

NETWORK

"Network," which can sometimes signify a singular and hierarchical system such as a radio or television channel, is a growingly complex word that represents the plural and nonhierarchical entity indescribable in a simple phrase. The term "network" has started to not simply contain meanings but function as "an analytical tool embedded in global culture and information technologies, and their multitudes of connections, messages, and topographies."¹ Network denotes "connections" that are possibly abstract but definitely present, such as "the terrorist network," and "messages" that are shared on various platforms, such as "the social media." More significantly, the network denotes the "topographies" that organize everyday life experience in terms of sociality and relationality or, in other words, "connectivity in perpetuity."² Media and information technologies rendered the world in the state of constant and continual mediation via the network.

The network is able to create perpetual connectivity because it is decentralized and diverse, as it operates through "a multitude of nodes."³ This format of decentralized connectivity resembles various ecological phenomena, such as fungal networks, through which plants communicate with each other. The fungal internet, in addition to being a beautiful and astonishing occurrence, is a fantastic example of how seemingly separate organisms are often "interconnected and interdependent" in "the wood wide web."⁴ Fungi, scattered and multiple, function as nodes of connectivity in the decentralized and diverse wood wide web. It's not

¹ Levina, M. (2017). Network. In L. Ouellette, & J. Gray (Eds.), *Keywords for media studies*. New York University Press.

² Levina, Marina; Grant Kien, eds. *Post-global Network and Everyday Life*. Peter Lang New York, 2010.

³ Grewal, David Singh. *Network Power: The Social Dynamics of Globalization*. Yale University Press New Haven CT, 2008.

⁴ Fleming, Nic. Plants talk to each other using an internet of fungus. BBC, 11 November 2014

surprising that the writer of the source article used terms of information technologies like "network, "internet," and "web" when referring to the various modes of "connections, messages, and topographies" between organisms. Decentralization and diversification are the primary characteristics of any network. It is through the decentralized and diverse formation of nodes as the foundation that the network achieves connectivity.

The decentralized model of the network system is vital for technological advancement and distribution of information, which have been the primary agendas of informationalism.⁵ Informationalism was a new mode of capitalist development since the mid twentieth century after industrialization. Unlike industrialism's strife for maximization of productivity through the means of hierarchical and strict structures, informationalism aimed for advancement of information technology with a nonhierarchical and flexible system---the network. Topographically, the sources moved from Detroit to Silicon Valley, from car factories to Google offices, and from organized labor to flexible work. The transition from organized labor to flexible work is particularly important, because it emphasizes how the network is an "antiunion force."⁶ The network economy's need for constant input of information from various sources inevitably brings flexibility to the work. The flexibility of work allows for individualized "free labor" that is essential for production and distribution of information. For instance, many social network services such as Twitter depend almost entirely on the voluntary input of information from users for contents. These platforms encourage constant contributions to the body of contents, so that they can arrange, design, and showcase the data. Informationalism, which is the new mode of global capitalism, uses the decentralized network in order to eventually induce individualized, free labor.

⁵ Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of Network Society*. Blackwell Malden MA, 1996.

⁶ Terranova, Tiziana. *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*. Pluto Press London, 2004.

As the emergence of global capital and information technology birthed the network, it inescapably reflects the power structures of its creators.⁷ Despite the unprecedented and therefore seemingly subversive characteristics of the network, it does not disrupt but rather absorb the existing hegemony into its own nonhierarchical, flexible, and decentralized structures. Power in the network operates through regulations of standards, as labor in the network works through decentralized relations of sociability, and therefore, is nonlinear. Unlike the traditional model of sovereign power, which exercises control through a linear and deterministic structure, network power exercises control through a nonlinear and constitutive structures that incorporate dividend elements.⁸ The network power welcomes divergence and difference because they all contribute to its continuous growth. The network power practices systems of control like other entities, but it is relational, circumstantial, and mutable.

Understanding the network power's particular structure and its practice of control enlightens us from the tech industry's frequent claim that the network is inherently democratic simply because it is decentralized. By equating the decentralized characteristics of the network's structures to the democratic possibilities of its politics and ethics, Silicon Valley tries to humanize the network so that it appears autonomous and good. The Arab Spring, which was problematically named as "Twitter Revolution" in the west, is an example of how a technological enterprise erases the actual subjects of a movement in order to advertise its network product as an elevated entity. The phrase "Twitter Revolution" attributes the significant and strenuous political revolution not to the brilliant organizers and protesters but to the mere tool of their work---Twitter. This way, the beneficiaries of the network platform create

⁷ Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of Network Society*. Blackwell Malden MA, 1996.

⁸ Galloway, Alexander R.; Eugene Thacker. *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*. University of Minnesota Press Minneapolis, 2007.

a narrative that minimizes the actual struggles and sacrifices of the demonstration and highlights the network tool to appear divine. However, the Arab Spring was a bloody movement carried out in reality with the physical bodies of revolutionaries, and Twitter simply reflects such a strife. The politically charged, radical power clearly worked through the network's relational, circumstantial, and mutable pathways, and achieved the revolution. Therefore, what made Twitter revolutionary in the context of Arab Spring is the revolution itself in which Twitter was involved, and nothing else. Even if it was utilized by fascists, Twitter would have stayed open to them the exact same way, because it in itself is neither political nor ethical and therefore, not democratic. Marina Levina states in the article that "the network is not outside of power, but rather than power is what gives the network its body" (Para 3). In the case of the Arab Spring, the revolution gave the network platform Twitter the bleeding body of a revolutionary.

