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Lines of Flight: The Digital Fragmenting of Educational Networks

COLLECTION: SOCIAL MEDIA IN HIGHER EDUCATION: WHAT'S HAPPENING?

ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

With the precipitous changes of the platform formerly known as Twitter, brought on by the change of ownership in late 2022, many networked educators sought, and continue to seek, new digital spaces to continue fostering and developing their digital practice. The authors of this article had all been actively networked on Twitter, and wanted to explore these changes in their professional worlds. As we sought out these spaces we critically began to interrogate our own practices on this platform to gain a deeper understanding of our practice going forward. We've approached this exploration through three vectors: an examination of the terms we use to describe movement from platform to platform, digital identity formation and disruption, and building human connection in digital spaces. The findings from our exploration yielded the following conclusions: (1) With regard to metaphors of movement (i.e., "migration") we leave space open as to which metaphor to use as no metaphor is a perfect fit to explain the complexity of this phenomenon. (2) Digital identity/ies are multifaceted and sometimes place-specific, but some networked affordances seemed to encourage an ever-evolving digital identity more than other spaces. (3) Finally, digital spaces afford us the ability to carve out our own communities from the wider academic community, in the process developing a more owned and voiced identity. However as social media platforms are fleeting, those connections – and identities – are in danger of getting co-opted or deleted as platforms rise and fall.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms are complex, dynamic, evolving, and multifaceted ecosystems of real persons, autonomous bots, services, and affordances. Early in the existence of such social media platforms, the assumption was that one person would eventually have one social graph (Singh 2008). The social graph was popularized by Facebook during one of their early developer conferences (Facebook 2007) but it is based on the older concept of the sociogram, some early examples of which can be seen in Moreno's work (1934). The idea behind both these concepts is that we can track and visualize the social connections between entities. The utopian promise was that the social graph would be a portable component of one's network (Singh 2008). If users wished to leave one platform, they could take everything with them. This meant that users could take their social graph and their media contributions (e.g., text posts), and bring it over to another social media service, thus allowing users to switch platforms without losing what made the service valuable: connection to others. This initial conception of portability also failed to capture another essential element of networked spaces: the promise of portability left out the important element of accumulated social capital, such as followers and your digital image (i.e., reputation). While you could have moved *some things,* some intangibles were always going to be left behind.

Over the years, neither the assumption nor the promise of portability turned out to be true. Users maintain an overlapping network of connections across social media and, as some social media platforms have ceased to exist, the social graphs of each use have not been portable. On the contrary, the information we provide on each platform has been uniquely isolated, with people having to rebuild their persona(e) and connections over and over again. Examples of this movement and rebuilding exist across the internet, for those who remember. This holds true for services that may still exist in some fashion, such as MySpace, Hi5, and LiveJournal but whose past users have moved onto greener pastures; and for services that simply no longer exist, such as Friendster, Orkut, Jaiku, Pownce, AIM, and so on.

Twitter (now called "X"), a once popular microblogging network, currently faces both criticism over the actions of its new owner (e.g., Duffy 2023; Mancini 2023) and competition as other social media platforms vie to become *the next Twitter* (e.g., Napolitano 2023). It is in the churn of this social media landscape that a number of questions emerge for us as social media users and researchers. Why do people gravitate to a particular social media platform? Why do they stay, and what might cause them to leave? Are metaphors such as 'nomads' and 'migrants' helpful in understanding user engagement patterns on different platforms over time? What and who gets lost or left behind as people move from platform to platform? What is gained? What do users keep in mind, if anything, when deciding which platform(s) to invest their time and energy in? Our collaborative approached these questions from three converging vectors. The first vector focused on the words we use to describe movement from platform to platform, and we started this exploration with the words 'migrant' and 'nomad.' Our second vector approached these questions from the perspective of how digital identity forms and gets disrupted in such platform changes. Finally, we explored how people connect and what the loss of a platform, and platform politics more broadly, mean for individuals whose aim is to maintain those digital connections.

