seem like a distant memory, the traces of activist archives that have resisted displacement might still evoke another Internet if they are prevented from vanishing.

Dataset Archives and Displaced Ethics

Debates surrounding social media data offer a culmination of some of the challenges that surround digital archives, while demonstrating how these struggles can productively generate practices that trouble commercial norms and enact new forms of ethics. As noted previously, extensive concern has been raised about commercial data archives being used as resources to hone predictive marketing techniques. However, critical attention has also been directed toward wider engagements with large social media datasets in the context of research and innovation. The most incisive critiques have been levelled at initiatives that use publicly available text as training data for machine learning: without reflecting on either the ethical dimensions of treating user-generated content as a free resource for developing black-boxed algorithms, or upon the social biases that might be reproduced through this process (Benjamin, 2019; Thylstrup et al, 2022).

To remedy this ethical omission, Thylstrup (2022) underlines the need for more extensive engagement with tools, concepts, and approaches from critical archive studies, to inform an approach that she terms "critical data set studies." This approach is designed to resist the displacement of humans from the data they generate – as happens, for instance, when data is simply treated as a resource for generative AI – by instead seeking to "visibilise humans in machine cultures" and centralise "ethical questions about how to encounter these humans with empathy and care" (Thylstrup, 2022: 656).

Thylstrup's intervention is grounded in emerging concerns about the ethical and political implications of treating online data as some sort of public archive that can be mined, stored, and made available for future analysis. For instance, in our own, respective, research projects we have encountered all manner of things that are – technically speaking – freely available for anyone to read and engage with, but which raise complex ethical questions if amplified by academic work: from activist tactics and debates, to intimate personal discussions buried in large Twitter datasets, to racialised Islamophobic hate speech. In this final section, we suggest that one of the reasons that the human is often submerged in the context of big data archives is a "triple displacement" – of politics, method, and ethics – onto the digital platforms that mediate data and away from the humans who co-constitute it. These entwined displacements, we argue, are what are being contested by an emerging set of archival practices that have arisen from the context of social justice activism and that – while oriented towards preserving the past – prefigure alternative ways of conceiving of and engaging with data that resist displacement.

The first way in which humans are displaced from datasets is bound up with the aforementioned conflation of politics with online participation identified by Dean (2010; see also Dean, 2003). This type of framing, for instance, was typified by Yochai Benkler's Benkler's *Wealth of Networks* (2006), which stressed the egalitarian potentials of openness, transparency, and participation in online communications, and claimed that digital media could be the avenue to realising an idealised Habermasian public sphere through: "allow[ing] a very large number of actors to see themselves as potential contributors to public discourse and as potential actors in political arenas, rather than mostly passive recipients of mediated information who can occasionally vote their preferences" (2006: 220). However, entwined with the displacement of politics, we suggest, is a second form of *methodological* displacement.

The sense that politics is something that happens online, means that – by extension – analysing digital media content has become a means of understanding politics, and new approaches and methods have accompanied these assumptions. Benkler's conception of the digital public sphere, for instance, has fed into other influential frameworks, such as Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg's (2012) distinction between collective and connective action wherein they claim that digital media are not an intermediary that is co-constitutive of action but a key "organizing agent" (2012: 752). What is significant about the concept of "connective action," however, is not just the conceptual displacement of agency onto technology, but that this research was the product of digital methods which have since become one of the dominant ways of researching digital activism. Bennet and Segerberg analysed Twitter narratives circulated by a range of social movements (with a focus on the indignados (15M), Occupy, and activists uprisings associated with the "Arab Spring") and, since then, there has been a dramatic upsurge in uses of big data analytics to map political contestation (see Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021). In this context, therefore, political agency is delinked from the collective action of political movements, digital media have displaced humans as the organizing agents of political action, and digital methods – rather than qualitative research – are understood as the means of researching contemporary politics.

