

The Alt-social Network of Natalie Bookchin's *Testament*

Television & New Media

1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/1527476416670011

tvn.sagepub.com



Sarah Whitcomb Laiola¹

Abstract

This article addresses issues of user precarity and vulnerability in online social networks. As social media criticism by Jose van Dijck, Felix Stalder, and Geert Lovink describes, the social web is a predatory system that exploits users' desires for connection. Although accurate, this critical description casts the social web as a zone where users are always already disempowered, so fails to imagine possibilities for users beyond this paradigm. This article examines Natalie Bookchin's composite video series, *Testament*, as it mobilizes an alt-(ernative) social network of vernacular video on YouTube. In the first place, the alt-social network works as an iteration of "tactical media" to critically reimagine empowered user-to-user interactions on the social web. In the second place, it obfuscates YouTube's data-mining functionality, so allows users to socialize online in a way that evades their direct translation into data and the exploitation of their social labor.

Keywords

social media, YouTube, labor, art, tactical media, data mining, obfuscation

The contemporary online environment of the social web is structured through a series of ideological and technological contradictions. On one hand, popular and corporate rhetoric ideologically casts the social web as an egalitarian public sphere, committed to ethics of user empowerment. Through invitations to share, connect, or build community on the web, this same rhetoric describes the social web as an environment where general users can counter feelings of isolation, precarity, or vulnerability that have been prevalent since the postmodern era, as Frederic Jameson describes (Jameson 1991), and that have become the norm in the post-industrial, neoliberal era, as Lauren

¹Georgia Institute of Technology, USA

Corresponding Author:

Sarah Whitcomb Laiola, School of Literature, Media, and Communication, Georgia Institute of Technology, 729 Bonaventure Ave NE, Apt 3, Atlanta, GA 30306, USA.

Email: sarah.lozier@lmc.gatech.edu

Berlant describes (Berlant 2011). On the other hand, participating in the social web requires that we render ourselves into informational patterns of data that can be mined and interpreted by the computational programming and encoded algorithms forming the web's technological infrastructure. Although these data-mining processes are what ultimately facilitate the user-to-user connection we call "social networking" online, they are also mobilized toward corporate profitability to create an economic environment that is, as Tiziana Terranova described before the web turned "social," no less than the exploitation of users' online labor (Terranova 2000). Thus, the technological infrastructure of the social web contradicts and undermines its ideological claims to reduce user vulnerability and promote user empowerment.

This contradictory environment presents a critical challenge. In a moment where "opting out" is effectively impossible (Brunton and Nissenbaum 2015), and where, as the success of #BlackLivesMatter demonstrates, the social web can be mobilized to achieve its ideological promises, this challenge is effectively one of imagining ways to increase user safety on the web while simultaneously increasing possibilities for users' empowered online participation. Highlighting the urgency of this need are the overwhelmingly "paranoid readings" (Sedgwick 2003) that populate social media criticism today. Much of this criticism focuses on the problematics of the social web's technological infrastructure at the denigration of the possibilities for its ideological promises; the rhetoric of user empowerment through human connection and community formation is always assumed to be a predatory, exploitative corporate (smoke)screen. Thus, there is a need for a critical social networking system that might disrupt both the contradictory encoding of the social web and the ideological programming of our systems of social media critique.

As I argue throughout, Natalie Bookchin offers just such a critical system in her 2009, composite video series, *Testament*. This system emerges as each chapter performs, what I call the *alt-social network*, a version of an online social network that presents distorted reflections of YouTube's—the social web platform on which *Testament* circulates, and from which it takes its videographic material—ideological and technological coding. In this distorted reflection, the *alt-social network* expands imaginative possibilities for, and critiques of, social networking today by working, ideologically, as an iteration of what Rita Raley (2009) has called "tactical media" and technologically, as an iteration of what Helen Nissenbaum and Finn Brunton have called "obfuscation" (Brunton and Nissenbaum 2015). In what follows, I focus on each of *Testament's* three chapters in turn—"My Meds," "Laid Off," and "I Am Not,"—as each articulates a particular element of the *alt-social network* as a critical, social media system. "My Meds" highlights the *alt-social network* as distorted reflections of both YouTube and the state of contemporary social media criticism today. "Laid Off" highlights the *alt-social network* as a work of tactical media that provides critical, imaginative possibilities for re-thinking social media's ideological coding as spaces for user empowerment and community formation. Finally, "I Am Not," highlights the technological obfuscation by which the *alt-social network* protects its users from vulnerability due to exploitative data mining on the web.

“My Meds” and Distorted Reflections of a Critical Social Media System

The frame of a video opens. Within this frame, a single smaller frame appears. In this second frame, a female sits at a kitchen table, staring directly at the camera. She opens her mouth.

“So, um, without further ado, I’m going to introduce you to—.”

She is joined by four more people, each in their own clearly delineated frame, each staring and speaking into their own cameras, who finish the statement with her.

“—my medications.”

The video continues as more and more video bloggers fill the gridded screen from top to bottom. As if they could speak forever, they list the types and dosages of their medications, which range from “Depakote, 500 mg,” to “Cilexa, 40 mg of Prozac and half a milligram of Xanax at night,” to “Ritalin, [and] Adderall.”