METHOD~~OLOGY~~

The nine authors came together to reflect on social media and respond to the Call for Papers by discussing our collective work, research and experience in this area. We were a self-selected group of loosely networked collaborators, friends and allies who had worked together in various ways across the years – and enabled by the very social media we wanted to reflect upon.

Our approach is a form of Collaborative Autoethnography inspired by both Elizabeth St. Pierre and Laurel Richardson and where the 'writing together' is itself our method of inquiry. St. Pierre believes that writing is a type of thinking (1997), while Richardson suggests writing is a way of finding out what we know:

> Writing is also a way of "knowing" – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable (Richardson 2000: 923).

Likewise, Murray (1972) calls writing a "process of discovery" (1972: 4), a way to learn about and evaluate the world. Although writing is often seen as an individual activity, we have undertaken this collaboratively. Gale (2013; 2016) harnessed collaborative writing both as a method of becoming and of inquiry, arguing that collaborative writing offers a valuable reflexively based and ethically and aesthetically sensitive means of research for practitioners working in the field of qualitative inquiry. This marriage of inquiry, collaboration, and becoming suggests this method for researching the experiences of practitioners who are already active in inquiry, and want to look back and develop their own thinking, together with others (cf. Abegglen, Burns & Sinfield 2022a, 2022b; Jandrić et al. 2023). It expands the field of research – it multiplies, emerges – it has no center, no unified or author-itative voice – it is collective thinking in process (Hamon et al. 2015).

The writing approach that we have adapted and are using here can be seen as analogous to the zigzag (Mazzei & McCoy 2010) and worked in stages of synchronous and asynchronous writing. Zigzags are often seeded in face-to-face conversation but in our work were developed in our synchronous and asynchronous writing in Google docs:

- First, each person in the group takes it, in turn, to write in response to a prompt on the subject matter (in this case: the theme of social media).
- Next the person who has just been written to (and in our case that could be anybody in the collective) turns to somebody else within the group who has not yet been written to and writes to the topic. Their utterance could be identical to what was written to them or completely different, there is no right or wrong answer.
- Once everybody has written, each person writes a response to what was written to them. Again, there is no right or wrong answer, they can write any response, as long as it is their own.
- From here, participants write a response back to the written response they have received – and this can continue as a written dialogue between participants (a zigzag discussion).
- Alternatively, the collective could introduce a new question on the topic to move the process along (which happened in our own writing process when developing the idea of digital nomads, migrants, [something]).

Through this back-and-forth zigzag process, authors produce a written document providing a wealth of data, full of their knowledge, opinions and views on the subject. The 'collective researcher' both produces and gathers a large collection of data with many lines of flight.

This is not an epistolary form of writing where authors respond to one another in a sequential and connected fashion (although if someone were keen to do so, we – the authors – suspect that one can trace the evolution of this through snapshots of GoogleDocs' Document History), rather it is a contingent and perhaps de-stabilizing way of communicating and researching. The zigzag is a messy process in which everyone contributes to one document and discusses the process, content, and ideas as they happen. In our case, the comment feature in GoogleDocs was used to have side conversations, explore ideas, problematize, and arrive at a space where our ideas, issues, and problematizations could be crafted into this piece. We quickly surfaced three broad categories (whose category names actually changed through the process of research and digital dialogue) and explored those specific facets of the overall emergent issues with X/Twitter and social media "migrations".

WHY ZIGZAG?

The reason that we chose zigzag as our method of collaborative writing is that it allows reflexivity amongst participants: we can notice and respond to, diverge from, and adapt what other respondents have posted. And as Mazzei and McCoy (2010: 505) state:

> The zigzag is the lightning bolt spark of creation and the "crosscutting path from one conceptual flow to another", a path set off by the spark of creation, unpredictable, undisciplined, anti-disciplinary, and non-static (Stivale 2003, p: 32).

This method is creative, unpredictable, and reflexive. It allows participants the chance to use their own language and give voice to their opinions – and also to be influenced, or not, by the words of others. This provides the researcher collective with deeper and richer data. Another

benefit of this method is that it disturbs the common sense, and day-to-day pattern of thinking of participants. By speaking and writing our opinions, by reading the voices of others, we can disrupt thoughts that may have been dormant in our minds and, in a Deleuzian way, open 'lines of flight' (Deleuze & Guattari 1998).

