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The Politics of Platforms: The Case of Discord

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Academic Year 2021/2022

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Introduction

Today Facebook, YouTube, Airbnb, Spotify, Discord and other platforms permeate practically every sphere of society. Whether keeping up with friends, watching tutorials, booking a place to stay, listening to music or chatting with fellow gamers, the way people relate to one another has changed. The spread of the platform model has resulted in the gradual diffusion of digital platforms in a variety of fields, a process known as *platformisation*. The term *platform* refers to a type of business whose core service is acting as an intermediary between different groups (e.g. users and advertisers). The word is deliberately specific and vague at the same time: the core idea of being an intermediary is well-defined, but the term maintains some purposeful vagueness in order for businesses to fit in various sectors.

The ubiquity of platforms has not come without its share of controversies. Platforms which present themselves as technological venues allowing independent service providers to reach individual consumers are often accused of wanting to provide a service without the liabilities associated with large staff and huge equipment inventories. Likewise, social media want to host user-generated content without the responsibility incurred by traditional media and publishers. Paradoxically, when platforms attempt to address their societal responsibilities by moderating offensive, dangerous or controversial content, they are accused of political bias. In recent months, Florida, Texas and California have introduced legislation to regulate platforms' handling of politically contentious user content.¹ This approach stems from the use of the word politics to describe day-to-day partisan stances in relation to current issues.

While this debate on the political biases of platforms is undoubtedly critical in an increasingly digital society, it overlooks the more fundamental question of whether platforms, like other technological arrangements before them, have an intrinsic political nature. This thesis will examine the broader question of politics as arrangements of power and authority and will try to identify their effects and requirements on society. Rather than focusing on current events, the analysis will be carried out by using Discord, a popular free instant messaging platform, as a case study. This platform was selected for three different reasons. Firstly, it has been studied and analysed much less than social media giants, so this research offers opportunities for new and diverse insights. Furthermore, its smaller size, compared to most social media and messaging platforms, makes for a more accessible and straightforward analysis. Finally, because Discord has been associated in the media with some

¹ David McCabe, 'A federal court clears the way for a Texas social media law', *The New York Times*, 16 September 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/business/texas-social-media-political-law.html>; Cat Zakrzewski, 'New California law likely to set off fight over social media moderation', *Washington Post*, 14 September 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/09/13/california-social-network-transparency/>.

high-profile alt-right events, it is a good candidate as an example of the limitations posed by solely analysing the political biases of platforms. Looking at Discord from a technical standpoint, instead, gives a more complete and thorough understanding of how the existence of platforms may impact people and society.

This thesis is organised as follows. Chapter 1 examines existing literature on the political nature of artifacts and technologies to establish whether artifacts and technologies can be political. Langdon Winner's "Do artifacts have politics?" essay is used as an interpretative framework, along with Helen Nissenbaum's questions on the values behind the design of computer systems. The two, together, are then used to analyse the politics of both the Internet and platforms themselves.

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 take an empirical approach to Discord. The former describes its functioning and interface, traces its history and finally analyses its business model. The latter assesses how the platform relates to its users. This is done by taking an in-depth look at Discord's terms of service, privacy policy and blog. The platform's terms are fairly standard, though in some cases the wording is ambiguous. The blog, instead, presents themes the platform believes are important to speak out about.

Chapter 4 will combine the information from the previous chapters to discuss the political nature of platforms. Platforms are complex technical systems and must deal with a variety of issues, including content moderation, privacy and legislation. These three will be used as examples to demonstrate the difficulty in pinpointing the exact political nature of platforms.

Finally, the conclusion will discuss the findings and their relevance for contemporary society. As the influence of platforms expands, it is important to look at what the technologies in our lives demand and how society adapts to these technical means. Accepting certain arrangements as 'natural' means not understanding the issues at play. The limited available resources on Discord and the limitations of Winner's 1980 model will be discussed, underlining why the latter is still a useful interpretative framework; lastly, this thesis will propose further avenues for research.

1. Technology and Politics

1.1 Introduction

In order to analyse the politics of platforms, it is first necessary to establish whether artifacts and technologies possess political qualities, specifically examining the politics of artifacts, of the Internet, and platforms. The interpretative framework for this will be provided by Langdon Winner's pioneering 1980 article, intertwined with Helen Nissenbaum's questions on the values behind the design of computer systems from her 2001 article. The final section applies these questions to conceptualise the politics of platforms.

1.2 The politics of artifacts

"[T]ools and instruments are so intensely worldly objects that we can classify whole civilizations using them as criteria."² As Hannah Arendt underlines, technology, in a broad sense, has been (and continues to be) extremely important and impactful in human history. Underlining this fact may seem superfluous, as it is undeniable that technological advancements have driven significant historical events. The most evident example is the importance of steam power in the industrial revolution, which transformed every aspect of human life and society. Other examples might include: Gutenberg's movable-type printing press, which expanded access to information and increased literacy rates, permanently altering European society; gunpowder, which determined a shift from cavalry to infantry and the social classes that provided them.

It is important, however, not to fall into the trap of technological determinism. The idea that technology develops on its own and that society just adapts to it is a simple and attractive way of describing societal change, but can be quite misleading. Determinism implies that all technological change is positive and leads to social progress, and that it is useless to resist it. Looking at technology as part of human life and society, instead, allows a deeper and more complete understanding of how things come to be.

Langdon Winner, a political theorist at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, posited that "the social circumstances of [the] development, deployment, and use"³ of technologies matter greatly and ensure that they are evaluated not only for their existence, but how they were conceived and the effects they cause. However, it would also be reductive to only consider the social determination of technology: the social origins of things cannot explain everything, and the technical aspects must also be evaluated. To have the most complete understanding, the technologies themselves, their technical

² Hannah Arendt and Margaret Canovan, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 144.

³ Langdon Winner, 'Do Artifacts Have Politics?', *Daedalus* 109, no. 1 (1980): 122.

characteristics and how societies respond to such technologies must all be considered. Having done this, one may notice that certain technologies tend to embody (or sometimes favour) specific ways of distributing and exercising power. This often leads to categorising technological artifacts as either democratic or authoritarian, though their political nature is much more complex.

In his 1980 essay, Winner explained how technical things can have political qualities. He argued that any judgment of a technology (or technical system) must take into account “the ways in which they can embody specific forms of power and authority”,⁴ and not metrics of efficiency, productivity or environmental impact alone. While *politics* and *technology* are broad terms which can be interpreted in many ways, Winner proposed the following definitions, which will be adopted and used throughout this study:

By “politics,” I mean arrangements of power and authority in human associations as well as the activities that take place within those arrangements. For my purposes, “technology” here is understood to mean all of modern practical artifice, but to avoid confusion I prefer to speak of technology, smaller or larger pieces or systems of hardware of a specific kind.⁵

More specifically, Winner identifies two broad categories through which technological artifacts can contain political properties. The first is what he calls *technical arrangements as forms of order*, meaning a deliberate thought process behind certain choices determining a particular social effect. Winner illustrates this through the work of Robert Moses.⁶ By designing exceptionally low overpasses in Long Island, he naturally prevented buses from passing through. Behind this apparently technical choice there was a specific reason: Moses wanted to ensure that lower social classes would have limited access to Jones Beach State Park, also created by him in 1929. Because high-income white families could afford cars, they had no issue passing under the low-clearance overpasses. Conversely, racial minorities and low-income groups disproportionately relied on public transportation and were de facto excluded from the park. Moses’ choices can be compared to contemporary *hostile architecture*. The term refers to features of urban landscaping aimed at discouraging individuals from using public places in unwanted ways. Anti-homeless spikes and uncomfortable benches are examples of hostile architecture found in metropolitan areas, including New York City, London and Rome. Supporters of such elements affirm that they are designed to ensure the dignity and decorum of urban areas, though one can intuitively grasp the true aim: preventing homeless people from ‘ruining’ public places. Winner also underscores that in the case of

⁴ Winner, 121.

⁵ Winner, 123.

⁶ Robert Moses (18 December 1888 – 29 July 1981) was an American public official and urban planner whose decisions between the 1920s and 1960s shaped New York City. For additional information see Joel Schwartz, *The New York approach: Robert Moses, urban liberals, and redevelopment of the inner city* (Ohio State University Press, 1993).

technological arrangements as forms of order, it is naïve to think that the original implementation of a technology is the only relevant question. While the initial arrangement is what matters most, decisions made after choosing to use a technology are equally crucial. For example, Intel has produced processors since the 1970s, but its decision to embed a personal serial number (PSN) in its 1999 Pentium III CPU was undoubtedly remarkable. While Intel argued that the PSN was designed “to guard against hardware theft and unauthorized copying of software”,⁷ many noted that it would also allow user identification and web-activity tracking. Here, the issue isn’t whether CPUs should exist or not, but what social consequence a specific feature would have.

The second category of political properties identified by Winner is *inherently political technologies*. This category made a bolder claim: some technologies are naturally political in a specific way and, when adopted, require a specific set of social conditions in order to exist. Winner himself conceded that the argument might exist in its weaker version as well, in which some technologies are *strongly compatible* with certain political and social relationships, but do not strictly require them.

This is not an entirely new position. In the 19th century, Friedrich Engels had already argued that industry naturally required authority and that the political beliefs of those in charge did not matter:

Supposing a social revolution dethroned the capitalists, who now exercise their authority over the production and circulation of wealth. Supposing, to adopt entirely the point of view of the anti-authoritarians, that the land and the instruments of labour had become the collective property of the workers who use them. Will authority have disappeared, or will it only have changed its form?⁸

To further support his point, Engels argued that “to abolish authority in large-scale industry is tantamount to wanting to abolish industry itself”.⁹ Indeed, the inherent political nature of this technical artifact, however, only affects its own internal organisation. It is a practical requirement: in a cotton mill, the example Engels used, the different steps required to transform untreated cotton into thread and the machines to do so needed to be coordinated by a manager who had a complete understanding of the production process. However, this would not affect the organisation of society as a whole. The need for authoritarian power structures is often explained – or better, justified – by saying that they simply are the most efficient, effective and safe ways to run a firm. The need to ensure consistently stable operations discourages firms from adopting other alternative power structures too, even though there are successful examples (such as W. L. Gore & Associates’ “lattice

⁷ Helen Nissenbaum, ‘How Computer Systems Embody Values’, *Computer* 34, no. 3 (2001): 118.

⁸ Friedrich Engels, ‘On Authority’, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, trans. Robert C. Tucker, 1st ed. (Norton, 1972), 663.

⁹ Engels, 663.

organisation”¹⁰ and Haier’s self-managed teams¹¹). This type of reasoning excludes any thoughts on the social or political effects of a technology’s power structure. This is well demonstrated by the USSR: though the state implemented Marxist ideology, its industrial organisation still required a hierarchical structure to operate effectively.

Winner thus suggested that a technology may have different internal and external requirements. The former are socio-political conditions required within a technical system; the latter concern the ways in which a technology complements aspects of society not directly related to the organisation of the technology. Winner uses solar power as an example of external requirements. Supporters of solar power believe that it is more consistent with democratic values than various forms of non-renewable energy, as the possibility of disaggregating and decentralising plants allows individuals and small communities to manage their own energy. This is not worker autonomy within the industry itself as in Engels’ example, but autonomy from other institutions surrounding energy production.

Winner then makes two other interesting points. Firstly, he asks whether the politics of artifacts are unavoidable due to the properties of the artifacts themselves, or if such patterns are put in place by institutions to further their own purposes. The atom bomb, for example, clearly fits in the first category: a centralised, hierarchical structure is required to ensure complete safety and smooth operations.