Despite moments of clarity in the recitation, what stands out from the soundtrack is the chorus of nonsensical drug suffixes—“-pan,” “-cor,” “-cin.” These snippets of vocalized text reflect, not just an overwhelming sense that pharmaceuticals intervene in and structure our cultural world, but that this structural intervention is so vast that it is impossible to grasp in any kind of specific, clear, meaningful way. Similarly, the tone with which this chorus of vloggers recounts what, through the sonic and visual echoes of voice after voice, hits the viewer as an overwhelming amount of meds, is almost entirely nonchalant. Only one speaker suggests that her medication is anything but a matter-of-fact part of daily life, and as she says, this is because she is in the middle of switching types and dosages.

Sixty seconds after it began, the video comes to an end.

Much as it began, this ending features a single female, alone in the frame, assuring the viewer that, despite the tears running down her face, she’s “been feeling—” cue the appearance of four more vloggers, “—much better.”

This describes “My Meds,” one of three chapters that make up Natalie Bookchin’s 2009 *Testament* (Bookchin 2009d). Formed through a compositional collage of disparate vlogs that Bookchin has culled from YouTube and cut together into a cohesive narrative, “My Meds,” gives vision and voice to psychotherapeutic drug use. At once deeply personal and inarguably structural, the narrative that emerges in this chapter mobilizes certain themes that are indicative of contemporary life lived through the digitally mediated, socially networked screen. Some particularly resonant thematic concerns include the unresolved tensions and blurring lines between privacy and publicity, isolation and connection, stability and precarity, and invitation and exploitation.

While viewing “My Meds,” for instance, as much as we feel the raw pain of each vlogger, sharing and connecting in their emotionally fraught affect, we must recognize that this shared affective vulnerability is possible only because the vloggers have merged publicity with privacy. In accepting YouTube’s invitation to “Broadcast Themselves,” they have invited us, and the rest of YouTube’s community, into their private homes through the camera, and into their private lives through the recitation. Similarly, even as the vloggers’ voices flow in and out of one another, overlapping and seeming to connect in the recitation of their meds, each person remains entirely isolated from the rest, delineated as much by their personal frame, as by their personal experience. At the same time, though, they share the larger frames of the video screen, psychotherapeutic drug use, and psychological vulnerability. Finally, despite the vloggers’ collective assurances that these drugs stabilize their otherwise precarious, vulnerably affected selves, the insistence of this fact, coupled with the palpable anxiety present in the tears streaming down some of the vloggers’ faces, prompts us to wonder if the speakers really are “feeling much better,” or if there is not, perhaps, a disconnect between the narrative and its performance, between external performance and internal structures of feeling.

Notably, these formal and narrative tensions emerge through a visual design that is, itself, a reflection of YouTube. Perhaps most clearly reminiscent of YouTube is the video’s gridded structure of frames within frames, each signaling an individual video that has been connected to the others through an organizational logic, to form a social network, a community of users. Similarly, this social network is made up of individuals representing a vast range of ages, races, genders, and classes, apparent diversity that reflects YouTube’s own claims to universal inclusivity in its invitation to “billions of people to discover, watch, and share originally-created videos,” and its claim to “[provide] a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others across the globe” (“YouTube About” 2016). Underlying this articulation of YouTube’s corporate ethos is the implication that it represents a democratic, egalitarian public sphere, open to amateur and professional video makers alike, regardless of age, race, gender, class, or location.

Although formally YouTube and *Testament* share these reflective similarities, Bookchin’s artwork is a reflection of YouTube in distortion, as each of *Testament*’s chapters reveals a narrative in stark contrast to that which YouTube tells about itself. Where the rhetoric of YouTube’s “About” statement (quoted above) describes the site as a safe egalitarian space, a public forum that facilitates community formation, *Testament* performs personal narratives of emotional vulnerability and intense isolation, even within such a networked community. In this narrative light, the formal grid that signals connection on YouTube becomes a sign of systemic isolation in Bookchin’s text. As *Testament* reflects a distortion in the semiotics of YouTube’s visual design, it prompts the question of whether YouTube really facilitates the social “healing” of its precarious, vulnerable, and isolated users. Is it really a place, in other words, where these users might go to adopt empowered, valuable positions from which to inform, inspire, connect, and share with others, and thereby begin “feeling much better”?

Much of social media criticism today answers this question with a resounding negative, citing contradictions inherent in the public media sphere that render YouTube and other social networking sites as predatory, unsafe space that ultimately increase

users' vulnerability and precarity. As Felix Stalder describes, where the user-accessible front-end of social media might rhetorically promote ideologies of "semiotic democracy" that grant the user the power to create new media forms and participate in public discourse,

if we consider the situation from the [technological] back-end, we can see the potential for Spectacle 2.0, *where new forms of control and manipulation, masked by a mere simulation of involvement and participation*, create the contemporary version of what Guy Debord called "the heart of the unrealism of the real society." (Stalder 2012, 242, emphasis added).

In Stalder's view, because the front-end of the web is entirely conditioned by its programmatic back-end, the rhetorical promises of user empowerment through semiotic democracy are no more than a spectacular façade that disguises the system's totalitarian power dynamics. Geert Lovink extends Stalder's claim, suggesting that this front-end rhetoric is actively predatory, preying on feelings of vulnerability that characterize contemporary life. When social networking sites ask, "What's going on," Lovink (2012, 138) claims, they mobilize a "subtle play with affect" that "gives us the energy to express ourselves and the warm feeling that we exist, that at least someone cares." Within this formulation, YouTube's invitation is one that explicitly aims to capture anxious, vulnerable, precarious users by promising them, not simply a democratic sphere of personal video, but entry into a community that will care about them as (implicitly) members of their offline communities do not.