INITIATING THE FINDINGS THROUGH THE ZIGZAG

Collectively, we, the authors, come from a variety of academic backgrounds and have a broad experience in social media, and X/Twitter specifically. Given our diverse backgrounds, different aspects of social media and connected ways of being piqued the curiosity of different authors, differently. The three main strands of inquiry were surfaced through the Collaborative Autoethnographic zigzag writing: Digital Migrants, Digital identity formation and network weaving, and Social media for connection and compassionate collegiality. These were underpinned by our collective experience being users of social media, having done research on social media in the past, and continuing to engage in inquiry on social media. As you will notice, this final piece evolved through the act of zigzagging with each other and contributing our experience(s) and knowledge to this process, and the reflection on that writing. The article grew by looking back at our own contributions, discussing them within the body and the margins of the document/article itself, and using the dialogue and editing processes to distill our collective knowledge into new understanding. This was a messy process, similar to past collaborative experiences (Hamon et al. 2015), the output of which we've cleaned up as part of the research process – and to better help the reader. Some of the messiness has been retained through the use of ~~strikethrough~~ text.

DIGITAL ~~NOMADS MIGRANTS~~ [SOMETHING]

How do we characterize social media platform usage by educators and researchers? Two common metaphors are those of the nomad and the migrant (Aldea 2014; Rodda 2015). Two other possibilities that emerged through our dialogue are asylum seekers and hostages. All of these, on the face of it, look to be plausible. However, when we start to tease out what each means, we find that none are perfect analogies for the types of behavior that we are wanting to notice. Perhaps we need to stop taking metaphors so literally. In this next section, we took turns 'writing out loud' to see if we could identify some metaphors that resonated as we considered the lines of flight from *the social network formerly known as Twitter.* It should be noted that this social platform is currently branded as 'X,' and the name change occurred while we were in the midst of our exploration.

This exploration of digital *being* began, as with many journeys of exploration, in one place and ended in another. Our starting point was that of a digital nomad. When Apostolos (AK) first suggested the heading of 'Digital Nomad' a few things influenced that word choice. First, there was the notion that became popular in the past few years whereby people who traveled freely while working remotely and were using technology and the internet to accomplish their *work from anywhere* were called *digital nomads* (Hannonen 2020; Hennigan 2023). AK's word choice was also influenced by a constructed persona he had created for his dissertation, the "learning nomad" (Koutropoulos 2021). The underlying idea here is of always being on the move. You might not be an academic with a stable employment situation (e.g., adjuncts or sessional instructors in North America); you might be a lifelong learner who reads about any and every topic you might find interesting, regardless of a discipline-based continuity; you might be a researcher who doesn't have a highly focused research agenda for your work. The nomad 'travels' from topic to topic as those pique their interests, yet still remains in some bounded thematic area. This tripartite learner-teacher-researcher identity was core in formulating the concept of the "learning nomad".

When Sarah joined, before we started zigzagging, she struck through *~~nomad~~* and substituted *migrant*. This was unsurprising because much of the discourse around Twitter after its sale revolved around a *migration* with hashtags like #TwitterMigration trending (e.g., Fiesler 2023; Pot 2022) and accounts such as @MastodonMigration on Twitter assisting users who wanted to try out, or move to, the Mastodon platform. Migration has been an accepted term in past practice when communities looked for new or additional internet 'homes' (e.g., Fiesler & Dym 2020). However, neither descriptor struck the right chord. Sarah highlighted that it is not unusual

for people to talk about nomads when they mean migrants. An exemplified difference between nomads and migrants is that nomads have specific routes that they travel every year, as the Indigenous Australians do (Chatwin 1987). By contrast, migrants move from one (permanent) home to another (Aldea 2014; Rodda 2015).

Terms such as migrant/nomad are problematic when taken as being dichotomous, as both Bonnie and Sarah note. Limiting choice to two options harkens back to issues with other simplified dichotomies. Bonnie writes:

> My response is partly the result of too many years griping at Prensky's 'digital natives/immigrants' framework, which essentialized differences in ways that seemed, frankly, naive…but I see real differences between digital experiences of displacement and embodied experiences of displacement and re-place-making.