Still, in most cases, the power structures are an easy and effective way of handling business. This prompts Winner to make a second point, on moral claims: does practical necessity outweigh the idea that workers should contribute to running or making decisions in their workplace? In any case, whether artifacts help establish a form of power or require such a form, they do have political qualities. This is not an unimportant detail:

In our times people are often willing to make drastic changes in the way they live to accord with technological innovation at the same time they would resist similar kinds of changes justified on political grounds. If for no other reason than that, it is important for us to achieve a clearer view of these matters than has been our habit so far.¹²

Winner is not alone in his observations. Twenty years later, Helen Nissenbaum, information scientist and professor at Cornell Tech, also called for a deeper look at the interaction between values

¹⁰ Gary Hamel, ‘Innovation Democracy: W.L. Gore’s Original Management Model’, Management Innovation eXchange, 23 September 2010, <https://www.managementexchange.com/story/innovation-democracy-wl-gores-original-management-model>.

¹¹ Joost Minaar, ‘The World’s Most Pioneering Company Of Our Times’, Corporate Rebels, 31 January 2018, <https://corporate-rebels.com/haier/>.

¹² Winner, ‘Do Artifacts Have Politics?’, 135.

and technology. She highlighted that the “natural, cultural, social, and political context [...] may feature in an account of the values embodied in [a system or device]”.¹³ Once again, this doesn’t mean that the technical aspects of a device don’t matter at all; on the contrary, any attempt to understand the values embodied in a technology will necessarily lead to questioning and researching the technical aspects. Nissenbaum stresses the importance of *engineering activism*, the idea that engineers themselves should consider the moral properties of the systems they build. In fact, this framework can be used to analyse any existing system in a non-engineering context. Nissenbaum believes six questions can help understand the values behind a design:

- What values do they embody?
- Is their locus of control centralized or decentralized?
- Are their workings transparent or opaque?
- Do they support balanced terms of information exchange?
- Do they unfairly discriminate against specific sectors of potential users?
- Do they enhance or diminish the possibility of trust?¹⁴

The above questions can be used as guidelines when investigating the political nature of an artifact. An example of this is *Four Arguments for Eliminating Television*, a 1978 book by Jerry Mander, where the former advertising executive reiterates that the idea of neutral technology doesn’t make sense: “the basic form of [...] the technology determines its interaction with the world, the way it will be used, the kind of people who use it, and to what ends.”¹⁵ While TV’s current influence is much lower than before,¹⁶ Mander highlighted issues that may still be broadly relevant today. Arguing that television was far less neutral than it was thought to be, Mander described it as a mass communication technology which allowed few people (who owned the networks) to talk to many (the general public). It could not exist in another way, since operating a TV station had a high cost and no individual (or small group of people) could do it. TV inevitably favoured appearance and image over content, and those who appeared on television must also fit this predetermined style. TV news, for example, presented what the editorial staff believed to be important, and news channels may have different biases; this is an issue when TV is the main source of information.

Overall, Mander believed the very nature and existence of TV had four consequences: it forced people to accept someone else’s authority; it colonised experience, thus favouring consolidated

¹³ Nissenbaum, ‘How Computer Systems Embody Values’, 120.

¹⁴ Nissenbaum, 119.

¹⁵ Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, 1st ed. (William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1978), 45.

¹⁶ Feliz Solomon, ‘YouTube Could Be about to Overtake TV as America’s Most Watched Platform’, *Fortune*, 9 June 2021, <https://fortune.com/2017/02/28/youtube-1-billion-hours-television/>.

power; it conditioned people for authoritarian rule; finally, it contained inherent biases. Mander believed “television is not reformable”¹⁷ precisely because its nature was inherently political.

1.3 The politics of the Internet

Before reviewing the politics of the platforms themselves, it may be useful to examine the political aspects of the Internet,¹⁸ the technology on which all platforms rest on. Computer networks were first developed in the 1960s. Their development was influenced by two different sets of values, respectively reflecting defence requirements and academic intellectual freedom. The prevalent view is that the US Department of Defense (DoD) was interested in a decentralised communication network due to the fear of a nuclear attack,¹⁹ though others hold that “military applications were secondary”.²⁰ The technical basis for this was replacing circuit switching with packet switching. The former, used for standard telephones, established a dedicated physical path between the source and destination for the duration of the connection and was inadequate for networks. Packet switching, instead, transfers data by breaking it down into small pieces (*packets*), allowing a quicker and more efficient transfer process.

Large scale computer network development was largely funded by the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA), a R&D agency of the DoD and was thus financed by the military for secure military communications. By late 1969, “four host computers were connected together into the initial ARPANET”,²¹ the Internet’s predecessor. Without the initial military interest in secure communications, it is highly unlikely that researchers would have had the necessary resources to finance early research and development. Although conceived for military use, the role of universities in its development instilled this technology with freedom-oriented values. The “culture of individual freedom [...] in the university campuses of the 1960s and 1970s”²² played a major role in the openness of the first networks and elements like RFC, open architectures and TCP/IP can be traced back to this culture.²³

¹⁷ Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, 46.

¹⁸ It is important to distinguish between the Internet, meaning the communication network connecting computers all over the world, and the World Wide Web (WWW or simply ‘Web’), a part of the Internet which can be accessed through a browser.

¹⁹ David Kergel, ‘The History of the Internet: Between Utopian Resistance and Neoliberal Government’, in *Handbook of Theory and Research in Cultural Studies and Education*, ed. Peter Pericles Trifonas, 1st ed. (Springer, 2020), 399–414.

²⁰ Manuel Castells, *The internet galaxy: Reflections on the internet, business, and society*, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2001), 17.

²¹ Barry M. Leiner et al., ‘Brief History of the Internet’ (Internet Society, 1997), 4, <https://www.internetsociety.org/internet/history-internet/brief-history-internet/>.

²² Castells, *The internet galaxy: Reflections on the internet, business, and society*, 23.

²³ Request for Comments (RFC), “documents of record” (Leiner et al., ‘Brief History of the Internet’, 12.) on how the Internet is built are freely available; networks were designed with open architecture, referring to the possibility of designing individual networks in different ways, but still being able to communicate with another; TCP/IP and previous communication protocols embody the idea of free communication, allowing different networks to communicate with one another.

The argument for including the Internet in Winner's *technical arrangements as form of order* seems weak. Because there was no predetermined path in the creation of the Internet or list of features to gradually implement, it is difficult to argue that the social effects that derived from this technology were deliberately created. It is much easier to view the Internet as an inherently political technology, over which there are contrasting views as to its authoritarian or democratic nature. After all, the Internet is not one thing, but rather a "a set of services, platforms, standards, and user behaviours".²⁴ The fact that it is a global system further complicates things, because its use and impact may vary greatly between societies. Some aspects of the Internet may simultaneously display inherently democratic features and authoritarian ones. For example, social media has given a voice to protesters in Russia; at the same time, however, some US states are likely to use Google searches and smartphone location data to incriminate women seeking abortions.²⁵

Evgeni Morozov, a researcher studying the political and social implications of technology, argues that one cannot simply determine the political implications of the Internet "because it's like asking 'What are the political implications of everything for everything?'"²⁶ While the nature of a technology and its political implications are not the same thing, Morozov's reasoning is still interesting:

The Internet, as this term exists in popular discourse, is not the Internet as it's experienced by users on the ground. There's no Platonic idea of the Internet or a stable abstract object around which we can build a philosophy or a social science or on which implications we can reflect. That is, it certainly exists as a ubiquitous presence in our public debate but this is not the Internet as it is experienced by actors on the ground—those who are actually making politics.²⁷

But this doesn't mean that the Internet cannot be studied; Morozov believes that the key is studying particular sections of the Internet. Focusing on smaller and more defined sections can provide much more relevant observations and findings.

1.4 The politics of platforms

While it is fairly straightforward to establish the political nature of artifacts and technologies, literature on the politics of platforms is limited. Most research addresses 'politics' in the policy-making sense, looking at how platforms themselves shape the legislation affecting them and attempt to limit the creation of further legislation; studies on the inherently political nature of platforms are

²⁴ Evgeni Morozov, 'The Internet, Politics, and the Politics of Internet Debate', in *Change: 19 Key Essays on How Internet Is Changing Our Lives*, by Manuel Castells et al. (Turner House Publications, 2014), 158.

²⁵ Kashmir Hill, 'Why Deleting Your Period Tracker Won't Protect Your Privacy', *The New York Times*, 30 July 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/30/technology/period-tracker-privacy-abortion.html>.

²⁶ Morozov, 'The Internet, Politics, and the Politics of Internet Debate', 157.

²⁷ Morozov, 159.

rarer. Nissenbaum's questions, cited in paragraph 1.1, can serve as a guide in analysing the political qualities of a technology and will be used throughout this section, with the exception of the only partially relevant question of user discrimination. The decision of Internet actors to define themselves as *platforms* is the necessary starting point for analysis.

Tarleton Gillespie, a researcher focusing on the impact of the Internet, explains the word has several definitions in four semantic areas. The common concept between the computational, architectural, figurative and political connotations is that "'platform' emerges not simply as indicating a functional shape: it suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, promising to support those who stand upon it."²⁸ In the digital world, the word has gone from indicating "a technical base upon which other programs will run"²⁹ (such as the Windows operating system) to a service which allows users to communicate, interact or sell. By adopting this definition, companies running the platforms are implying that they are facilitators, merely offering a place for these interactions to take place. This allows the platforms to present themselves in an adequate way to different audiences, such as users, advertisers and legislators.

The idea that a platform is "open, neutral, egalitarian and progressive"³⁰ is what draws users in: the lack of gatekeeping and the freedom to create any kind of content are attractive to many. Furthermore, the large userbases of platforms mean that they have a very large potential audience, even for niche content.

Platform also works for marketing, but in a completely different way. Companies can portray their platform as a place for advertisers to find the perfect audience, increasing exposure and reach. In this case, the user data collected by platforms is a selling point, as it allows advertisers to understand and analyse the behaviours of their prospective customers.

Finally, the word *platform* allows companies to avoid unwanted regulation and protect themselves from liabilities. Companies such as Uber and Airbnb, for example, argue that they are not transportation or accommodation providers because they do not own any cars or properties; they instead view themselves as technology companies, operating a platform which connects two sides of a market. This is crucial because the transportation and technology sectors entail completely different regulations,³¹ with companies forum-shopping to choose whatever sector imposes the lightest regulatory burden. In a similar way, social media platforms portray themselves as neutral

²⁸ Tarleton Gillespie, 'The Politics of "Platforms"', *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (2010): 350, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342738>.

²⁹ Gillespie, 351.

³⁰ Gillespie, 352.

³¹ Philip M Napoli and Robyn Caplan, 'When Media Companies Insist They're Not Media Companies and Why It Matters for Communications Policy', *Available at SSRN 2750148*, 2016, 39, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2750148>.

intermediaries: they do not produce their own content, but simply host user-generated content and do so without favouring anyone or anything. This is the case with YouTube and Facebook, for example.³²

US and EU legislation are particularly relevant to illuminate the impact of platforms being considered hosts or publishers. US legislation matters because tech giants are mostly American companies; EU regulation, instead, is relevant because stricter European provisions often force platforms to modify their behaviour across the globe.