What both Stalder and Lovink ultimately convey, is that underlying and *undermining*, YouTube's front-end rhetoric of user empowerment through community formation, is its back-end architecture of algorithmic programming. As stated, the back-end reduces users to patterns of informational data that are produced through their online activities and are used both to maintain the web and facilitate community, and to turn a profit for those companies that run the social networking sites. Jose Van Dijck (2013, 16) describes the process by which sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube profitably exploit users' online activities as one that mines and converts the data produced through front-end, human activities of socializing and connecting into the profitable resources of "sociality" and "connectivity" at the back-end (Van Dijck 2013). Thus, as we (the users) "[accumulate] *social capital*," the owners of those social media sites "[amass] *economic capital*" (16). Although we may "opt into" this exchange, Van Dijck, following Terranova (2000), maintains that the process is no less than exploitative of users' affective "free labor" of socializing. According to these thinkers, a great deal of this exploitation stems from the secrecy of these data-mining processes.

Although few users are entirely unaware that social data mining exists, the extent to which these data-mining processes spread across the social web, the types of data that get mined, and the interpretations drawn from this mining remain largely unknown and unknowable. In his book-length study of Google—notable as both YouTube's parent company and as the most successful practitioner of social media's profit model—Siva Vaidhyanathan (2012) argues that this secrecy is largely by design. On one hand, keeping these processes secret allows Google to maintain its

monopoly on focused web-based advertising, a necessity for success in capitalistic economic cultures. More importantly, what Vaidhyanathan argues is that this data-mining secrecy contributes to the company's cultural power as a benevolent, godlike entity that brings order to the web, organizing information to render it user friendly, and existing by its creed to "do no evil." As Vaidhyanathan puts it, "the Book of Google contains *contradictions* that leave us baffled, pondering whether we mere mortals are capable of understanding *the nature of the system* itself. Perhaps our role is *not to doubt*, but *to believe*" (Vaidhyanathan 2012, 2, emphasis added), and in believing, willingly offer up our "fancies, fetishes, predilections, and preferences" as data to be mined, quantified, and rendered into profit (3). In other words, as we offer up ourselves as data to the back-end of the web, Google maintains the front-end as a user-friendly, navigable space where order, rather than chaos, reigns. Similarly, sites like Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube, provide us with communities and social networks in exchange for the data we produce by socializing and connecting. The aura of secrecy cultivated around social data-mining processes maintains both our positions as willing producers of our selves as data, and these companies' positions of capitalistic success.

Throughout this critical system, the social web is cast as a space structured through ideological contradictions between the front- and back-ends that is exploitative and capitalistically predatory. Although an accurate portrayal of the web that offers a necessary counterview to both the corporate rhetoric that views the web as a democratic zone of user empowerment (Johnson 2006), and early social media criticism that celebrated the arrival of the social web as a means to disrupt the power dynamics of media control (Jenkins 2006a, 2006b), it is a portrayal that relies on and strengthens a belief in the web as an exclusively predatory, dangerous place. Consider Lovink's description of the ways social media sites *play* with affect, a play that in Van Dijk's formulation becomes an *exploitation* of affect-as-labor, or Stalder's description of the back-end as mobilizing new forms of not just control, but *manipulation*. The telling word choice here marks these critics' arguments as sketching the social web as actively deceptive to its users. Similarly, Vaidhyanathan's description of Google as an entity that cultivates godlike omnipotence having risen to power as a system that should not be critically understood, but faithfully *believed*, similarly casts the web—the zone that Google controls—as unknowable, and therefore critically dangerous to its users. Although not inaccurate, this critical system understands the social web's front-end ideological promises as always already reduced and denied by the back-end technological processes. As such, it is a critical system as limited as the technological system it critiques, operating through misattributed technological determinism and ideological paranoia in a feedback loop of critical impossibility.

At the heart of this critical system is the reduction of the social web's front-end to its back-end, a reduction that can be understood as one between an ideological infrastructure and a technological infrastructure. It is, thus, a viewpoint with technologically determinist leanings. More importantly, as N. Katherine Hayles (2006, 181–210) has argued in her writings on new media poetics, to reduce a digital object to either its back-end code or to its front-end interface is to fundamentally misunderstand the

digital object as such. Calling for a critical view of new media objects that approaches them as dispersed, processual, dynamic events rather than fixed, stable, pre-determined objects, Hayles' view allows for a rearticulation of the social web—itsself, a new media object—as a dynamic system of front- and back-ends, where each end can act on, condition, and affect the other. Although this view does little to mitigate the power dynamics of capitalistic exploitation that structure the social web, it does provide a place from which to imagine front-end intervention as meaningful within the social web's dynamic system. At the same time, reimagining the power dynamics of the digital system in this way disrupts the paranoid perception of the back-end as omnipotent.

Complementing this critical system's misattributed technological determinism is its ideological paranoia, which distrusts the back-end, in large part, because of its very real inaccessibility to the user. As stated, though the user likely knows of the back-end, she can access neither the extent of its coded functionality, nor the extent to which this technological coding contradicts the ideological coding of the system's front-end. Despite this systemic reality, understanding the dangers of this system as stemming from its hiddenness and its inaccessibility—and by extension, suggesting, as Lovink and Vaidhyathan do, that increasing users' awareness of the system will mitigate their vulnerability—is essentially what Eve Sedgwick (2003, 123–52) calls a “paranoid reading.” For Sedgwick, the “paranoid reading” is one that imagines exposure of systems that perpetuate injustice as sufficient to end that injustice, as if the main problems were not the systems themselves, but the hiddenness of the systems. Ultimately, this paranoid viewpoint strengthens the power dynamics it seeks to disrupt. On one hand, it removes all possibility for user agency just as assuredly as the social web's back-end; on the other hand, it naturalizes both the system and its power dynamics through constant repetition and recognition in an interpolative process such as that which Louis Althusser (2008) describes. In the case of social media critique, then, the paranoid reading produces a critical system that only serves to enhance the online precarity and vulnerability of the very users it seeks to protect.