Sarah adds that user behavior on social media platforms can take on both nomadic and migrant attributes depending on context.

> I see aspects of both of these in my behaviour – I am nomadic as I use specific SM [social media] at specific times/for specific things. I am a migrant when a particular SM is removed from me and I have to use a different one. People leaving Twitter for Mastodon are probably better characterised as migrants than nomads (and quite likely some are also asylum seekers). Here I'm talking about those who have actually left Twitter, as a fair few of my friends and colleagues have done, and not those people who dramatically announce that they are leaving only to sneak back quietly later, or those who dual post to keep their options open.

This loss of agency when a social network is removed from users is an important aspect to consider. AK pointed out that this loss of a digital space has occurred previously, with social networks such as Google+, Jaiku, Pownce, GoWalla, BriteKite, and so forth. There is evidence that this goes even further back for some groups (cf. Fiesler & Dym 2020). Aras highlights that being a digital nomad is almost a necessity. Moving from space to space doesn't mean abandoning your previous settlement, but rather going elsewhere to better meet your needs. One space won't necessarily cover all of one's needs.

When a space ceases to exist, displacement is perhaps a necessary evil if individuals want to remain connected. However, when the service still exists but is degraded, or *enshittified* (Doctorow 2023), it might elicit nomadic-like behavior on the part of users, going from space to space on the cyberspace landscape, trying to maintain or recreate the benefits of a functional network. This kind of nomadism, which can include periodic returns to a once oft-used service, speaks to the value of the social graph and the personal and professional identities developed on social networks over the preceding decades. Livelihoods and expertise were rooted in Twitter, even for many who were not necessarily 'content creators' or 'influencers'. Thus, its threatened demise can also feel like the demise of those related identities.

Yet Doctorow's description of social media platforms' upheaval as a hostage situation (2023) does not necessarily make us hostages, Bonnie asserts. Twitter's descent into X points out how networks are captive to the whims of owners rather than users, in spite of their participatory origins. And Musk's bad faith business decisions may be, reasonably, experienced as violence by those of us who have invested long-term time and energy in building that space through our participatory contributions. Len notes that he experiences online spaces in sharp contrast with his offline existence, and those online networks provided spaces for him to grow and flourish (Singh 2022). They are an integrated part of his existence. If social networks like Facebook, Instagram, and Threads disappeared, Bonnie points out that many of us would lose ambient contact with many people we value. But fundamentally, "you may never see your friends again" does not fully encapsulate the threat faced by a hostage. We are free to come and go, as individuals. It is the social networks themselves, as digital versions of Bhabha's 'third spaces' (2012), that are the hostages.

Still, as AK notes, over the last decade, social networks have become his address book, replacing telephone numbers and emails with social media profiles. When a platform goes dark, it also removes that ambient presence that Bonnie described from his network in ways greater than outdated phone numbers and emails in a contacts application.

There is more to the issue of just losing connections when a platform is removed. Many of us are also researchers of social media. Both Sarah and Bonnie used Twitter data for their PhD research (Honeychurch 2021; Stewart 2015). Len's current doctoral thesis examines how early career researchers utilize Twitter for their identity development and he has written about the use of Twitter in higher education (Singh 2020a, 2020b) including his own experiences (Singh 2022). Others, too, have used Twitter to connect (cf. examples by Sandra S. and Tom and Sandra A.) and research participant engagement in a variety of online learning communities (e.g., Bozkurt et al. 2016; Koutropoulos et al. 2012). Beyond personal connections the removal of a platform like Twitter has significant implications for the academic and research community, as many have leveraged its data and functionalities for in-depth studies, highlighting its crucial role in the educational research landscape.