In the US, with the introduction of Section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act in 1998, platforms are considered intermediaries and are also shielded from civil liability.³³ In the EU, article 14 of the e-Commerce Directive (Directive 2000/31/EC) states roughly the same, though it adds a condition:

1. Where an information society service is provided that consists of the storage of information provided by a recipient of the service, Member States shall ensure that the service provider is not liable for the information stored at the request of a recipient of the service, on condition that:

(a) the provider does not have actual knowledge of illegal activity or information and, as regards claims for damages, is not aware of facts or circumstances from which the illegal activity or information is apparent; [...]³⁴

YouTube shows the flexibility of the word ‘platform’ very well. The name clearly points to the importance of users and their own content, and the slogan “Broadcast yourself” (used from 2006 to 2011) underlined the platform’s role as a mere facilitator, providing a place for users to share their own videos. As mentioned earlier, this is in contrast with TV, which has high barriers to entrance and features a few-to-many communication. YouTube’s main source of revenue is its advertisement platform, generating almost 29 billion dollars in ad revenue in 2021.³⁵ By using Section 230 and portraying itself as an intermediary (rather than a publisher), YouTube has also protected itself from lawsuits.^{36, 37}

³² In a notable exception, while most of YouTube’s content is still uploaded by users, since October 2015 the platform started offering original content with its YouTube Premium subscription.

³³ ‘Protection for Private Blocking and Screening of Offensive Material’, 47 U.S. Code § 230 (1998), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/47/230>.

³⁴ ‘Directive 2000/31/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 8 June 2000 on Certain Legal Aspects of Information Society Services, in Particular Electronic Commerce, in the Internal Market’ (2000), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32000L0031:EN:HTML>.

³⁵ L. Ceci, ‘YouTube Global Advertising Revenues 2021’, Statista, February 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/289658/youtube-global-net-advertising-revenues/>.

³⁶ Jake Holland, ‘Google, YouTube Score Win in Section 230 Account Removal Case’, Bloomberg Law, 17 August 2020, <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/tech-and-telecom-law/google-youtube-score-win-in-section-230-account-removal-case>.

³⁷ Eric Goldman, ‘Section 230 Ends Demonetized YouTuber’s Lawsuit-Lewis v. Google’, Technology & Marketing Law Blog, 4 June 2020, <https://blog.ericgoldman.org/archives/2020/06/section-230-ends-demonetized-youtubers-lawsuit-lewis-v-google.htm>.

As far as values are concerned, platforms are often contradictory as they embrace both progressive and conservative ideas. They outwardly support progressive values such as inclusion, support for minorities, taxing the wealthy through PR activities and blog posts. However, platforms often also support and advocate for regulation, including resisting labour unions and government regulation,^{38, 39} which seems to contradict the ideals they promote in their material. For this reason, platforms can be viewed as political actors in their own right, as they increasingly engage with policy issues and communicate their preferences.⁴⁰

As for Nissenbaum's second question, the locus of control of systems (in general) can be either centralised, where "[a]ll strategic decisions are made in one location"⁴¹ along with all of the computing power, or decentralised, with decisions being made in "at least three locations"⁴² and processors being deployed in various sites, yet still connected to one network. Naturally, there is a reason: centralised systems ensure that their technical aspects are tightly integrated in order to offer unique features, which they leverage in an attempt to become market leaders. Decentralised systems, instead, have 'decoupled' layers, allowing third parties to work and innovate on them separately.⁴³ Platforms are typically centralised in order to increase competitiveness. Facebook, for example, was described by a former investor as having "the most centralized decision-making structure [he had] have ever encountered in a large company."⁴⁴ The platform's chief operating officer, Sheryl Sandberg, and its founder, Mark Zuckerberg, make all decisions despite the platform having around 30,000 employees.

Most platforms fail the transparency test. Platform software is proprietary and typically not accessible, with most terms and conditions not allowing users to copy or modify their source code. This contributes to most platforms being opaque, as there is limited information on their inner workings. The algorithms which platforms use to serve personalised content to users in order to keep them engaged show this well. Social media platforms use algorithms to sort the posts that users see on their feed or are recommended; platforms such as Airbnb, instead, use algorithms to determine which listings will be at the top of the search results. Though algorithms are an important part of the

³⁸ David E. Brockman, Gregory Ferenstein, and Neil Malhotra, 'Wealthy Elites' Policy Preferences and Economic Inequality: The Case of Technology Entrepreneurs', 5 September 2017, <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/sites/gsb/files/rp3581.pdf>.

³⁹ Pawel Popiel and Yoonmo Sang, 'Platforms' Governance: Analyzing Digital Platforms' Policy Preferences', *Global Perspectives* 2, no. 1 (2021): 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.1525/gp.2021.19094>.

⁴⁰ Popiel and Sang.

⁴¹ Niv Ahituv, Seev Neumann, and Moshe Zviran, 'Factors Affecting the Policy for Distributing Computing Resources', *MIS Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1989): 392, <https://doi.org/10.2307/248722>.

⁴² Ahituv, Neumann, and Zviran, 392.

⁴³ Erol Kazan, Chee-Wee Tan, and Eric Lim, 'Towards a Framework of Digital Platform Disruption: A Comparative Study of Centralized & Decentralized Digital Payment Providers', 2014.

⁴⁴ Tom Bissell, 'An Anti-Facebook Manifesto, by an Early Facebook Investor', *The New York Times*, 29 January 2019, sec. Books, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/29/books/review/roger-mcnamee-zucked.html>.

user experience, there is often limited information available on them and many users don't know why they see the content they see. Platforms are mostly secretive about their inner workings, with Airbnb's guide to improving search rankings⁴⁵ being an exception. User knowledge on how platforms work should not be overestimated, as shown in a 2020 study on algorithm awareness. The study was conducted in Norway and found that, even in this "highly digitized country"⁴⁶, 40% of people had no awareness of algorithms, with only 13% having high to very high awareness.⁴⁷

Level of algorithm awareness	Per cent
No awareness	40.6%
Low awareness	20.8%
Some awareness	26.2%
High awareness	9.8%
Very high awareness	2.6%

Table 1 - adapted from Gran et al., 2020

Independent research has attempted to understand how platforms serve highly personalised content to users,⁴⁸ but constant alterations to algorithms⁴⁹ mean that it is hard to pinpoint the exact mechanisms. And even if these mechanisms were clear, it still wouldn't be enough: businesses can pay to be placed higher up in search results, bypassing the 'natural' algorithm position they would otherwise have.⁵⁰

The consequence of this is imbalance in information exchange: not only do users not know exactly how platforms work 'under the hood', but they also have access to less information about the platform than the platform has about them. The user data collected by platforms can also extend beyond data given by users when signing up and behavioural data usage: off-platform activities may also be tracked,⁵¹ and users are not always aware of this.

There are exceptions: publicly traded companies must disclose financial information. In the US, where most platforms are based, this data is made freely available on the website of the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). Examples of publicly traded companies include Alphabet Inc. (Google's parent company), Airbnb, Meta, Uber, and so on. While this supports the

⁴⁵ Airbnb, 'Answers to Your Top Search Questions', Airbnb Blog, November 2017, <https://blog.airbnb.com/search/>.

⁴⁶ Anne-Britt Gran, Peter Booth, and Taina Bucher, 'To Be or Not to Be Algorithm Aware: A Question of a New Digital Divide?', *Information, Communication & Society* 24, no. 12 (2020): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2020.1736124>.

⁴⁷ Gran, Booth, and Bucher, 'To Be or Not to Be Algorithm Aware: A Question of a New Digital Divide?'

⁴⁸ *How TikTok's Algorithm Figures You out* | *WSJ*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfczi2cl6Cs>.

⁴⁹ AJ Agrawal, 'What Do Social Media Algorithms Mean for You?', *Forbes*, 21 April 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ajagrwal/2016/04/20/what-do-social-media-algorithms-mean-for-you/?sh=3ca1a7c6a515>.

⁵⁰ Aaron Wall, 'Paid Inclusion, Incentive Structures, Deep Content & Scraping', *SEOBook*, 22 June 2012, <http://www.seobook.com/paid-inclusion>.

⁵¹ Geoffrey A. Fowler, 'Perspective | Facebook Will Now Show You Exactly How It Stalks You — Even When You're Not Using Facebook', *Washington Post*, 28 January 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/01/28/off-facebook-activity-page/>.

idea that platforms are transparent, it is likely they would not disclose this information were they not obligated.

Another relevant issue is trust: the current decline in trust experienced by political institutions and mainstream media has also impacted platforms.⁵² Digital trust is composed by three factors: security, identifiability and traceability.⁵³ If users do not believe that the service is secure “against malware and data abuse”,⁵⁴ that the parties involved are honest, and that these parties will follow through with their commitments, then they will not trust a platform. This is especially true for social media platforms, as shown in the graph below: users generally do not believe platforms use of personal data can be trusted (security). Users were polled on their opinions on a number of internet companies, but the least trusted were platforms (as opposed to companies, such as Apple). It is interesting to note the different levels of perceived trust placed in the Meta-owned platforms (Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp).

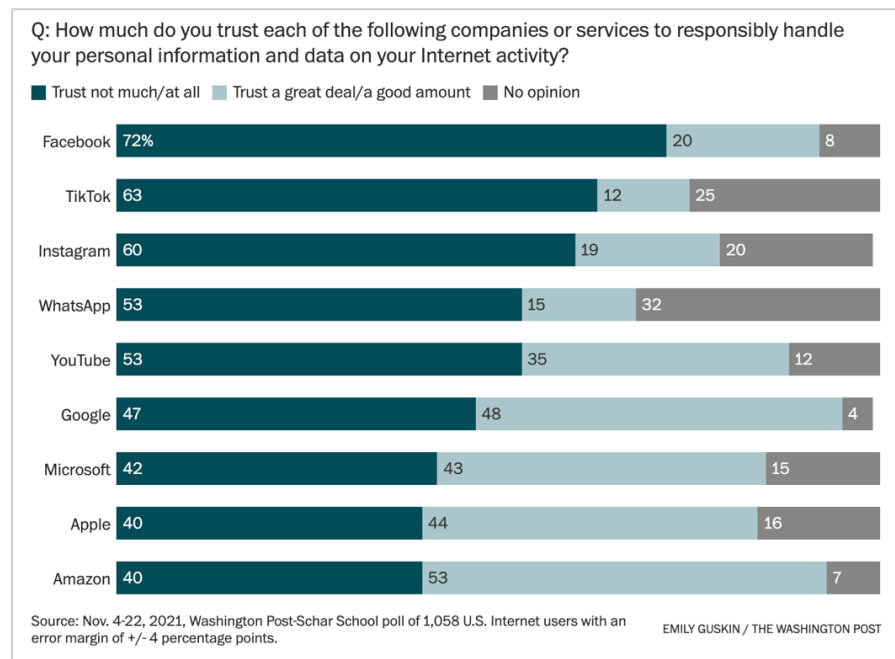


Figure 1 - from Kelly and Guskin, 2021

The word *platform* is thus an attempt to shape public perception, “[...] to establish the very criteria by which these technologies will be judged, built directly into the terms by which we know them.”⁵⁵

Platforms are not technical arrangements as a form of order because they were not built to determine a particular social effect, just like the Internet. Platforms must thus be inherently political technologies; the question is whether they require or are simply strongly compatible with a particular

⁵² Popiel and Sang, ‘Platforms’ Governance: Analyzing Digital Platforms’ Policy Preferences’.

⁵³ Juri Mattila and Timo Seppälä, ‘Digital Trust, Platforms, and Policy’, *ETLA Brief No 42* (2016).

⁵⁴ Mattila and Seppälä, 1.

⁵⁵ Gillespie, ‘The Politics of “Platforms”’, 359.

political system. Internally, platforms tend towards a more authoritarian structure. The decisions are taken mostly by executives, with employees having little power and users having close to none. Users also have limited information about how the platforms work.