As “My Meds” makes clear, the social web's users are already vulnerable and precarious, in need of both those possibilities for human connection through social community formation that the web's front-end promises, and protection from the back-end that exploits this front-end need. It is precisely in response to these needs that the alt-social network steps in, reflecting YouTube in distortion, and thereby offering a view of the social web that relies neither on technological determinism, nor on ideological paranoia. Rather, the view through the alt-social network imagines critical possibilities at the front-end that can disrupt and undermine the exploitative processes of data mining at the back-end. These critical possibilities resist relying on the exposure of data-mining systems as such, and approach the social web as a dynamic, processual electronic text in its own right. Turning now to *Testament's* second chapter, “Laid Off,” which features a diverse set of vloggers performing a shared narrative of job loss, I demonstrate the front-end ideological disruptions that the alt-social network effects within the social web's critical system. Performing the alt-social network as an iteration of what Rita Raley has called “tactical media,” “Laid Off” provides the

possibility for approaching the front-end of the web outside of a critical system that views it as predatory simulation. Instead, “Laid Off” tactically mobilizes the signs of its social media regime to perform the front-end as a very real zone that can effect user connection, community formation, and empowerment.

“Laid Off” and the Tactical Re-imagination of Social Media Criticism and Ideology

The frame of a video opens. Within this frame, six smaller frames, each featuring one person, quickly pop up, side-to-side, stretching across the center. Together, these people begin speaking:

“So today, really, really, really—”

At this point, four frames disappear and the soundtrack gives way to the single female voice:

“—sucked.”

The lone vloggers are joined, and eventually replaced, by more vloggers, each in their individual frame stretching across the horizontal center of the larger video frame. They recount a narrative in which what began as a normal day, dramatically changed course as they were asked to step into their managers’ offices upon arriving at work. Recalling the boss, the manager, and HR personnel present in the room, the vloggers eventually announce that they were:

“Laid Off.”

On this vocal refrain, the screen lights up with thirty frames in a row featuring thirty different vloggers, so that the phrase “laid off” is both sonically and visually loud. As the vloggers take turns explaining why they were let go, the viewer is treated to a chorus of corporate rhetoric:

“Financial reasons.”

“The company is going out of business.”

“The position became redundant.”

“They have to downsize.”

“They’re outsourcing the job.”

At this point, the vloggers express how long they have been working at their companies, tenures that extend from one year to nineteen years. This leads to expressions of

frustration, feelings of betrayal, and questions of societal worth, as the viewers face their new positions of financial precarity and vulnerability.

The narrative then takes a turning point, as the vloggers share all the reasons being laid off might be a good thing. Being released of a job will allow time for one vlogger to “work on my skills to pursue what I really want,” while another feels “excited to get the hell out of there,” and many have been looking forward to “having more time on their hands.”

This up-beat is soon cut off with a chorus of “I guess we’ll see,” which leads to the admittance that, on Monday, each vlogger will go “start looking for a new job, a better job.” Nearly four minutes after it began, the video ends with requests for prayers, expressions of hope that the vloggers will last long enough at the next job, and a matter-of-fact lone, male voice:

“Anyway, I’m gonna turn this camera around now. I’m gonna stop.”

This describes the second chapter of *Testament*, “Laid Off” (Bookchin 2009b). In this chapter, vloggers share personal stories of losing their jobs. As in “My Meds,” this narrative is visually performed by a diverse set of vloggers. These vloggers are similarly arranged in a grid of smaller, isolated frames within the video’s larger frame, and they speak through voices that overlap one another at moments of shared recitation. In contrast to “My Meds,” the visual grid in “Laid Off” stretches in a single line across the video’s central horizon, and the overlapping voices coalesce into a shared narrative arc of affect and experience. In this aligned narrative, the front-end performance in “Laid Off” expands the distorted reflection of YouTube performed by “My Meds,” to imagine a form of front-end, social connection online that is not pre-scriptively reduced and undermined by the technological processes of control and manipulation at the system’s back-end. Through these forms of connection, “Laid Off” works as an iteration of what Rita Raley has called “tactical media,” effectively “interven[ing] in” and “disrupt[ing] . . . a dominant semiotic regime” to create “a situation in which signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible” (Raley 2009, 6). This chapter thus becomes a space from which to critically think beyond the view that the front-end’s ideological promises are always already predatory tactics mobilized to disempower, control, and manipulate users. Instead, “Laid Off” visually, formally, and narratively performs an alt-social network that invites users into meaningful communities at the front-end, which are not reducible to the technological processes of the system’s back-end.