Finally, Bonnie suggested two additional metaphors: serfs and flâneurs. Flâneurs is the less loaded term. A flâneur strolls through a city as a spectator, voluntarily and without losing anything in the process. That understates the power platforms have over us, just as migrant or hostage perhaps overstate it, and it doesn't incorporate actions imparted onto the network by users. By contrast, millions of people are currently experiencing digital serfdom (Fairfield 2017) as social media enters its robber baron stage. Like the serfs of the feudal past who lacked any rights on the land that they worked, digital serfs lack the rights to the content they produce on social media, and are allowed to exist on the platform as long as they follow someone else's rules (Fairfield 2017). Also, just as the robber barons of the 19th century used monopoly and exploitation to amass their wealth and influence, so too present-day robber barons have monopolized the digital public sphere to capture both our "data exhaust" (Zuboff 2019) and our actual work (cf. Milmo 2024) in their attempts to derive profit and influence. Social media platforms are about capital and the enclosure of spaces that were never designed as a commons. Users built communities on these spaces, but the debts are being called in, and user displacement is only collateral damage. Fundamentally, it is not we who are the hostages, it is our spaces and networks, built on the fickle and shifting sands of capitalism. Despite what some might have thought, social media platforms were never democratically owned open spaces (cf. Deleuze & Guattari's nomadic space).

The terms hostage, migrant, nomad, or any other term we thought of do not accurately describe what is happening as we attempt to navigate the loss of our previous platform: a loss characterized by content loss, fragmented communities, broken social networks, and shifted community norms (Fiesler & Dym 2020; Fiesler 2023). Ultimately, our consensus was that we should strikethrough both migrant and nomad and leave open which metaphor to use.

DIGITAL IDENTITY FORMATION

Here we consider digital identity formation as a complex set of practices whereby users of social media platforms form an outward presentation of themselves through the use of visual presentations, narratives, and actions/behaviors across platforms. There is also an element of reputation in this concerning how one is perceived in the network (Costa & Torres 2011). These practices may lead to presenting our idealized or true selves (Bozkurt & Tu 2016), we may present one constructed identity in some places, another identity in others, and some may be more genuine or fake than others (Costa & Torres 2011). The more active we become in our digital network the more we develop different facets of who we are, which leads us to discuss not one identity but a web of identity (Koole 2010). Managing one's online identity is an ongoing process (Costa & Torres 2011), with no one way to do it (Feher 2021). Identities can be malleable depending on the context (Code 2013).

The formation of digital identity on a social media platform is a complex endeavor incorporating factors from both the affordances and the community makeup of the online space, and factors from the offline world. A medley of affordances, constraints, contexts, past experiences, and personal preferences combine to determine whether we use our real name as our online handle or a pseudonym, whether we share our real-world names, what languages we use in our posts, and what sorts of content and communities we engage with. Unsurprisingly there is no one way of arriving at your digital identity/ies and there is not necessarily one kind of identity that users of a platform adopt (Jordan 2020). This has parallels to past work on taxonomies of online and work personae (Fieseler, Meckel & Ranzini 2015; Honeychurch et al. 2019), as well as other research on digital identity (cf. Bozkurt & Tu 2016; Cho & Jimerson 2017; Code 2013; Costa & Torres 2011).

Keith emphasizes that creating an identity is not a solitary activity. Identity, meaning, being, and a sense of belonging are found in the relationships among things, and rooted in a place/domain. These connect with the concept of a rhizome from Deleuze and Guattari. Keith introduces McAdams who suggests that humans use storytelling to create their identities, "a person's internalized and evolving story of how he or she has become the person he or she is becoming" (2019: 2). McAdams details a psychological developmental arc where we are first actors within a social context among others, then agents aware that we are acting among others, and finally authors who create a narrative identity that provides each life with meaning, unity, and purpose and "situates the individual as a moral agent in the world" (2019: 8). Thus, a social network isn't just whatever an individual user makes of it. Rather, it is made up of the exchanges of energy, matter, information, and organization, as Edgar Morin (2007: 10) explains, that users bring, that the network brings, and that others bring, and that we exchange with each other. The creation of identity is an ever-evolving process. Aras also expands upon this by highlighting that an internet persona and, thus, digital identity formation is about self-actualization, self-presentation, and self-disclosure.