1.5 Conclusion

The literature review carried out in this chapter shows that the idea of artifacts being political is at least a century and a half old, as shown by Engels' 1878 reflections on the organisation of industry and its relations to power structures. It is only in 1980, however, that Langdon Winner structured the concept of artifacts having political qualities, definitely overcoming the idea that technology is neutral. While this may be a reasonable concept, it is not sufficient to settle the matter. As shown in section 1.3, there are many elements at play in the creation of a technology which contribute to define the content of its political nature. Though platforms present themselves as neutral, they are inherently political and are political actors in their own right. The questions raised in this chapter will be applied in analysing Discord.

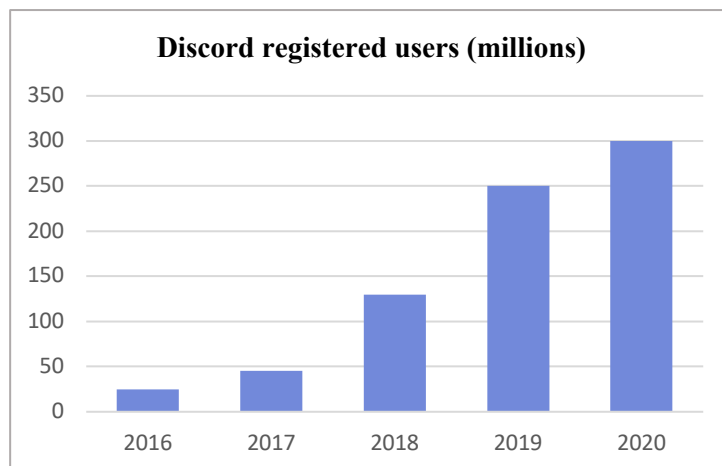
2. Case study: Discord

2.1 Introduction

The Discord case study was written in summer 2022, with all information being accurate as of 23 September. Since Discord is not a public company, it is under no obligation to disclose its information to authorities such as the SEC. This chapter utilizes an extensive selection of sources, individually cited in footnotes, to overcome this issue. The history of Discord was compiled by cross-referencing several newspaper articles, including The New York Times, Protocol and Slate, with technology news websites such as The Verge providing complementary information. Financial information and data on user numbers, instead, were reported by business-focused newspapers such as The Wall Street Journal.

Discord is a popular free instant messaging platform launched in 2015. Aimed at gamers, it is organised similarly to business communication platform Slack. Users send messages and make video calls through Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), a technology which allow users to communicate over the internet instead of traditional telephone networks. Communication takes place within communities called *servers*, which may be open to all or accessible solely through invites. Servers are made up of several chat rooms, either text- or voice-based, called *channels*. Users can also send direct messages to one another, outside Discord servers.

Discord is incredibly popular: it has grown from 25 million registered users in 2016 to more than 300 million in 2020. There are 150 million users on the platform each month, with 19 million active servers per week. This amounts to 850 million messages being sent and four billion minutes of conversation happening every day.⁵⁶



Graph 1 – adapted from Curry, 2022⁵⁷

⁵⁶ 'About Discord | our mission and values', Discord, accessed 4 August 2022, <https://discord.com/company>.

⁵⁷ David Curry, 'Discord revenue and usage statistics (2022)', Business of Apps, 7 July 2022, <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/discord-statistics/>.

Though the platform is free to use, it has been successful in translating its success into revenue: according to The Wall Street Journal, “the company generated \$130 million in revenue” in 2020.⁵⁸ The company is not publicly traded, which limits the amount of publicly available data.

2.2 History of Discord

The Discord platform was officially launched in May 2015, though the company behind it was founded in 2012 as game development studio *Hammer and Chisel*. Its founders, Jason Citron and Stan Vishnevskiy, believed existing VoIP software, such as Skype, to be inadequate for in-game communication when playing online with friends and decided to create a messaging platform with gamers in mind.

The choice to name a messaging platform with a noun meaning lack of agreement⁵⁹ may seem unusual. Citron explained the choice as follows:

We picked the name because at the end of the day it just sounds cool and has to do with talking. We had a bunch of names that we bounced around, but picking a name for a product is a complicated process. You want a name that is easy to say, spell, remember, related to the function of the product, available for TM, and has a website you can get. There are a lot of things to consider and we had a number of different candidates. Discord met all the criteria that we had and we fell in love with the name.⁶⁰

“It’s time to ditch Skype and TeamSpeak”,⁶¹ Discord’s tagline in its early days, represents its initial gamer centricity perfectly. In addition to Discord’s general ease of use, the platform offered several features aimed at its specific audience (such as low latency, minimal CPU usage and in-game overlays).

The platform gained popularity through word-of-mouth. Subreddits (communities from forum-like social network Reddit) started hosting their community chats on Discord, and satisfied users encouraged fellow Redditors to join Discord. Citron has stated that nothing specific was done to target that audience, and a large part of its success came from people recommending the platform to their friends. While the app’s gaming focus undoubtedly favoured its success, users also credit the community aspect. For example, rather than dialling someone or clicking a link to join a videocall,

⁵⁸ Sarah E. Needleman, ‘What Is Everybody Doing on Discord?’, *Wall Street Journal*, 8 March 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-social-network-without-ads-discord-defies-convention-11615199401>.

⁵⁹ Merriam-Webster, ‘Discord’, in *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster, 1993).

⁶⁰ Nelly, ‘2015.05.21 AMA Transcript’, Discord Blog, 23 August 2021, <https://discord.com/blog/2015-05-21-ama-transcript>.

⁶¹ ‘Discord - Free voice and text chat for gamers’, Discord, August 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150815173719/https://discordapp.com/>.

voice-chats are always open and anyone can join at any time, with Vishnevskiy describing the platform as “a house where you can move between different rooms”.⁶²

In 2017, Discord faced controversy for its use by alt-right communities. In January, BuzzFeed News revealed that the platform was providing an easy and private way for these communities to talk. Citron’s response was that such presence had been noticed, but because Discord was not “a public communication tool”,⁶³ there was little to do and seemed resigned to the fact that Discord would not be used solely by gamers or those with good intentions. After the Charlottesville “Unite the right” rally and terrorist attack⁶⁴ in August, the press described how white supremacists and alt-right activists were using the app to talk and coordinate actions, but the platform did not take any steps to remove such groups. In the words of The New York Times, “Several [Discord executives] said they were aware of the issue, but had no concrete plans to crack down on any extremist groups.”⁶⁵ Discord took action only after the rally by banning several large alt-right servers. This continued in the following year, with Slate reporting that white supremacists were still using Discord and describing the contents of over 20 Nazi/anti-Semitic/racist communities it had found.⁶⁶ In 2019, however, Discord started publishing *Transparency Reports* twice a year, aiming to “make visible the reports we receive from our users about bad behaviour on the platform and how we respond to them.”⁶⁷ While alt-right groups have not stopped using the platform, Discord has taken a much more proactive approach, as evidenced by the Transparency Reports and blog posts about Discord’s involvement in violent incidents.⁶⁸

The platform maintained its gaming-centric focus until 2020. Its website and marketing material were clearly geared towards communicating between fellow gamers. The website’s front page stated that Discord was an “All-in-one voice and text chat for gamers”, with similar references to gaming spread throughout the site.

Discord saw exponential growth during the COVID-19 pandemic, as people tried new platforms to stay connected to their friends and family during lockdown. This prompted the platform

⁶² David Pierce, ‘How Discord (Somewhat Accidentally) Invented the Future of the Internet’, Protocol, 31 December 2021, <https://www.protocol.com/discord>.

⁶³ Joseph Bernstein, ‘A Thriving Chat Startup Braces for the Alt-Right’, BuzzFeed News, 23 January 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/josephbernstein/discord-chat-startup-braces-for-the-alt-right>.

⁶⁴ Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Brian Rosenthal, ‘Man Charged after White Nationalist Rally in Charlottesville Ends in Deadly Violence’, *The New York Times*, 13 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/12/us/charlottesville-protest-white-nationalist.html>.

⁶⁵ Kevin Roose, ‘This Was the Alt-Right’s Favorite Chat App. Then Came Charlottesville.’, *The New York Times*, 15 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/technology/discord-chat-app-alt-right.html>.

⁶⁶ April Glaser, ‘White Supremacists Still Have a Safe Space Online’, Slate, 9 October 2018, <https://slate.com/technology/2018/10/discord-safe-space-white-supremacists.html>.

⁶⁷ Discord Safety, ‘Discord Transparency Report: Jan 1 — April 1 2019’, Discord, 12 August 2019, <https://discord.com/blog/discord-transparency-report-jan-1-april-1>.

⁶⁸ Discord, ‘Our Response to the Tragedy in Buffalo’, Discord Blog, 20 May 2022, <https://discord.com/blog/our-response-to-the-tragedy-in-buffalo>.

to rebrand starting March 2020, when it changed its motto from “Chat for Gamers” to “Chat for Communities and Friends”. In a blog post announcing the change, Citron explained that Discord would be shifting to more generic communication rather than gaming alone. He noted that “many [...] use Discord for day-to-day communication”,⁶⁹ with the platform being “for more and more than playing games”.⁷⁰

Verified servers and Discord Partners provide an understanding of this shift. The former are official servers run by public figures, brands or businesses and are certified as such by Discord through a Verified badge. Partner servers, instead, are “the best communities”⁷¹ on Discord, and are certified as such by a specific badge. At present, both categories include a variety of interests such as education, music and entertainment, and not only individuals and companies pertaining to the gaming world. Examples of non-gaming Discord Partners include fan servers for artists such as Taylor Swift and Blackpink, but also educational ones such as “Chess Academy” and “Le Salon Français”.

In early 2021, newspapers reported that several companies were interested in buying the platform, with Microsoft reportedly in advanced talks to acquire Discord for \$10 billion. The platform later chose to remain independent.⁷² Around the same time, several reports indicated that Discord was looking to go public, either with an IPO⁷³ or direct listing.⁷⁴ However, at the time of writing the platform has not done so yet. In July, Discord bought Sentropy, an AI company which makes harassment-detecting software.⁷⁵

2.3 Business model

Like other messaging platforms, Discord is free and does not have ads or algorithms.

Its main way of earning money is through its Nitro subscription packages, introduced in January 2017. These give users access to unique benefits and features which would otherwise be unavailable. Discord currently offers two subscription packages, Nitro Classic (\$4.99 monthly, \$49.99 yearly) and Nitro (\$9.99 monthly, \$99.99 yearly). The former offers perks such as GIF avatars, higher quality video, increased file size uploading limit and more. The latter includes improvements

⁶⁹ Jason Citron, ‘Your Place to Talk’, Discord Blog, 30 June 2020, <https://medium.com/discord-engineering/your-place-to-talk-a7ffa19b901b>.

⁷⁰ Citron.

⁷¹ Apollo, ‘Partnered vs Verified Servers’, Discord, 27 July 2021, <https://support.discord.com/hc/en-us/articles/360047236171-Partnered-vs-Verified-Servers>.

⁷² Sarah E. Needleman and Cara Lombardo, ‘Discord Ends Deal Talks With Microsoft’, *Wall Street Journal*, 20 April 2021, sec. Tech, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/discord-ends-deal-talks-with-microsoft-11618938806>.

⁷³ Taylor Hatmaker, ‘Discord Walked Away from Microsoft Talks, May Pursue an IPO’, TechCrunch, 20 April 2021, <https://social.techcrunch.com/2021/04/20/discord-ipo-microsoft-deal/>.

⁷⁴ Katie Roof, ‘Discord Interviews Banks for Possible Direct Listing’, *Bloomberg.Com*, 15 March 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-15/discord-is-said-to-interview-banks-for-possible-direct-listing>.