“Laid Off” most clearly demonstrates possibility for front-end empowerment and community formation through the ways its narrative and formalisms are distinguished from those of “My Meds.” Over the course of “Laid Off,” the vloggers’ voices perform a cohesive narrative sequence that is striking, not just in the narrative arc, but in the fine details of emotion, phrasing, or reasoning that are shared amongst the vloggers, so that the narrative appears as if they have all experienced the same day simultaneously. In the performance, the vloggers form a social network of shared experience and affect, as

they work through shared processes of shock, denial, anger, sadness, and eventual acceptance. The community that is formed through a social network of emotional vulnerability is one of re-empowered users who, by the end of the narrative, are ready to begin applying for new jobs, thereby mitigating their current financial vulnerability.

This community is notable for having been formed at the front-end of two different systems that, at their back-end, control and manipulate these vloggers into economic precarity and financial vulnerability. These two systems are, of course, YouTube and the economic system of post-industrial capitalism. Yet, as the narrative makes clear, it is by “opting into” the user-accessible front-ends of these systems that these users will find ways to re-empower themselves and mitigate their vulnerabilities. In other words, by talking through their experiences and uploading them as vlogs to YouTube, these users are affectively prepared to begin looking for a new job, and re-enter the “front-end” of the economic system. In both systems, the back-end processes of control and manipulation continue to function; however, these processes do not negate the effective reduction of emotional and financial vulnerability that occurs in the users’ front-end participation. In terms of YouTube, specifically, the chapter’s narrative of shared, yet dispersed, affective vulnerability suggests that YouTube’s “subtle play[s] with affect” in its invitations to connect, inform, and inspire community, cannot be entirely dismissed as simulation. This reconfiguration of the front-end’s invitation into a socially networked system is a critical tactic through which the alt-social network operates.

This space for critically re-thinking YouTube’s front-end rhetoric that the multi-vocal, dispersed yet shared, narrative of “Laid Off” tactically opens is strengthened by the videos’ compositional, visual formalisms. Here, the contrasting grid styles between “Laid Off” and “My Meds” are telling, as they reflect YouTube in distortion to visually reimagine the videographic social network. As stated, the grid structure, which has transformed from the full frame of “My Meds” to the horizontal line in “Laid Off,” simultaneously connects and disconnects each vlogger from the others. In this simultaneity, the grid creates the effect that the stories and experiences the vloggers share are precisely *not* singular, *not particular* to any one vlogger over another; instead, they are universal, structural, shared across a system of connected people. Indeed, the grid, Rosalind Krauss (1979) had noted, has always functioned as a way to deny the particular or the singular. In Krauss’s words, since the modernist period of visual art, the grid has functioned as “a way of abrogating the claims of natural objects to have an order *particular to themselves*” (50, emphasis added). For modernist artists like Mondrian and Malevich, the grid functioned as “a staircase to the Universal” (52). On YouTube, where the overwhelming visual schema is of a vertically and horizontally expansive grid such as that featured in “My Meds,” there is a similar tendency toward universalization. Indeed, this grid visualizes YouTube’s algorithmic reduction of users and their activities to a universal, machine-readable code. As such, it is no surprise that Bookchin has adopted this form in a chapter that performs connection through what are effectively shared data points of prescribed drug use. However, the reflection of YouTube in her horizontally aligned grid that performs a shared *narrative* in “Laid Off” suggests an alternative ideology at play in this chapter.

Where the grid that expands in both vertical and horizontal directions on YouTube functions as a sign of universalization, the aligned grid is one that maintains attention to

the particular within the universal system. On YouTube, the horizontally aligned grid is present on each user's algorithmically constructed homepage that, following the site's 2012 rebranding, features channels of videos "you may like." It is a schema, in other words, that is produced precisely in response to the user's particular practices on the web, the data from which are mined and interpreted as her particular "tastes." A visual schema, then, that represents the particular individual as a processor and producer within the larger system of the social web, this horizontal grid serves a similar function in Bookchin's text. Combined with her maintenance of the visual and sonic particularity of each user within the narrative system, this front-end organizational schema is one that insists these users not be reduced to a "universal" at the back-end. Instead, it requires that these users be understood as particulars within a system, individuals within a community. As such, it is a front-end that allows us to visualize the alt-social network.

Beyond the visual effects of Bookchin's distorted reflection of YouTube's grid, this alt-social network of particular, yet systemically connected individuals emerges in the sonic effects of the multi-vocal simultaneity performing the narrative of job loss. As stated, these voices maintain their particularity, even as they layer over one another, joining together in a choral performance that is shared in even the finest details of recitation. In this layering of voices, the vloggers mobilize an alternative mode of human-to-human connection that April Durham calls "the trans-subjective." According to Durham (2014, 67), trans-subjectivity emerges as a result of "the imaginative, social, physical, and political affects reflected in [Bookchin's] layered video installation," and is a "contingent experience that occurs among multiple actors in site-specific creative practice (not limited to art) who are engaging intensely such that the porosity of supposedly fixed boundaries becomes both visible and more permeable" (68). Like the horizontally aligned grid, the trans-subjective resists reducing the particular to the universal, and functions instead as "a playful, if frightening slippage that seems unfamiliar but which occurs regularly whether we recognize it or not" (68). This "playful, frightening slippage" is essentially the sharing of affect among the (alt-)social network of simultaneously performing, speaking, enacting vloggers. It is a front-end process, in other words, that effects a shared "subtle play with affect" that results not in the spectacularization of this affect through its reduction to minable, universal information (as Stalder and Lovink argue), but in the realization of human connection aligned in the alt-social network. Furthermore, this human connection that is realized through the porosity of the trans-subjective's boundaries extends outward, as if traveling on the sound and light waves of the video, to include the listening, viewing audience.