Within our network we observed examples of these various ways of becoming in our Twitter networks, and in how those interact in real life. Sarah initially used her given name and surname as her Twitter username, but later decided to close that account. Instead, she chose a pseudonym for her username but was quite happy to link her 'real' name to it. For Aras, the digital identity is an online extension and reflection of the physical self, with more flexibility to form an identity. His digital identity is guided by impression management mostly informed by his professional engagements. This is indeed what we do with our physical identities. In a digital space, we decide how to present ourselves based on the context we are in. Because most of Aras's activities are related to his professional engagements, in some platforms he constructed two identities: one that reflects his personal life and another that reflects his professional life.

AK has a few Twitter usernames, both for work purposes (e.g., department accounts), and for personal use. His most successful persona is that of the *learning nomad* because it was constructed in public and evolved through public interactions with other academics and practitioners in the learning design field. The least successful account was his first Twitter account, using a long-held username but because it was made private this account never really flourished or evolved. It remained *frozen* to that social graph at the time it became private. His professional persona was initially a username that was not connected to him, and once real-world contexts had changed, and his digital identity had gathered a healthy social graph, he interacted more like himself rather than as someone who used a pseudonym. AK's online and digital identity started as open, became more closed and guarded, and then opened up again, based on those contextual factors online and offline.

The development of that more 'guardrailed' professional and academic persona was a development based on perceived threats, either in the online or offline world. Len commented that these kinds of negative, even toxic, experiences: such as arguments over trivial things, could be harmful to the sense of oneself, and a developing academic persona. While guardrails may exist to help maintain a balanced sense of self there is only one integrated identity, not several disconnected identities. As Sarah points out, "my Twitter handle is now as much my name as my given one". For those of us who've been using other social platforms, like Bulletin Board Systems, Messenger services (e.g., Yahoo! Messenger, ICQ, MSN, etc.), and other pseudonym-based systems, we come to be identified by our usernames. Times change and platforms come and go, but people remember you by your username.

Finally, Len and Bonnie comment on the digital spatiality of a social network. The platform, that digital real estate, plays a role in how we perceive and form our identities in digital spaces. Len reflects on his journey from digital space to digital space:

> Now I am mainly off Facebook though I occasionally return in case there might be something there for me. What I do not know. But apart from knowing many of my social and family circles are still there, the place feels different. I do not feel or see my footprints there. And so even though I've not fully left and the place is still there to go, I am mostly not there. I tried Mastodon during the Twitter takeover. I tried to be there but it feels not right for me. Truth be told I do not want to be there. I don't feel at home. So I am there but yet not. Twitter is my homeland from where I occasionally take trips but I come back.

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This feeling of *digital nostos*, a longing to return to a digital place where we felt at home, is as much predicated on the digital space, the platform that hosts communities, as the communities and the members that comprise that space. Our digital nostos is a place frozen in time, with people, networks, and interactions that occurred that may no longer be there. The former attributes of Twitter: short message length, rapid engagement, public visibility of posts, and a directed network graph (i.e., 'follow' relationships do not need to be mutual) that are described by Tufekci (2014) are part of what made Twitter seem like a digital agora, an open space for ideas and a way to encourage an ever-evolving digital identity, rather than users picking an a priori decided identity based on whichever social network they were using.

HUMAN CONNECTIONS IN A DIGITAL WORLD

Building 'homes' and identities in these various online spaces led to the formation of connections beyond our immediate sphere and context. While 'nesting', we found new people, within and across academia; we occupied new territories. The reasons to find refuge online, in various social media platforms, were manifold. For Sandra A., Tom, and Sandra S., as for many others, the potentiality of these platforms stood at the forefront:

> What we hoped for was the reaching out and drawing in of social media to our various academic practices, the possibility of smoothing out the negative striations of already populated academic spaces. This could be *our* space. This could be *our* time!