These methodological transformations feed into the third displacement we are concerned with. What has been notable about the explosion of digital politics research over the past decade and a half, is its departure from a qualitative paradigm of social movement research that was predominantly ethnographic. What is significant is that, bound up with this methodological shift, are certain ethical assumptions entwined with the valorization of open communication. Unlike earlier social movement media research, which relied on negotiating with gatekeepers and complex processes of gaining consent, when it comes to social media data there has historically been the assumption that:

> …social media users have all agreed to a set of terms and conditions for each social media platform that they use, and within these terms and conditions there are often contained clauses on how one's data may be accessed by third parties, including researchers. Surely, if users have agreed to these terms, the data can be considered in the public domain? (Townsend and Wallace, 2018: 5)

As pointed out in Leanne Townsend and Claire Wallace's critique of assuming consent, this approach is dangerous as it entirely delegates ethical responsibility to the values of commercial media platforms. This entwinement of political, methodological, and ethical displacement thus helps to clarify some of the mechanisms through which humans have become detached from datasets. It is these dynamics, however, that are being challenged by emerging approaches to digital archives.

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In conceptual terms, the idea of the networked public sphere has been reformulated by scholars who have built on queer and feminist critiques of the exclusions inherent in Habermas's bourgeois public sphere. This research has emphasised the socio-political settings of mediated politics, in order to offer more context-specific understandings of how particular platforms have enabled grassroots counter-public movements to consolidate ideas, values and tactics before gaining wider visibility (Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles, 2020). The reintroduction of political settings has had methodological consequences, as social movement scholars have pushed back against the notion that social media platforms are the "organizing agents" of protest by elucidating the collective action that often underpins networked counter-publics. For instance, *contra* Bennet and Segerberg, scholars using ethnographic methods point out that even if it seems like hashtag campaigns are taking on a life of their own this assumption often masks the work and collective organization that underlies counterpublic activism (see Kavada, 2016 in relation to Occupy; Treré, 2020 in relation to the Indignados).

This conceptual and methodological focus on the contexts of activism has, crucially, also informed archival practices, as elucidated by Tara L. Conley's entry in *Uncertain Archives*, "Hashtag Archiving" (2021). On one hand, the creation of hashtag archives is intimately related to political commitment to documenting social justice narratives that have been produced by "underrepresented and marginalised groups," the most prominent of which are archives dedicated to racial justice, feminist and queer activism (such as hashtags related to #MeToo, #Ferguson, and #BlackLivesMatter). Echoing Drummond's (2024, this issue) account of community archives, motivating the creation of these archives is sharp awareness of the ease through which communal narratives can be lost due to changes in the platform economy (as brought sharp relief by Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter, which has prohibited the sorts of research that enabled the development of these archives).

On the other hand, there is growing awareness that the way these archives are curated and used should not be structured by the values of openness that animated early accounts of the networked public sphere, due to the risk of decontextualising (as well as instrumentalising) user data (see Nikunen, 2021). Hashtag campaigns such as #MeToo, for instance, often include intimate personal disclosures; in some of our own research, moreover, we have encountered instances of hate speech that have since been deleted by Twitter but which remain visible in our datasets, which complicate notions that data can be unproblematically reused due to its publicness (Poole et al, 2021, 2023). When it comes to big data, however, it is impossible to gain consent from the thousands of users whose engagements might constitute these data sets.

To negotiate the need to avoid presuming consent, while recognising that gaining it might be impossible, Conley draws on influential scholarship on influential scholarship on #BlackLivesMatter archiving (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015), which illustrate emerging practices for curating hashtag archives. These practices include extensive annotation to contextualise the origins of narratives; anonymising tweets when they are re-narrated in publications and explaining "a rationale for citing or not citing and why it matters to the archive;" and treating data as though it were living through checking – and removing – materials that users have since erased. Collectively, Conley contends, these archival practices offer possible means of preserving activist history while foregrounding ethical responsibility. In doing so, these hashtag archives elucidate the human-centred approach advocated by Thylstrup, by demanding attention to the contexts in which activism took place and fostering ethical attentiveness towards the co-authors of hashtag narratives.