The apparent porosity of the digital, videographic screen that connects the audience to the performers is not unrelated to the digital video's ancestral cultures of cinematic and televisual viewing. Describing the screen as a border that separates the viewer from that which is viewed, even as it conditions and determines the very act of viewing itself, these cultures of viewing cast the screen through a duality that is not unlike that between the social web's front- and back-ends. In discourses of cinematic viewing, for instance, Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" describes a version of this connection that occurs between the (male) viewer and the (male) protagonist on screen, through their shared pleasurable viewing of the (female) body (Mulvey 1999).

In this shared pleasure, the viewer identifies himself with(in), and therefore as, the onscreen protagonist. Similarly, in discourses of televisual viewing, Amelia Jones (2006, 137) has argued that televisual art can collapse the sense of “those we view on screen as comfortably *other*,” inviting the viewer to recognize herself within the onscreen other. Although the culture of watching digital video shares some of these connective qualities, it is important to note that this is a distinct culture from either its cinematic or televisual predecessors. Having been described as “vernacular watching” (Mirzoeff 2010, 224) and “watching databases” (Lovink 2012, 134–45), this culture of viewing complicates these apparently shared modalities of visual connections, precisely because the viewer is not simply invited to connect through *viewing* videos on YouTube, but to connect through *producing* her own videos and adding them to the database. In other words, the screen separating the viewer from YouTube is already porous, as the front-end invitation to “broadcast yourself” reminds us. Traversing this porous boundary, however, does not just connect the user to performing others, but to an exploitative system of data mining.

Here, then, is where the invitation to join the alt-social network through the porosity created by the trans-subjective body of the “Laid Off” vloggers becomes more than just a distorted reflection of YouTube’s front-end; it becomes a tactical reformation of the dominant semiotic regime of YouTube’s front-end that uses the rhetorical signs of user empowerment to invite users into the social network. Through the aligned grid that visually reflects YouTube’s front-end in distortion, and an audio-visual narrative performance that mobilizes the porous boundaries of the trans-subjective body, the alt-social network in Bookchin’s “Laid Off” becomes a work of tactical media. As tactical media, the alt-social network mobilizes a micropolitics of disruption against the signs of YouTube’s front-end, re-forming that front-end so that it may be a conduit for user empowerment and human-to-human connection. This re-empowerment becomes possible as the alt-social network maintains the particular throughout its system, never allowing the particular to become reduced to the universal, the mineable, data-based information that it becomes in YouTube’s social network. In other words, the alt-social network resists the reduction, exploitation, and increased vulnerability of the users it invites in; instead, it connects these users to a trans-subjective, social community of shared, yet particular, affect. All of this resistance and re-empowerment, however, ultimately continues to take place at the front-end of the social system. Indeed though it may prompt critical re-thinking of the system’s front-end ideologies, this re-thinking may ultimately be no more than rhetorical simulation when processed through the system’s back-end. It is to the alt-social network as it resists and obfuscates data processing at the back-end, then, that I now turn.

“I Am Not” and the Obfuscation of Algorithmic Data-mining Systems

The frame of a video opens. Inside this frame is a smaller frame featuring a single man. He begins speaking:

“For those of you who doubt, I’m straight. For those of you who don’t know, I haven’t always been straight.”

As this man finishes his statement, another frame pops up right at the center of the larger video frame. This frame features a single man who says nothing and, almost as soon as he appears, walks out of the frame in silence. His empty room, however, remains a central anchor for the larger video, as smaller frames pop up around it. In these frames, are individual vloggers who speak:

“I’m such a bad gay.”

“I used to be gay, but then I decided it’s wrong.”

“I am NOT gay.”

“I AM gay.”

“I’m so gay.”

“I’m ‘too’ gay.”

“I didn’t have fun being gay.”

“I LOVE being gay.”

“I really wish I wasn’t gay.”

“I wish I was gay.”

Apparently responding to off-screen questions of sexuality and gender, the video soon takes a turn and another series of vloggers begin speaking:

“It’s ok to be gay, but I’m not gay.”

“I’m not gay.”

“I’m not gay.”

“I am NOT gay.”

The force of the qualifier “not,” here, is striking, as it contrasts with the apparent claim that “it’s ok to be gay.” This resistance to homosexuality becomes increasingly forceful until one vlogger explodes:

“How many times do I have to tell you!?”

“I’m NOT GAY!”

This chorus of denial becomes louder, more insistent, encircling the central frame that has, throughout this recitation, remained empty and silent. Suddenly, it is as if this vlogger can be silent no longer, he reappears, grabs the camera, and yells:

“I don’t give a damn! Listen to me one fucking time, I don’t give a damn! Ok? I don’t care. I’m gay. I’m gay. I’m a fucking homosexual. I’m proud of it, baby! I am so sick. And tired. And hurt.”

Here he stops, and stares into the camera, breathing hard, fuming, crying. Slowly, his glaring face fades away as the top right corner of the screen reveals a calm, smiling vlogger who simply says:

“If someone came up to me and said, ‘Hey Matthew, are you gay?’ I would basically be like, ‘Yeah,’ ‘Yeah.’ And they would basically be like ‘Oh, okay.’”

Here he pauses, before adding the qualifier:

“For the most part.”