⁷⁵ Jacob Kastrenakes, ‘Discord Buys AI Anti-Harassment Company’, *The Verge*, 13 July 2021, <https://www.theverge.com/2021/7/13/22575809/discord-ai-anti-harassment-company-sentropy-acquisition-buy>.

on the previous perks, such as even higher quality video, and additional ones, including higher server limits and character limits per message.

In 2018, Discord launched its game store, where users would be able to buy Discord-exclusive video games. This section would feature “curated selection, editorialised content” and “social information”⁷⁶ to help users choose which games to buy. Discord took 10% from sales, leaving 90% of revenue to game publishers, a much more publisher-friendly deal than other game stores. Despite this, Discord Store was not popular among users, causing the company to close it in late 2019.⁷⁷

In June 2019, the platform introduced Server Boosts (\$4.99 monthly, \$49.99 yearly). These boosts can be applied to individual servers and grant both owners and members access to special perks for that server only. Using multiple Server Boosts on a server increases its level, giving the server itself and its members more and better perks. Users who have an active Nitro or Nitro Classic subscription have a 30% discount on Server Boosts.⁷⁸

The platform has also raised roughly a billion dollars in funding over the course of 10 rounds. As of September 2021, after its latest round of financing, the company has been valued at \$15 billion, more than double its 2020 valuation.⁷⁹ The company is privately held, meaning that it is not obligated to publicly disclose ownership figures and revenues.

Funding round – date	Deal amount
Seed – July 2012	\$1.1 million
Series A – November 2013	\$8.2 million
Series B – February 2015	\$4.5 million
Series C – January 2016	\$20 million
Series D – January 2017	\$50 million
Series E – April 2018	\$50 million
Series F – December 2018	\$150 million
Series G – June 2020	\$100 million
Series H – December 2020	\$100 million
Series H – September 2021	\$500 million

Table 2 – Discord funding rounds⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Nelly, ‘Discord Store Global Beta Is Live!’, Medium, 16 October 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210204233728/https://blog.discord.com/discord-store-global-beta-is-live-38bfd044d648?gi=ababea684775>.

⁷⁷ Nelly, ‘What’s Coming for Nitro’, Medium, 12 September 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20191118010138/https://blog.discordapp.com/whats-coming-for-nitro-a732ddc4b5b1?gi=db83ae770df8>.

⁷⁸ Potato, ‘Server Boosting FAQ’, Discord Help Center, 1 June 2022, <https://support.discord.com/hc/en-us/articles/360028038352-Server-Boosting-FAQ->.

⁷⁹ Katie Roof, ‘Chat App Discord Is Worth \$15 Billion After New Funding’, Bloomberg, 16 September 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-09-15/chat-app-discord-is-worth-15-billion-after-new-funding>.

⁸⁰ Table adapted from ‘Discord - Funding, Financials, Valuation & Investors’, Crunchbase, n.d., https://www.crunchbase.com/organization/discord/company_financials. Each funding round is assigned a letter. The

Discord also sells merchandise. Though it is unclear how much revenue this practice generates, it is unlikely that it is a significant amount.

2.4 The interface

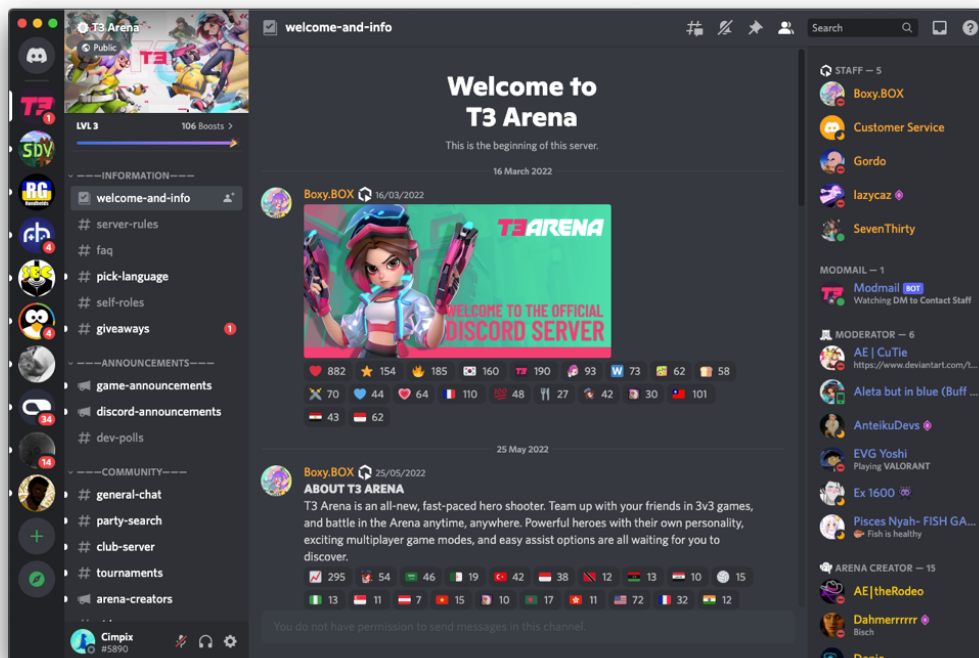


Figure 2 - The Discord app interface

Discord can be accessed both through a browser (at <https://discord.com/app>) or its own app, available for iOS, Android, macOS, Windows and Linux. The macOS app is shown above, though the platform's user interface is the same if accessed through the browser, Windows app, or Linux app. The iOS and Android version is slightly different to accommodate for the smaller screen.

The interface is divided in four sections, starting from the left. The first section features the servers the user has joined, with each server represented by its own icon. The currently selected channel is marked by a vertical white line on the left of its icon. In the screenshot above, the first channel is selected.

The second section is the list of all channels within the server. Each channel has a specific topic, in order to avoid off-topic conversations. Channels are separated into categories, which are collapsible dropdown menus. In the picture above, the first category is called “---INFORMATION---” and contains various channels, such as “welcome-and-info”, “server-rules” and “faq”. Next to channel names are icons which indicate the channel type: a hashtag indicates a text channel, a speaker

latest funding round, in September 2021, should be a Series I funding round, though Crunchbase reports this as being another Series H funding round.

with three sound waves a voice channel, a megaphone an announcement channel and a book with a checkmark signifies a channel containing server rules.

Once a channel has been selected, the third and largest section of the interface will show the selected chat. This is where conversations take place in real time, with the newest messages appearing at the bottom. Users can chat by using the text box at the bottom of this section.

Finally, on the right side, is a list of the server's users, with their roles and online/offline status. Roles are groups within a server which users can join and often have different permissions or privileges associated. In the interface above, for example, the highest role is 'Staff'; it is likely these users can delete messages and/or ban users.

2.5 Conclusion

Discord is a well-loved gaming messaging platform, which over time has sought to expand its business by redefining itself as a communication platform for everyone. Despite a number of incidents involving alt-right content, including the May 2022 Buffalo mass shooting,⁸¹ the platform has maintained its popularity due to its ease of use and lack of direct competitors.

The widespread interest in gaming and the general increase in use of communication platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic, along with Discord's ease of use and freemium pricing, have driven the platform's 2016-2020 growth. This has driven its perceived value, to the point where Microsoft offered \$10 billion to purchase it. Discord's refusal to sell suggests that the investors believe the platform has not yet reached its full potential and look to achieving an even higher return on their investment.

⁸¹ Discord, 'Our Response to the Tragedy in Buffalo'.

3. Discord policies

3.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at how Discord relates to its users, which provides a more complete understanding of the platform's values and functioning. Discord is not particularly vocal on current events and political issues; however, looking at the topics covered in its blog is interesting as it reveals what the platforms believes is important enough to speak out about.

Discord's terms of service and privacy policies are generally not viewed favourably, as can be seen in the analyses performed by websites such as Terms of Service; Didn't Read (ToS;DR), Mozilla's *Privacy Not Included, and Common Sense Media's Privacy Program.

ToS;DR evaluates 'points' within the terms and privacy policies, then assigns a grade to the service. Discord has been given a Grade E, meaning that there are serious concerns. Out of the 66 points analysed, two aspects are rated particularly bad: the platform can read user messages (due to a lack of end-to-end encryption) and content can be deleted without reason and without warning. ToS;DR also categorises 24 points as bad, including the fact that user logs are retained for an undefined period of time.

Mozilla's *Privacy Not Included is a guide which looks at publicly available privacy policies and information on companies' security practices. Discord is given a neutral evaluation, though users have voted it 'super creepy'. Some of the concerns cited in this report: though not sold, user data is still shared with third parties for unclear purposes; some sections of the privacy policy are very vague.

Common Sense Media's Privacy Program has given the platform a 46% rating and a "Warning" label, meaning that Discord does not meet the privacy and security recommendations. Common Sense Media points out many concerns: for example, it is unclear whether geolocation data is collected, or if data is used solely for the purpose it was collected for.

3.2 The Blog

The Discord Blog is a crucial source of information about the platform, which as a privately held company is not obligated to disclose much company information. It covers topics that concern the platform and does not, for the most part, address broader societal or policy issues. This is unlike most platforms, who instead address a variety of issues on their blogs, e.g. implementing immigration reform and frictionless regulation. The Discord blog is divided into several categories. The following table shows the description for each, as found on the blog itself, and the number of posts per category.

Category	Description	Number of Posts
Community	Stories, spotlights, and behind the scenes from the heart and soul of Discord: the community.	44
Discord HQ	General company updates about what Discord is up to at HQ.	22
Engineering & Design	General tips and insights from Discord's Policy & Safety teams who enable users and communities to be safe on the platform.	28
How to Discord	Tutorials and guides to help with Discord and other topics of interest.	8
Policy & Safety	General tips and insights from Discord's Policy & Safety teams who enable users and communities to be safe on the platform.	23
Product & Features	Announcements, new features, and general info about the Discord app.	54

Table 3 - data as of August 2022

Posts in the *Community* category cover topics such as LGBTQ+ pride and Black History Month, but most of the time Discord does not comment or offer perspectives on current events. Of the 44 posts in this category, only two explicitly mention on going events: “Pride 2022 @ Discord” mentions US states introducing anti LGBTQ+ legislation, while “Resources Against Hate and Discrimination Towards the AAPI Community” cites the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes in the US. Similarly, the *Discord HQ* category includes only two non-business-related posts, both dealing with racial equality. The first was posted following George Floyd’s murder in June 2020; the second is an update on racial equity at Discord one year later and does not address other current events.

The above are all times when the platform showed support for certain communities; for the most part, Discord does not publish official policy blog posts. The only occasion on which Discord has done so is a 2017 post titled “Why net neutrality matters”, in which Citron supported net neutrality ahead of the US Federal Communications Commission’s vote on rolling back the 2015 Open Internet Order. Even then, the post does not go in depth on the topic and invites users to visit another website for more information on this issue.

3.3 Terms of Service

The first source on Discord’s relationship with its users is provided by its Terms of Service.⁸²

The first sections of the ToS contain details on creating and maintaining a Discord account, which is required to use the service. Users must be 13 and older, though country-specific age

⁸² The version currently in effect was updated on 25 February 2022 and is effective as of 28 March 2022.

requirements may apply. Users must also maintain accurate contact information so that the platform can contact them. Furthermore, users must notify the platform if their account has been compromised.

The ToS specify that users are responsible for “all the things [they] add (upload, post, share, or stream)”,⁸³ including text messages, photos, and other media. This content is licenced to Discord, so that it can be shown in public servers, adapted for different-sized devices and stored on cloud services. In keeping with Section 230, Discord states it is not responsible for any user content or third party features. The platform also reserves the right to “block, remove, and/or permanently delete [user] content for any reason”.⁸⁴

Users can download client software (the various versions of the Discord app) to access the platform, but no derivative work (including reverse engineering) based upon Discord is allowed. There are two exceptions: some parts of the platform include open source software and open source licencing must be referenced in such cases; for third party software and services, users must reference these parties’ terms and policies.