There was the opportunity to experiment and play – different from visions offered by restrictive government policies. For example, an early UK policy document (DfES 2005) emphasized technology's role in changing how we "do business" and how we "deliver services" to our customers (i.e., our students). Typically, government hopes of new technology were that: "Education and industry working together through shared e-learning resources and support, will contribute to the aims of our skills strategy to improve basic and higher-level skills, across the workforce, throughout life" (DfES 2005: 6). In those early policies, we saw no vision for education or our students other than to be equipped with the skills necessary for the neoliberal marketplace.

> There appeared to be no room for us, the 'other' in academia, those of us feeling not quite 'at home' in the existing spaces, or the discourses of those spaces. We could become academic on their terms, or perhaps we could play the game and pass for being academic on their terms. This meant that we could not become academics *on our terms* – at least not in the existing spaces. Then suddenly there was this space – these spaces – that the established world of academia did not yet own. They had not conquered or colonized it. In fact, it seemed like they just ignored it altogether as it wasn't prestigious enough for the metrics-based practices that had taken hold.

We asked – and we still ponder – whether these social media spaces could be something that academics could re-territorialize, differently. Might social media spaces constitute "third spaces" (Bhabha 2012) that academics could inhabit with each other and with their students? Could they be conceptualized in line with Soja's (1996) theorization of third space and Shields' (2001) analysis of Henri Lefebvre's work (2003; 1991) that reveal the liberatory potential of third spaces: as spaces where the negative striations of normal academic power relations can be swept away? Webster (2018) describes this as a space where boundaries are fuzzy and malleable, and hence a space that can expand and morph to accommodate the needs of those involved as well as those of the broader environment. Social media spaces can be jointly occupied – defined by joint goals and outcomes: a liberating network (Castells 2004) enabling the development of new collective capitals and habitus (Bourdieu 1986).

These kinds of constructed spaces, or perhaps carve-outs of a larger social space, are indeed possible. One of the examples AK offers dates back to the late 90s, before Web 2.0 and our current understanding of social media platforms. In those days, *Yahoo!* ran a browser-based chatroom service called *Yahoo! Chat* with persistent rooms dedicated to various topics of interest, such as discussions about movies, sports, and news. Through that space, AK made connections with fellow Greeks in other chatrooms. Since there was no persistent space for people to discuss in Greek, the users made a quasi-persistent room called the Greek Cafe (*Elliniko Kafeneio*). It was not persistent in that *Yahoo! Chat* didn't consider it as one of its usual chatrooms that were

always open, but it was quasi-persistent because there was always a user logged into that room to continue to keep it open. If the room closed for some reason, someone would open a new chatroom with the same name. This was a form of community building and connection building in both synchronous and asynchronous means, and it's an example of users defining the space based on their existing practices, yet distant from governing outside practices.

In Twitter's early days, we also saw countless examples of this, both through weekly and events-based chats, some of which have managed to survive over time and keep that community-spirit, spontaneity, and joy such as #lrnchat, #phdchat, and #LTHEchat. There are also examples of longer-term engagements that are operating in the same vein, including MOOCs such as #mobimooc, #cck11, and #dalmooc. And, there are groups that have emerged and transcended the time-limited, events from which they arose, examples being #CLMooc and #DS106. These communities have all carved out space for their members, on their own terms, using the platform's affordances. The means might be different from what was accomplished in the late 90s with *Yahoo! Chat*, but the outcomes are the same: *they bring people together*.

These community carve-outs of social spaces bring to the fore questions about connection. How do we find – and sustain – our network(s) while being open to others, to the other? As Jean-Luc Nancy (2000: 2) states:

> There is no meaning if meaning is not shared, and not because there would be an ultimate first signification that all beings have in common, but because meaning is itself the sharing of Being.

When we think of social media spaces, are we connected to each other, a social media account, the content posted, the 'happening' (like the weekly #LTHEchat)? And how do we stay connected? Is it the hashtags, the platform(s), the happenings, the follows and likes? Or the people – the humans behind it all? For instance, many of us have participated in chats and MOOCs with one another. Some remain connected through social media platforms long past the expiration date of those happenings. While we may have never met in person, we know one another. We've met. Taking this article as an example, our collective brings together people both for the *nth* time and the first time. Sandra A. notes that she does not know most of us – and yet she does! She is connected with us in various ways, on social media and other social platforms. But, we have not physically met. So... what makes that connection; that relationship? More importantly, perhaps, is what we can do with that digital connection, that relationship, to foster the human in a supercomplex, exclusionary, posthuman world.