This describes the third and final chapter of *Testament*, “I Am Not” (Bookchin 2009a). In this chapter, vloggers attempt to articulate their identities through the lens of sexual desire. Like “My Meds,” and “Laid Off,” the vloggers are vulnerable in their attempts to explain themselves; however, “I Am Not” notably diverges from these previous chapters’ audio-visual formalisms that connect vulnerably isolated individuals. Aurally, the vloggers’ voices remain individualized, as each responds to or echoes the others; they do not overlap or layer over one another, even in moments of shared vocabulary. Visually, the design merely gestures at a grid, featuring a series of frames that circulate around a central anchor, resisting the straight grid featured in the previous chapters. Through these audio-visual disruptions, these vloggers insist on being understood as particulars, as individuals. They resist their neat connection into a universalizable system that relies on binary codes of sexuality and digitality. “I Am Not” thus becomes as much a statement responding to questions of sexuality, as a statement declaring resistance to reduction into machine-readable data. As such, the chapter is ideal for articulating the final piece of the alt-social network: its technological obfuscation that extends its front-end ideological reform to the back-end, where it resists the reductive data mining, and exploitative norms of YouTube’s infrastructure.

This resistance appears, first, through Bookchin’s compositional use of YouTube’s own tagging infrastructure that links topically similar videos. Working her way through this system of connections, Bookchin takes on the role of YouTube’s data algorithm, navigating links to build a social network of vernacular video. Unlike YouTube’s machinic processes, which rely on exact tags to build connection, Bookchin is able to forge connection between synonymous tags, thereby bringing together videos that might otherwise not be linked. In other words, Bookchin forms an alt(ernative)-social

network of vernacular video by navigating both the human and machinic information contained in the tags. Cutting these vlogs together through their human information, *Testament's* composites mark the second place of technological resistance, as the composite video obfuscates the machinic information that defines each of its parts. As it circulates on YouTube, Bookchin's composite video is mechanically legible as just that—the single composite whole. However, it is simultaneously legible (to the human viewer) as the parts that make up the whole. This disruption of informational legibility effects an obfuscation of information at the back-end, thus disrupting the technological codes of social networking through the alt-social network formed within the composite video.

In her role as video editor and artist, Bookchin cuts together disparate vlogs that might otherwise not have been connected to one another. In facilitating these connections, she effectively becomes a social network processor, a compiler that reflects (in distortion) the processing, compiling algorithms (in)forming YouTube's back-end and rendering its front-end navigable and socially networked. Furthermore, Bookchin uses that same infrastructure of user-generated tags that YouTube's own algorithm uses to build its social network of vernacular video. However, Bookchin's adoption of algorithmic practices of connection reveals a tension between information that is legible and meaningful to a human reader—a front-end social networking processor—and information that is legible and meaningful to a machinic reader—a back-end social networking processor. Where Bookchin, the front-end, human processor can connect videos into a topically similar, social network based on *synonymous* tags, the back-end machinic processor can only connect videos into a topically similar, social network if they share, letter-for-letter, the *same* tags.

Because YouTube's tags are primarily generated by its users, there is often some slippage between terms. For example, where one user might tag a video #queer, another might tag #gay or #homosexual—synonymous tags that signal connection for a human processor, but that remain disconnected by a machinic processor. As N. Katherine Hayles (2005) explains, it is precisely this slippage that separates human language (front-end information) from computer language (back-end information). Where the informational system of human language can make sense of these synonymous slippages, “at the level of binary [computer] code, the system can tolerate little if any ambiguity” (46), including that represented by synonymous terms that are not exact equivalents. Although Hayles qualifies this statement with the observation that some ambiguity is always present in “any physically embodied system” (46), she ultimately makes clear that, though we recognize #queer, #gay, and #homosexual could all point to topically similar content, the algorithmically structured tagging system used by YouTube cannot recognize this similarity. As such, when this human information is transformed into machinic information, these users may remain separate, isolated from one another in the social network formed by YouTube. In “I Am Not,” this tension between human and machinic information processing, and the formation of social networks through this processing, is aurally reflected in the chapter's resistance to blending and overlapping voices as they utter a shared tag like “gay.” This formal move, particularly as it contrasts with the vocal overlaps that occur in “Laid Off” and

“My Meds” on shared words that are likely also shared tags, highlights the ways Bookchin’s videos’ alt-social networks are built on connections that may or may not have existed in YouTube’s own socially networked database.

Here, the politics of Bookchin’s alt-social network become complicated. Although this network connects videos in a way that forges community where it may not have otherwise existed, it does so in a way that may arguably increase these users’ vulnerability to back-end data mining and exploitation. Because these tags are not just topics at the front-end, but also data points at the back-end, Bookchin’s texts are effectively the visualizations and auralizations of a database of anxieties. They are videographic performances, in other words, of precisely those databases that have formed around the user-generated tags. As such, they literalize Lovink’s claim that watching YouTube is “watching databases.” As with all of the moments where Bookchin’s videographic texts reflect YouTube, here the data-based reflection is one in distortion: these visualized and auralized databases include both those built around shared tags that already exist in YouTube’s back-end database, and those that have been built through the human information processing of synonymous tagging. Thus, we must ask if the alt-social network in Bookchin’s composites actually decreases the vulnerability of online social networking, or if it simply provides YouTube more information, more data, on these vloggers, thereby increasing opportunities for their exploitation, and their data-based vulnerability.