Discord says its users must follow ToS and applicable laws when using the platform. This means that the service should not be used to harm oneself, others, or Discord itself; this includes no bullying, spamming, transmitting viruses or attacking Discord systems. The platform must not be used to do anything illegal.

The right to termination is valid both for users and for the Discord. Users can stop using the service “at any time and for any reason”.⁸⁵ Discord, on the other hand, can suspend or terminate users for four reasons: breach of ToS; if required by a legal order; if Discord believes it is necessary to prevent harm; if the account has been inactive for two or more years.

Sections 12 (*Services “AS IS”*) and 13 (*Limitation of Liability*) of the ToS state the limits of Discord’s liabilities. The first is a classic clause for contracts, stating that the user (or buyer) accepts the product as it is, without further modifications, and according to the specified terms. The second is another common clause, outlining what the platform is liable for. In both cases, the wording of these clauses seems to be standard: for example, some parts of Dropbox’s “AS IS” clause are identical to Discord’s.⁸⁶

The ToS also outline how disputes with Discord can be solved. There are four sections: informal resolution, governing law and jurisdiction, agreement to arbitrate and class waiver. According to Discord, most disputes can be resolved informally by conversing with the platform and

⁸³ Discord, ‘Terms of Service’, Discord, 25 February 2022, sec. 5, <https://discord.com/terms>.

⁸⁴ Discord, sec. 5.

⁸⁵ Discord, sec. 10.

⁸⁶ Dropbox, ‘Terms of Service’, Dropbox, accessed 5 September 2022, <https://www.dropbox.com/terms>.

this should be done before pursuing legal action. US residents agree to not bringing class actions forward, unless the section is found unenforceable.

Section 15 (*More important stuff*) covers various additional details. For example, the platform explicitly says the following: “You have certain rights that, by law, can’t be limited by these terms, and we in no way intend to restrict those rights in these terms.”⁸⁷ Additional terms may apply (and can be found on the Discord Support website), including ‘Copyright Policy’, ‘Paid Services Terms’ and ‘Refund Policy’. There are some users who cannot use this service, more specifically those in “any government list of prohibited or restricted parties”⁸⁸ and users “in a country or region subject to U.S. or E.U. government embargo”.⁸⁹ Examples include North Korea, Cuba, Iran, Syria, and Crimea.

An additional paragraph of ToS apply for iOS Discord users.

3.4 Privacy Policy

Discord’s Privacy Policy is made up of 15 sections, mostly covering what user information the platform collects and how it is used.⁹⁰

The information Discord has on its users is obtained in three ways. Some information is provided by users themselves: this includes account information such as birthdays, phone numbers, purchase information, or third party accounts connected to Discord by users themselves. Some information is collected automatically, as is the case of device info (such as IP addresses), information about Discord usage, or first party cookies. Finally, the platform may receive information from third parties and combine it with the data they already have.

The platform then uses this information for several purposes. First and foremost, it fulfils the contract it has with the user by providing the service, personalising the product and making customer service available. Discord also uses the information it collects for its business interests, which include protecting and improving the service it provides, creating performance reports, and advertisements on other platforms. The information may be used to comply with legal obligations too. Finally, Discord may “collect or share personal data if [it] think[s] someone’s life is in danger”.⁹¹

The privacy policy also details how the platform shares user information. Discord states that all user information is shared either in aggregated form or after it has been de-identified, ensuring that it cannot be traced back to users.

Discord says that user information is shared when users tell the platform to share it, for example by adding content or linking a Discord account to a third party service. It also shares

⁸⁷ Discord, ‘Terms of Service’, sec. 15.

⁸⁸ Discord, sec. 15.

⁸⁹ Discord, sec. 15.

⁹⁰ Like the ToS, the Privacy Policy was updated on 25 February 2022 and has been in effect since 28 March 2022.

⁹¹ Discord, ‘Privacy Policy’, Discord, 25 February 2022, sec. 4, <https://discord.com/terms>.

information with its vendors (parties hired by Discord to carry out a specific task), such as payment processors (e.g. PayPal) or cloud service providers (e.g. Google). As explained above, Discord may also share info if required by law and will attempt to notify users before disclosing their information. It will also share information if needed to enforce its terms and policies. As mentioned above, Discord may share data if it believes “it’s necessary to prevent serious harm”.⁹² Finally, the platform states it shares user information with its related companies and will also do so in the case of a sale, acquisition, or transfer of assets.

Personal data is kept for “as long as it is needed”⁹³ for the purposes it was collected for. The privacy policy lists two cases: Discord may delete accounts which have been inactive for two or more years, and may also “delete or anonymize”⁹⁴ data associated with that account; if ID is submitted for age verification, it is deleted 60 days after the appeal ticket is closed.

The section on data protection states that “[a]ll information sent within our services is encrypted both in transit and at rest”,⁹⁵ but this does not mean that conversations in Discord are end-to-end encrypted, unlike other messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Signal.

In any case, there are limits as to what employees and contractors have access to. Though there are no further details on how Discord protects its users’ privacy, the Privacy Policy does have a lengthy section on how users can protect themselves. Users should, firstly, be aware of the space they take part in and how they interact: this means knowing whether the server is public or private and thinking about what to post, for example. They are also encouraged to modify the platform’s default settings to reach their desired level of privacy. Users can also delete any content they have posted, though public posts can be retained by Discord for the uses described above. When an account is deleted, all identifying information is deleted, and the remaining data is anonymized. Some circumstances, however, legally require Discord to retain certain information even if the account is deleted. A last step Discord lists is to change the cookie settings, though it warns that disabling or removing cookies may cause certain features to function incorrectly. Users can request a copy of their information from the platform and should receive it within 30 days of their request.

Section 9 of the Privacy Policy is dedicated to international data transfers. Discord warns that using the service means that users agree to have their data processed in the US. When transferring data from the European Economic Area (EEA), Discord uses standard contract clauses and follows the European Commission’s adequacy decisions. It also adheres to the Privacy Shield Program, a legal framework regulating personal data transfers for commercial purposes between the EU and the

⁹² Discord, sec. 5.

⁹³ Discord, sec. 6.

⁹⁴ Discord, sec. 6.

⁹⁵ Discord, sec. 7.

US, even though it is no longer valid. A small section of the Privacy Policy also includes specific information for users in the EEA, UK, Brazil and California, which have stricter privacy laws than the US.

Third parties which offer services on Discord must follow the Developer Terms of Service and Developer Policy.

Changes to the Privacy Policy are only communicated in a visible manner if changes are “significant”,⁹⁶ though this term is not further explained.

3.5 Conclusion

The analysis of the information on the Discord website (the blog, the terms of service and the privacy policy) is only partially helpful in understanding the platform’s nature. Significantly, the blog avoids any comments on politics, including those directly affecting it such as AI, content moderation and Section 230.

Similarly, Discord’s terms of service and privacy policy appear to incorporate fairly standard clauses which are often found in the terms of other platforms. Though Discord proudly informs its users it does not sell their data, unlike other platforms, a detailed reading reveals that it does share data with only partially identified third parties. This ambiguity seems to be in agreement with the concerns raised by the independent analysts mentioned in paragraph 3.1.

Discord’s lack of openness about company policies seems to be in contrast to what other platforms do. However, this does not necessarily imply a malevolent attitude, but may simply reflect the smaller userbase, different demographics and lower public profile of the platform.

⁹⁶ Discord, sec. 14.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to use Discord as a study and test case to understand whether platforms are technical arrangements as forms of order or whether they are inherently political technologies. The impossibility of categorising the Internet as a technical arrangement as form of order has already been covered in Chapter 1, and a similar argument can be made for platforms themselves. They were not created to determine a specific effect: there was no Internet theorist or engineer designing specific features in order to purposefully produce a series of consequences, in the way Robert Moses designed his parkways to exclude minorities.

This means that platforms must be inherently political. And if they are inherently political, which side do they lean towards? Once again, as mentioned in Chapter 1 with regards to the Internet, technologies can be ambiguous, simultaneously lending themselves to actions that may be viewed as positive and negative. Rather than looking at the surface level details, this chapter will use the theoretical framework from chapter 1 and the Discord case study from Chapters 2 and 3 to grasp the deeper nature of platforms.

4.2 What political nature?

Before proceeding with the discussion, it is important to define which political nature artifacts may have. Recent political discourse has become highly polarised and largely operates on a binary logic (e.g. ‘left vs. right’), though in reality politics are much more nuanced and, therefore, multi-axis models arguably represent the political spectrum much better. The definition of “politics” used throughout this thesis, however, does not refer to ideologies but to the “arrangements of power and authority in human associations”.⁹⁷ The focus is on whether platforms determine a democratic or authoritarian power structure and if such a structure is required for these technologies to exist.

While the meaning of democratic and authoritarian seems intuitive, these words have several connotations, not unlike the term *platform*. The literal meaning of democracy is “the rule of the people” but the word has accrued multiple connotations over time. The term can mean “a principle or doctrine of government; [...] a set of institutional arrangements or constitutional devices; [...] a type of behaviour”.⁹⁸ To further complicate matters, these definitions do not necessarily go hand in hand. The concept of democracy used throughout this chapter refers to the idea of open participation and equality.

⁹⁷ Winner, ‘Do Artifacts Have Politics?’, 123.

⁹⁸ Bernard Crick, *Democracy: A very short introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.

Authoritarianism⁹⁹ is in opposition to democracy and refers to a dictatorial arrangement of power which is not based on the people's will. Its supporters believe this system is more efficient and minimises delays.¹⁰⁰ In this thesis, the term will be used to denote the concentration of power in the hands of one person (or a few people) who are not chosen by the people, regardless of whether this is due to political or economic structures.

Throughout this chapter it may be useful to maintain an Aristotelian view on democracy: the rule of the people is a necessary condition for good government, but it is not sufficient.

4.3 The internal organisation of platforms

The internal organisation of platforms leans towards authoritarian because platforms typically have centralised decision-making and computing power (or programming). This preference is mostly explained by practical necessity, but financial affairs also play a role.

Practical necessity is easily explained: a centralised hierarchical structure allows platforms to be responsive and adaptable in a constantly (and rapidly) changing market. Programming takes the same amount of time whether the platform is centralised or not, but a democratic decision-making process involves complex discussions about whether to implement features and how to implement them. When many people are involved, as opposed to a small board of directors, the process becomes relatively long and competitors might reach the market first. Part of the motivation is also financial: at the end of the day, platforms need to make money. They are accountable to their investors and shareholders, and must generate revenue to receive further investments to continue to operate. These individuals, along with company officers, sit at the top of the decision-making pyramid and can determine which direction a platform should go. The goal is maximising profit; implementing features which will increase the userbase and further engage current users is not necessarily about what is morally or ethically better.

Discord's introduction of *Stage Channels* exemplifies this well. In early 2021, a platform called Clubhouse became incredibly popular.¹⁰¹ Within it, users could communicate in live audio-only chat rooms, hosting thousands of users at the same time. The app's popularity pushed many platforms (e.g. Twitter, Slack and Spotify) to implement similar features in their apps. In March, Discord launched Stage Channels, its Clubhouse-inspired audio-only channels.

Why did Discord create audio-only channels if voice channels already existed? Stage Channels have unique features which set them apart from standard voice chat – while the two are

⁹⁹ Though distinctions can be made between authoritarianism and totalitarianism, these are not relevant here.