The network, however, when not actively resisting the existing structures of power and control, inevitably solidifies them, although its compositional scientific systems like algorithms tend to appear neutral, absolute, and fair. The network, by default, reflects the larger socio-econo-political systems by embodying hegemonic beliefs and biases. Among many examples is the prominent search engine and database Google, which has been thoroughly representative of white supremacy, racism, and sexism.⁹ Google search results have drastically different narratives about people with various identities at the intersections of race and gender. When the phrase "White teenagers" was googled, the image outputs were smiling White teenagers in colorful clothes and diverse poses. However, when "Black teenagers" was searched, the results were predominantly mugshot images of Black teenagers. Moreover, when

⁹ Noble, Safiya. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. NYU Press, 2018., Noble, Safiya. *Google Has a Striking History of Bias Against Black Girls*. TIME, 2018.

the phrase "Black girls" was googled, the majority of the general content section contained "pornographic and otherwise disturbing" materials. Google's algorithmic prejudices directly mirror the hegemony of today's world, not in a vague sense but in a detailed perspective of international white supremacist patriarchy. Such a debilitatingly biased narrative of the network, of course, reinforces the said hegemony in both virtual and physical realms.

These "widespread, mysterious and destructive algorithms," or "WMDA," such as Google search engine, increase inequality and threaten democracy.¹⁰ In this age of Big Data, Machine Learning, and Artificial Intelligence, algorithms increasingly make more significant decisions that impact people's lives. Machine Learning algorithms are used for employment, insurance, loans, education, variable pricing, and predictive policing, among many. These algorithms do not contest the biases of the existing hegemony, and reach discriminatory results that damage the already oppressed and marginalized. A prime example is the case of a facial recognition algorithm's false accusation of an innocent American Black man in Michigan for a crime.¹¹ Another significant example is healthcare algorithms that discriminate against Black people.¹² These algorithms perpetuate and solidify international anti-black racism. There is also Tay, a chatbot who turned into a racist, sexist, facistic, antisemitic bigot.¹³ The list of network biases goes on. The high functionality and mathematical nature of algorithms create a delusion of progress and neutrality, and speed up the decriminalization and dehabilitation of already discriminated people. And it is all unsurprising because the network was born from the informationalism that was the new mode of capitalism, which has been the primary project of international white supremacist patriarchal hegemony.

¹⁰ O'Neil, Cathy. *Weapons of Math Destruction*. Crown Books, 2016.

¹¹ Hill, Kashmir. *Wrongful Accused by an Algorithm*. *The New York Times*, Aug 3, 2020.

¹² Ledford, Heidi. *Millions of black people affected by racial bias in health-care algorithms*. Oct 24, 2019.

¹³ Buranyi, Stephen. *Rise of the racist robots - how AI is learning all our worst impulses*. Aug 8, 2017.

The network facilitates its continuous and ultimately endless expansion by creating the collective goal of advancement. The network encourages the contributors to willingly share their personal data for the common purpose of enriching the database.¹⁴ However, the seemingly collective goal of data contribution is increasingly arguable, because the shared data are often exploited for profits by those claiming ownership of certain platforms of the network. Facebook, which is one of the most massive social network platforms to ever exist, failed to protect the personal information of millions of users from a cyberattack and exposed horrific amounts of private data.¹⁵ Without proper legal or societal structure to recover or compensate for the lost privacy of the data, Facebook stayed under-penalized. The incident naturally calls for the question of who truly owns the data in the network, when countless corporate platforms do not protect the rights of users while incessantly coaxing them for their data. The apparent collectivity of the network expansion growingly proves to be untrue and even deceitful.

In the midst of questions around violence and irresponsibility of the network is the discussion of identity:

"An identity constituted by information is an identity in flux. It lacks a fixed meaning, and therefore it can always be changed and altered. More importantly, it can be understood only in the context of other information, and therefore, in the network, we can understand ourselves only in terms of relationships to others. To be a part of the network is to embrace a network identity, or network subjectivity, which constructs the self as a source of a constant stream of information to be shared with others. The self becomes a node in the network as it parcels through the cyberspace bits of information. In other words, in the network not only are you your information, but also your perceived value or worth is determined by how much of that information is shared with others. Measured through "likes" on Facebook, political petitions signed on Change.org, or the number of steps logged through Fitbit, bodies in the network are

¹⁴ Dean, Jodi. *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*. Polity Cambridge, 2010.

¹⁵ Isaac, Mike.; Frenkel, Sheera. Facebook Security Breach Exposes Accounts of 50 Million Users. *The New York Times*, Sept 28, 2018.

in the constant business of generating and sharing information. Without that information, the network would cease to exist. In this way, we are the network.

Our bodies, however, are much more than the data they generate. Any particular information-based snapshot will be inherently incomplete, and therefore contradictory. We are large; we contain multitudes. The network in its many incarnations attempts to contain the entirety of our politics, our bodies, and our selves. The fact that it fails is the only thing that stops it from becoming an absolutely totalitarian force. Therefore, neither is network a benign description, nor is it necessarily a force for good. It is a topography that parcels out bodies into bits of information easily moved, shared, and modulated. It is total; it contains everything. The most important of which are the cat videos."