If back-end vulnerability emerges as the result of data points produced by a video’s views, clicks, likes, and comments, then it is directly related to a video’s user traffic, its popularity as defined by Google’s algorithm of the same name. Although Bookchin has not provided evidence of user traffic in the vlogs cut into *Testament*, her 2009 *Mass Ornament* (Bookchin, 2009c)—a composite video featuring an alt-social network of vloggers dancing in their homes, cut together into a choreographed performance that is compositionally similar to *Testament* and, thus, a critically comparable piece—she maintains each vlog’s “view count” in the bottom corner of its frame. These view counts are often less than 1,000, suggesting that prior to their inclusion in Bookchin’s composite, these videos received relatively low user traffic, so produced relatively low mineable data points for conversion into sociality. Comparing these numbers with *Mass Ornament*’s views—at the time of writing, 10.6K on vimeo and 4K on YouTube under the title “Me Dancing”—it is clear that user traffic in terms of viewing increases as the vlogs are cut into the composite. As such, it is possible that the users’ vulnerability to the back-end, data-mining algorithm increases as well, particularly in light of Vaidhyanathan’s argument that we cannot know to what ends and through what processes Google mines our data. However, the view counts at the bottom of each internal frame making up *Mass Ornament* remain unchanged, regardless of how many times the composite is viewed. This suggests that the increased user traffic to the vlogs in *Mass Ornament* occurs only at the front-end, through the human activity of viewing; as these ossified view counts signify, this traffic does not extend to the back-end to be quantified as mineable data. These frozen view counts, thus, signify the process of data obfuscation by which *Mass Ornament* resists the exploitative, data-mining processes of YouTube. Although the sign of obfuscation is erased in

Testament, the alt-social network as mobilized in each text suggests that they share this form of resistance.

The political power of using techniques of obfuscation to critically disrupt seemingly omnipotent processes of data mining is outlined in Helen Nissenbaum's and Finn Brunton's *Obfuscation: A User's Guide for Privacy and Protest*. Like Raley's tactical media, obfuscation is a minor, micropolitical movement that does not so much overhaul data-collection processes, as disrupt them through the "addition of ambiguous, confusing, or misleading information" (Brunton and Nissenbaum 2015, 1). As

a tool particularly suited to people without access to other modes of recourse . . . people who, as it happens, may be unable to deploy optimally configured privacy-protection tools because they are on the weak side of a particular information-power relationship, (3)

but who remain "obliged to be visible, readable, or audible" (2), obfuscation is a political, critical tool of evasion that lacks the precision of similar tactics (like cryptography). Indeed, in comparison with such tactics, obfuscation may appear "contingent, even shaky" (3), as it often takes the form of critical evasion by "burying salient signals in clouds and layers of misleading signals" (2), to render the noise inseparable from the information, as such. In this move, the obfuscating user avoids detection and disrupts data-based surveillance. Effectively, then, obfuscating techniques are effective as user-based forms of disruptive intervention precisely *because* of the technical zones of contingency and imprecision through which obfuscation operates.

In Bookchin's composites, these zones of imprecision are created in her compositional process of cinematic cutting, as it becomes, through the front- and back-end duality of digital videographic objects, an act of digital hacking. Like cinematic cutting, hacking signifies both the breaking apart and the putting together of digital code. Although not a hacker, this is effectively what Bookchin has done in her creation of a composite digital video out of found materials from YouTube's digital database. By hacking these found videos together into the new digital object of the composite, she obfuscates them from YouTube's data-mining algorithms. In other words, as far as YouTube's back-end algorithm is concerned, *Testament* is a set of three digital objects that, at the front-end, we recognize as chapters. As *Mass Ornament's* frozen view counts reveal, the back-end algorithm does not accurately or precisely recognize these three objects as being constructed of hundreds of individual vlogs that are also viewed by users at the front-end. Like a hacktivist working at the level of back-end code, Bookchin has manipulated a set of digital objects, so that they are no longer processed entirely correctly at the back-end. Although she has not jammed YouTube's servers or broken its functionality, she has, however micro-politically, disrupted its data-mining faculties. In other words, by hacking the vlogs out of YouTube's database and obfuscating them in her composite videos, Bookchin denies YouTube the ability to data-mine every online engagement with these vlogs; these vlogs may continue to be viewed at the front-end, but these views fail to be effectively quantified and mined at the back-end.

Effectively, then, the alt-social network that emerges from Bookchin's composite videos is one that critically imagines and videographically performs an online, social media paradigm that produces obfuscated data and thereby protects users from the increased vulnerability and exploitation that occurs through the fraught relationship between social media's front- and back-ends. In each chapter of *Testament*, the vlogs continue to circulate online, forging connections and operating as part of a human community that is accessible and inclusive at the front-end, while operating at the back-end only as part of the composite, part of one data point of digital video. As such, the power dynamics that inform the techno-ideological codes structuring the front- and back-ends of social media are disrupted: the front-end is no longer always already reducible to the back-end, which in turn, is no longer omniscient or inescapable. As a work of tactical media that mobilizes data-based obfuscation, the alt-social network offers testament to a safer, recuperative model for both socializing online, and for critically evaluating the risk of connection through connectivity.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Author Biography

Sarah Whitcomb Laiola is a Marion L. Brittain Postdoctoral Fellow in the Georgia Institute of Technology's college of Literature, Media, and Communication. She received her Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Riverside in 2016, and is in the process of preparing a book manuscript based on her dissertation project, "Hypermateral Language Art: Digitality, Materiality, and Contemporary Anti-Racist Poetics." She has presented elements of this research at various conferences, including the American Studies Association annual conference, the Society for Cinema and Media Studies annual conference, and the Modern Languages Association Conference, and has recently published a case study that uses the #MyNYPD hashtag to examine contemporary forms of digitally mediated activism in *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice* (MIT Press, 2016).