¹⁰⁰ Florence Elliott and Michael Summerskill, 'Authoritarian', in *A Dictionary of Politics* (Penguin Books, 1961), 28.

¹⁰¹ After this period of great popularity, most users abandoned Clubhouse. Steven Levy, 'Clubhouse's fall from grace', *Wired*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.wired.com/story/plaintext-clubhouses-fall-from-grace/>.

similar, they are not exactly the same.¹⁰² Discord executives and investors likely saw the rival app's popularity as something worth replicating for their own advantage. An authoritarian internal organisation certainly favoured the rapid implementation of this copy-cat feature: decentralisation results in longer times and less control due to multiple loci of control. In the short term, only a centralised platform can decide to copy a feature from another platform, then write the code and implement it.

The question, then, is whether platforms can exist in other ways. The existence of many open-source and decentralised platforms seems to indicate that it is possible, though these are much less popular than centralised ones. The table below shows some of the most popular messaging platforms and whether they are centralised and open source, along with the number of users.

Platform	Centralisation	Owned by	Open source	Users (2021)	Launched
Discord	Centralised	Discord Inc.	No	390 mln	2015
Element	Decentralised	Element ¹⁰³	Yes	43 mln ¹⁰⁴	2016 ¹⁰⁵
Signal	Centralised	Signal Found.	Yes	40 mln	2014
Telegram	Centralised	Telegram Inc.	Partly ¹⁰⁶	500 mln	2013
WhatsApp	Centralised	Meta Inc.	No	2.2 bln	2009

Table 4 - compiled by author

The table above outlines a trend, though limited by the number of platforms and characteristics taken into consideration. The most popular of the five, WhatsApp, is neither centralised, open source nor independent; the least popular, Element, is decentralised, open source and also independently owned. The point stands with other types of platforms: it is rare to find a decentralised platform leading the market. This is the case with social media platforms, video sharing platforms, etc.

Overall, it is possible for platforms with different internal structures to exist, but that commercially successful and mainstream ones seem to require a centralised, authoritarian structure.

4.4 Platforms and societal organisation

Viewed externally, platforms do not appear to have a strict requirement nor imply a certain arrangement of power and authority. This doesn't mean, however, that the elements of a technology do not matter; as discussed in Chapter 1 the ways a technology complements certain aspects of society are crucial. This is because digital platforms have permeated all aspects of society, including cultural

¹⁰² 'Stage Channels FAQ', Discord, 4 April 2022, <https://support.discord.com/hc/en-us/articles/1500005513722-Stage-Channels-FAQ>.

¹⁰³ Element is the trading name of New Vector Limited. 'Copyright policy', n.d., <https://element.io/copyright>.

¹⁰⁴ Element is part of the Matrix open network. This figure refers to the network's total users.

¹⁰⁵ Element was released in 2016 with the name *Vector*. It was renamed *Riot* in September of the same year and eventually became *Element* in 2020.

¹⁰⁶ While Telegram's API and code are open source, the server code is not. 'Telegram FAQ', Telegram, n.d., <https://telegram.org/faq?setln=en>.

practices, in a process called platformisation.¹⁰⁷ This has had a transformational impact on human interactions; the impact of communication platforms is particularly relevant because they facilitate or enhance communication.

The politics of platforms should not be confused with users' political identification and/or affiliation. This is not to say that certain platforms are not created to cater to a specific ideological area: Gab and Truth social both cater to well determined right-leaning users, though the former was widely used by this crowd despite not being created for them and latter was specifically created for Trump supporters. In any case, despite the high-profile accusations by BuzzFeed and others, there is insufficient quantitative evidence to establish a predominant link between Discord and right-wing users. The lack of external political affiliation can be attributed to the different nature of social media and messaging platforms.

In order to validate this assumption, the significance of platforms in society will be viewed through the lens of content moderation, privacy, and legislation.

Social media platforms have been under particular scrutiny because of the way they promote user interactions. In many cases, users find themselves in 'filter bubbles' where they only encounter content that they enjoy. This is mostly because of the platforms' algorithms: naturally, everyone wants to engage with content with content they like, but platforms amplify this. But by delivering personalised content and only promoting content that platforms believe users will like, platforms de facto limit users to specific sections of content. In this way, platforms shape how conversations take place in the 'digital town square' and undoubtedly play a role in determining what is discussed in the public sphere as a whole. Facebook is particularly well-known for its filter bubbles:

My sense of unease crystallized when I noticed that my conservative friends had disappeared from my Facebook page. [...] their links never turned up in my Top News feed. Facebook was apparently doing the math and noticing that I was still clicking my progressive friends' links more than my conservative friends'—and links to the latest Lady Gaga videos more than either. So no conservative links for me.¹⁰⁸

Messaging platforms, in this regard, are an exception: their lack of algorithms means users are not steered toward any content. Users are free to choose the groups they wish to be a part of, to interact solely with those they desire and must discover new content on their own, rather than be guided towards it. Within Discord, for example, users are not recommended new servers based on the ones

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Poell, David Nieborg, and José van Dijck, 'Platformisation', *Internet Policy Review* 8, no. 4 (29 November 2019), <https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1425>.

¹⁰⁸ Eli Pariser, *The filter bubble: How the new personalized web is changing what we read and how we think* (Penguin Books, 2012), 8.

they are currently in. The only way to join a new server is to receive a ‘server invite’ to a private server or find a public one through the ‘explore public server’ feature.

Content moderation is another critical issue. To ensure a positive user experience and comply with regulation, platforms must moderate the content they host. The rationale for restricting some content is self-explanatory: images or discussions of murder, child abuse, etc are unacceptable in any circumstance and are therefore banned without much discussion. In other cases, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, moderation may cause controversy, with users claiming it limits free speech; this is especially true with social media platforms. In the USA, a common argument is that content moderation violates the First Amendment of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of expression.

Messaging platforms stand out once again because content moderation has different implications for them. If a messaging platform moderates content added by users, then user messages are not private. This is where a highly important trade-off comes into play: content moderation implies less privacy. While the latter is a fundamental aspect of our online lives and individuals are becoming increasingly privacy-conscious, some argue that giving up some privacy is tolerable if this allows extremists or abusers to be caught. The argument is usually that, having ‘nothing to hide’, they are willing to lose a small part of privacy to stop the ‘bad guys’.

In any case, Discord’s lack of end-to-end encryption means user privacy is low, which is especially concerning since a large portion of users are minors. However, the safety argument is well-defended by the platform’s success in content moderation, tracked in the *Transparency Reports*. Considering the numerous reports of alt-right use of the platform, it would be reasonable to think that most of the content that Discord removes is either extremist or hateful, but this is not the case. In the first quarter of 2022, 78.5% of the accounts disabled by Discord were charged with child safety violations. Of the 40,009 servers removed, more than half were removed for child safety violations. In comparison, only 2.07% of user bans and 6% of server removals were for hateful conduct and violent extremism.¹⁰⁹

But accepting this loss of privacy in exchange for a safer environment does not guarantee that user data is protected. Platforms often have agreements with law enforcement and will provide significant amounts of data should they be asked or required to do so. A leaked FBI document lists what data from secure messaging platforms law enforcement can legally access and is an important testament to the difference between the values that platforms outwardly present and their real actions. Even platforms that portray themselves as being privacy-focused surrender large quantities of user

¹⁰⁹ Discord Safety, ‘Discord Transparency Report: January - March 2022’, Discord Blog, 30 June 2022, <https://discord.com/blog/discord-transparency-report-q1-2022>.

data to authorities. This links back to Chapter 1, with the idea of platforms expressing different values in public and privately. Discord is notably missing from the table below. While the platform does not portray itself as a platform for sensitive communications – unlike Signal, for example – it still publicly states that user conversations are private; the fact that it is not among the platforms the FBI is concerned about obtaining data from, instead, suggests the opposite.

The agreements between ‘secure’ platforms and law enforcement shows that the issue is more nuanced than it appears, and that security concerns might be well founded.

App	Information Accessed	Message content
iMessage (Apple)	Subscriber data, device backup, message sender-receiver data, user’s contacts, date/time information, registration time data, encryption key(s)	Limited
Line	Subscriber data, message sender-receiver data, user’s contacts, date/time information, registration time data	Limited
Signal	Registration time data, date/time information	No
Telegram	Registration time data	No
Threema	Subscriber data, registration time data, date/time information, encryption key(s)	No
Viber	Subscriber data, date/time information, IP address, encryption key(s), registration time data	No
WeChat	Subscriber data, registration time data, IP address	No
WhatsApp	Subscriber data, registration time data, message sender-receiver data, user’s contacts, date/time information	Limited
Wickr	Subscriber data, registration time data, date/time information	No

Table 5 - Platform data the FBI can lawfully access¹¹⁰

Platforms also shape the conversations surrounding legislative decisions. As explained in Chapter 1, their blog posts illustrate policy preferences in attempt to influence the public debate, with the purpose of gaining an advantage. These posts are not meant for users, who are unlikely to read them, but rather for those who play a key role in determining national policies and international standards. In this sense, Discord’s lack of policy blog posts makes it an outlier once again. There is one post that fits into this category, though it calls users to action rather than ‘lobbying’ governments or international communities. Reasons for this might include the platform only recently pivoting to a non-gaming focus and its generally young userbase. This is significantly in contrast with platforms

¹¹⁰ Adapted from ‘Jan. 2021 FBI infographic re lawful access to secure messaging apps data’, 19 November 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211202033025/https://propertyofthepeople.org/document-detail/?doc-id=21114562>.

which have established large corporate lobbying departments, for the express purpose of advancing their own interests in Washington and Brussels, including the key goal of ensuring that crucial legislative provisions such as Section 230 are not repealed. Meta, for instance, in 2018 appointed Nick Clegg, the former UK deputy Prime Minister, as vice-president for global affairs.¹¹¹

4.5 Conclusion

The widespread view that social media platforms have polarized society, making it less democratic in the process, is outside the scope of this thesis. However, the issues discussed in this chapter, which are connected to some of the core elements of platforms, are clearly significant to society. The authoritarian internal organisation can be easily traced back to the governing body's desire to easily control its platform. However, it is hard to argue that the central elements of platforms require a particular type of system externally. Content moderation, privacy, and regulation have an effect on how people communicate and how public conversations develop, but these elements do not require society to be arranged in one single way.

This analysis has shown the great variety among platforms, highlighting the unique features that messaging platforms, in particular, present. This variety is partly due to the complexity of the Internet as a technical base, upon which platforms themselves add further complexity. The consequence of this is that there is no single political nature of platforms, but various aspects presenting different tendencies. This finding is in agreement with something that Winner himself accepted as a possibility:

Indeed, it can happen that within a particular complex of technology – a system of communication or transportation, for example – some aspects may be flexible in their possibilities for society, while other aspects may be (for better or worse) completely intractable.¹¹²

Far from being an after-thought, this insight is an essential element to ensure that observations arising from an analysis of 19th and 20th century technologies remain relevant in the 21st century digital industry scenario.

¹¹¹ Kari Paul, 'Nick Clegg Promoted to Top Facebook Role', *The Guardian*, 16 February 2022, sec. Technology, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/feb/16/nick-clegg-facebook-meta-president-global-affairs>.

¹¹² Winner, 'Do Artifacts Have Politics?', 135.

Conclusion

The contemporary world is increasingly characterised by digitalisation, with platforms playing a decisive role in shaping daily life globally. For this reason, platforms are often accused of having and putting forward political agendas and biases. A more radical question regards their arrangements of power and authority, used by Winner to define politics.