In the everyday, we often conflate 'knowing' someone and 'having met' someone. We talk about 'knowing' people we have met, yet we may be 'familiar' with people if we have not met them in person (whether online or offline) or have just read their work. This is a barrier that can be broken when we form digital connections with others. As Sarah states, we can 'know' those whom we have 'only' met online. In all likelihood, she/we will probably never be in the same physical space as most of her #CLMooc or #DS106 connections, but their friendships are as real and as important as any that are developed and nurtured in offline settings. This phenomenon is not confined to social media. Different types of connections, from friendships, to collaborations, to romantic relationships, are formed and maintained often in virtual spaces (cf. Jenkins 2006). They are as real as those in real life.

A concern that Sarah raises is that as time goes by people might fall off her radar – you don't get a 'return to sender' response when someone stops using social media. "My mum, once an obsessive Facebook user, stopped abruptly last Christmas. Mutual friends were worried, of course, as she is not young. How does one explain to them that she just doesn't want to log in anymore?" Prior to connecting via social media, we maintained contact books with physical addresses and telephone numbers. Social media platforms are much more fleeting. As people 'move' and platforms either cease to exist, or become more marketized and managed, thus losing their liberatory power, we might ask: how does one maintain those connections? How do communities reconstitute themselves when they become fragmented across social platforms? Importantly, we also need to ask, where do we find the hope, the third spaces, the connections bigger than those envisaged or enabled by reductive policies and practices? This is a challenge to address as we explore our identities as Digital ~~Nomads~~ ~~Migrants~~ ~~Flâneurs~~ ~~Refugees~~ [something]s.

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CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Times are complex, supercomplex (Barnett 2000) and the university sector seems engaged in a spiral of permanent revolution and micromanagement, leading to what Richard Hall describes as the alienated academic (2018) and the hopeless university (2021). It is no wonder that educators found themselves reaching out to social media in the hope that they would find 'third spaces', alternative ways of being, connecting, and sustaining each other – and the values of a liberatory academy. Indeed, given that the third space is the space of potentiality, the contingent, of the liminal and the unmapped; given that it is the street fighting and nomadic space (Deleuze & Guattari 1998) of education, we would argue that it is essential that we educators map out new academic spaces – together. However, if we do not have control of these new spaces then we run the risk that they too will be colonized and enshittified. Social media platforms are not neutral or independent: they are owned by and beholden to big tech companies, and no matter how many pieces we carve out, they are shifting sands, always changing and bringing in new colonizers interested in extracting value. We don't own these space(s), in fact, we have never owned these space(s), yet there is hope – especially as we begin to create those online media spaces together. As we have shown, there are cracks and fissures that can hold communities in which we, authors, have grown and thrived.

As collective nomads, in this paper, we have reflected on what social media means for us. And we have realized that the solution is to take charge of our own data, and to empower our learners to take control of theirs. As some of the established social media like *the social network formerly known as Twitter* 'go down' and others like Mastodon or Bluesky 'rise' we must finally realize that these or indeed any social media platforms will always continue to ebb and flow – they are out of our control. They never were the third spaces that some believed they were, or wanted them to be. We may not be able to control our relationships with the platforms, but we can control and define our relationships with other members of our educational networks. The nomadic antidote to state institutions is not capitalist-controlled social media, but the autonomy of the IndieWeb (cf. Jamieson 2022) with its serendipitous, rhizomatic connections (Bozkurt et al. 2016; Deleuze & Guattari 1998). These rhizomatic connections can enable a multitude of spaces, with diverse personae, that can act as third spaces for our educational networks and networked selves. As Laing states: being enabled to see and think differently "can be a route to clarity ... a force of resistance and repair, providing new registers, new languages in which to think" (2020: para. 5).

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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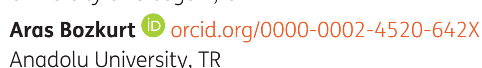
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