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Changing norms around hashtag archiving thus reflect a shift: from assuming digital narratives reflect some form of public sphere and treating openness as an unbridled good, to recognising the situatedness of data and working to reintroduce this context and the ethical demands it imposes. For a growing body of social science and humanities, moreover, the norms and practices spearheaded by archival initiatives have not just preserved Internet histories, but transformed the landscape of social media data re-use and informed benchmark guidelines that shape future practice. Crucially, these initiatives have done so in a manner that has created a gap between the norms of openness instantiated by the platforms who host and generate user interactions (as enshrined for instance in platform terms and conditions), and the ethical responsibilities held by researchers in their handling of data. In doing so, these new practices are resisting the triple displacement of politics, methods, and ethics onto platforms, and prefiguring futures that reintroduce humans who need to be taken into account ethically.

Conclusion

In *Uncertain Archives* Thylstrup and colleagues call for a new vocabulary to interrogate the ethico-political dynamics of big data archives, a vocabulary which their collection elaborates with its series of keyword entries by leading media theorists. In this article, we have underlined the value of "displacement" as another potential term that could be added to a keyword list for digital archives and, in the context of this special section as a whole, another term to add to estrangement, loss, and secrets in our reflections upon unfamiliar archives (see Drummond et al, 2024, this issue). Our focus here, however, has been less on applying frameworks from archival studies to digital media and more on delineating how emerging archival practices can be understood as a mode of resistance to the logics of displacement that undergird communicative capitalism. As we have traced across GeoCities, Indymedia, and hashtag archives, different practices have offered different ways of negotiating displacement. What unites the way these archives are mobilised, however, is how they resist the erasure of particular digital histories - of amateur web-designers, activists, and counterpublics - which have since become displaced as the participatory cultures they set in motion have been appropriated by commercial platforms.

Linear narratives about the displacement and appropriation of participatory digital cultures are, of course, overly simplistic, as underscored by canonical scholarship that has elucidated how the exploitation of free, creative labour has always been a feature of the cultural industries (e.g. Terranova, 2000, 2004; cf Hesmondhalgh, 2010). At the same time, as Lev Manovich points out in his update of de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life*, despite affinities between earlier iterations of the culture industries and contemporary digital cultures, there is something nonetheless distinctive about the way that social media "companies have developed strategies that mimic people's tactics of bricolage, reassembly, and remix. The logic of tactics has now become the logic of strategies" (2008: 323-4).

With this being said, it is important to briefly return attention to the observation that time is an often overlooked facet of resistance (Baaz et al., 2016). Through the documentary practice of archiving participatory digital cultures, so as to prevent their displacement and erasure, the logic of strategies, inextricably linked by de Certeau to the positionality of power, is inverted and imbued with the logic of tactical resistance. The reconstructive resistance (Lilja, 2022) of the digital archive steals back time from the telos of late capitalism by preserving participatory cultures amidst a landscape dominated by communicative capitalism, hinting at how digital media could be otherwise by troubling the inevitability of displacement.

The instances of digital archives we have delineated, moreover, are not simply different case studies that can be interrogated through the framework of displaced mediators. Instead, they actively enrich and complicate this concept by showing that mediators can be multiple. Dean's (2004) original account of displacement, for instance, describes how displacement can operate at different registers: from the displacement of the political settings that imbue media with meaning, to the displacement of "dead" media that are superseded by others. Her more fully developed account of displaced mediators is, however, more linear: with Silicon Valley countercultures cast as the displaced mediator that has imbued the Internet with political meaning (see Dean, 2010). By uncovering this specific - important - story, Dean makes an important intervention that troubles overly celebratory accounts of digital media as wellsprings of egalitarian politics. At the same time, this intervention risks making a displacement of its own, by neglecting other mediators that help to account for how and why digital media became associated with participation, creativity, politics, and scope for contestation. Digital archives are not only important in preserving marginalised histories, therefore, but in elucidating how political meanings associated with the digital have always been multifaceted and exceeded the values of a coding elite. To again rearticulate Star; these archives not only show how the Internet has been otherwise, but offer visions for how it could be enacted differently in the future.

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