Moving from this premise, this thesis has covered the politics of platforms, with the objective of understanding whether platforms have an intrinsic political nature and, if so, what this nature is. The literature review carried out in Chapter 1 largely confirms that platforms are inherently political, not unlike other categories of artifacts examined by Winner. The analysis concludes that all platforms seem to require an authoritarian internal organisation because of their complex technical structure, not unlike other categories of artifacts.

On the other hand, external requirements on society seem to vary between platforms depending on the sector they operate in and their specific business model, for example selling user data to third parties versus selling services/features to users. In the former case, the need to collect and correlate huge amounts of data for commercial uses inevitably leads platforms to shape user patterns of interaction and use; in the latter, users enjoy straightforward tools without being steered towards a preferred usage. In other words, messaging platforms lack algorithms and recommendation systems, meaning that they do not push their users to interact with certain content just to extract larger amounts of data from them. Instead, users shape their own experience and content is discovered spontaneously, without an algorithm's intermediation.

The thesis also proves that the underlying differences of the various businesses significantly impact the nature and organisation of platforms. Regardless of the legal finesse, platforms like Uber and Airbnb are arguably more accurately defined as transportation and accommodation providers than simple marketplaces which enable supply and demand to meet neutrally. On the other hand, the examination of the independent messaging platform Discord carried out in Chapters 2 and 3 has shown that the service it provides and its benefit-based business model give it a better claim to being neutral.

Like most other messaging platforms, Discord still requires what in Winner's concept might be called an 'authoritarian organisation' and in Nissenbaum's values would be defined as a 'centralised locus of control'. However this is mostly due to practical and financial needs, required for it to function as a business, particularly because they do not appear to dictate the same external authoritarianism. Discord's independent nature also plays a role here, compared to communication platforms which are a part of a wider company ecosystem. In addition, Discord does not sell user

data, which sets it apart from most platforms, though it still shares user data with its vendors. The vagueness of the contractual conditions makes this point opaque, referring to another of the key questions posed by Nissenbaum.

While this work has used many resources and analytical strategies to look at Discord's internal and external requirements and its political nature, the findings have been hampered by the lack of freely available documentation on this specific platform. In this respect, further research on Discord would greatly benefit from its going public, because SEC regulations would mandate the platform to publish its financial reports periodically, shedding light on how the platform's business model influences decisions on its structure and functioning. This would also improve the understanding of the platform as a whole, as Discord's values would not have to be deduced from limited amounts of carefully crafted blog posts.

Combining the results from the literature review and the case study, the differences between messaging and non-messaging platforms found described in Chapter 4 also lead to general methodological insights. Specifically, the Discord case study sheds light on the continuing validity of Winner's interpretative framework. The nature and inner workings of both the Internet and digital platforms suggest that the applicability of Winner's 1980 model might be approaching the limits of its usefulness. A comprehensive view of the political intricacies of artifacts and technology remains undoubtedly useful and stimulating, particularly in distinguishing corporate politics and the power arrangements of artifacts. However, the seminal Winner essay suffers from being based on a traditional, hardware-oriented era. By drawing its examples from traditional industrial fields (e.g. railroads) and older energy technologies, it describes the nature of tangible artifacts much better than contemporary services, online world and hybrid business models (e.g. the 'gig economy'). This finding is consistent with Winner's statement that the aspects of complex technologies may vary, although equating digital messaging of the 21st century to the generic systems of communications of the previous century requires a considerable stretch of imagination.

Internet is undeniably a technical artifact, although quite different from those produced in the first and second industrial revolutions. For this reason, despite the potential limitations of an almost half-century old interpretative framework, the intrinsic political nature remains a valuable field of inquiry. Ultimately, the impact of platformisation on society and everyday life suggests the importance of updating the interpretative framework in order to maintain its validity in a constantly changing world.

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Abstract

Al giorno d'oggi, piattaforme come Facebook, YouTube, Airbnb, Spotify, Discord e molte altre hanno pervaso quasi ogni aspetto della società. Il nostro modo di relazionarci con gli altri è cambiato, che si tratti di restare in contatto con gli amici, guardare tutorial, prenotare un alloggio, ascoltare musica o chiacchierare con altri videogiocatori. La diffusione delle piattaforme ha portato alla graduale espansione delle piattaforme digitali in una moltitudine di ambiti, un processo noto come *piattaformizzazione*. Il termine *piattaforma* si riferisce a un modello di business il cui servizio centrale è agire da intermediario tra gruppi diversi (ad esempio tra utenti e inserzionisti). La parola è volutamente specifica e vaga al contempo: mentre l'idea base di intermediare è ben definita, il termine rimane intenzionalmente vago in modo da consentire a tali aziende di adattarsi a vari settori.

L'ubiquità delle piattaforme non è esente da polemiche. Le piattaforme si presentano come luoghi tecnologici in cui fornitori di indipendenti servizi possono raggiungere i singoli consumatori, e sono spesso accusate di voler fornire un servizio senza le responsabilità e i costi che derivano dall'avere personale numeroso ed enormi quantità di attrezzature. Allo stesso modo, i social media vogliono ospitare contenuti generati dagli utenti senza le responsabilità dei media e degli editori tradizionali. Paradossalmente, quando le piattaforme cercano di assumersi le proprie responsabilità sociali moderando i contenuti offensivi, pericolosi o controversi, vengono accusate di *bias* politico. Negli ultimi mesi, vari stati USA, tra cui Florida, Texas e California, hanno introdotto leggi per regolamentare come le piattaforme gestiscono i contenuti degli utenti ritenuti politicamente controversi. Questo approccio deriva dall'utilizzo del termine 'politica' inteso come le posizioni partitiche in relazione a problemi quotidiani.

Sebbene il dibattito sui *bias* politici delle piattaforme sia indubbiamente molto importante in una società sempre più digitale, esso trascura la questione più fondamentale, ovvero se le piattaforme, come altri dispositivi tecnologici prima di loro, abbiano un'intrinseca natura politica. Questa tesi esamina la questione più ampia della politica, intesa come le strutture di potere e autorità nei rapporti umani, e cerca di identificarne gli effetti e i requisiti sulla società. Piuttosto che concentrarsi sugli eventi di cronaca, l'analisi è condotta utilizzando come caso di studio Discord, una diffusa piattaforma di messaggistica istantanea gratuita. Questa piattaforma è stata scelta per tre diversi motivi. In primo luogo, è stata studiata e analizzata molto meno rispetto ai giganti dei social media, offrendo alla tesi la possibilità di approfondire temi nuovi e diversi. Inoltre, le sue dimensioni ridotte, rispetto alla maggior parte dei social media e delle piattaforme di messaggistica, rendono l'analisi più accessibile e lineare. Infine, Discord è stato associato dai media ad alcuni eventi di alto profilo dell'*alt-right*, il che lo rende un utile esempio dei limiti posti dalla sola analisi dei *bias* politici delle piattaforme. Osservare Discord da un punto di vista tecnico, invece, permette di comprendere in modo

più completo e approfondito come l'esistenza delle piattaforme possa avere un impatto sulle persone e sulla società.

Il Capitolo 1 esamina la letteratura esistente sulla natura politica dei manufatti e delle tecnologie, per stabilire se possono essere politici. Per analizzare la politica delle piattaforme è necessario innanzitutto stabilire se manufatti e tecnologie possiedono qualità politiche, esaminando nello specifico la politica dei manufatti, di Internet e delle piattaforme. Il quadro interpretativo è fornito dall'articolo pionieristico di Langdon Winner del 1980, "Do artifacts have politics?", intrecciato con le domande di Helen Nissenbaum sui valori alla base della progettazione dei sistemi informatici, contenute in un articolo del 2001. La sezione finale applica queste domande per concettualizzare la politica delle piattaforme. L'analisi condotta in questo capitolo mostra che l'idea che i manufatti siano politici ha almeno un secolo e mezzo di vita, come dimostrano le riflessioni di Engels del 1878 sull'organizzazione dell'industria e le sue relazioni con le strutture di potere. Solo nel 1980, tuttavia, Winner struttura il concetto di manufatti con qualità politiche, superando definitivamente l'idea che la tecnologia sia neutrale. Pur essendo tale concetto ragionevole, non è sufficiente a risolvere la questione. Nella creazione di una tecnologia sono in gioco molti elementi che contribuiscono a definire il contenuto della sua natura politica. Anche se le piattaforme si presentano come neutrali, sono intrinsecamente politiche e sono attori politici a tutti gli effetti.

Il Capitolo 2 descrive Discord. Lanciata nel 2015, la piattaforma è destinata ai videogiocatori ed è organizzata in modo simile alla piattaforma di comunicazione aziendale Slack. Gli utenti inviano messaggi ed effettuano videochiamate tramite *Voice over Internet Protocol* (VoIP), una tecnologia che consente agli utenti di comunicare su Internet invece che sulle tradizionali reti telefoniche. La comunicazione avviene all'interno di comunità che prendono il nome di *server*, che possono essere aperti a tutti o accessibili solo tramite inviti. I server sono costituiti da diverse chat room chiamate *canali*, che possono essere testuali o vocali. Gli utenti possono anche inviare messaggi diretti al di fuori dei server Discord.

Discord è incredibilmente popolare: è passato da 25 milioni di utenti registrati nel 2016 a oltre 300 milioni nel 2020. Ogni mese ci sono 150 milioni di utenti sulla piattaforma e 19 milioni di server attivi a settimana; ciò equivale a 850 milioni di messaggi inviati e quattro miliardi di minuti di conversazione al giorno. Nel tempo, la piattaforma ha tentato di espandere il proprio business ridefinendosi come piattaforma di comunicazione generica. Nonostante una serie di episodi che hanno coinvolto contenuti dell'*alt-right*, tra cui la sparatoria di Buffalo del 2022, la piattaforma ha mantenuto la sua popolarità grazie alla facilità d'uso e alla mancanza di concorrenti diretti.

Nonostante il suo utilizzo sia gratuito, Discord è riuscito a tradurre il suo successo in fatturato. Secondo il Wall Street Journal, nel 2020 l'azienda ha generato \$130 milioni di entrate. L'azienda non

è quotata in borsa e ciò limita la quantità di dati disponibili al pubblico. La crescita nel periodo 2016–2020 è stata guidata da vari fattori, tra cui il diffuso interesse nel *gaming*, l'aumento generale dell'uso di piattaforme di comunicazione durante la pandemia COVID-19, e la facilità d'uso unita al prezzo *freemium* di Discord. Tutto questo ha fatto crescere il suo valore percepito, al punto che Microsoft ha offerto \$10 miliardi per acquistarla. Discord ha rifiutato di vendere, il che suggerisce che gli investitori ritengano che la piattaforma non abbia ancora raggiunto il suo pieno potenziale e tentino di ottenere un ritorno ancora più alto sul loro investimento.

Il Capitolo 3 valuta il modo in cui la piattaforma si relaziona con i suoi utenti, fornendo una comprensione più completa dei suoi valori e del suo funzionamento. A tal fine, si esaminano in maniera approfondita i termini di servizio, l'informativa sulla privacy e il blog di Discord. I termini della piattaforma sono abbastanza standard, anche se in alcuni casi la formulazione è ambigua. Sebbene Discord informi orgogliosamente i propri utenti di non vendere i loro dati, a differenza di altre piattaforme, una lettura dettagliata rivela che i dati vengono condivisi con terze parti solo parzialmente identificate. Questo ed altri dettagli ambigui sono stati criticati da analisti indipendenti come *Terms of Service; Didn't Read* (ToS;DR), **Privacy Not Included* di Mozilla, e il *Privacy Program* di Common Sense Media. L'analisi degli argomenti trattati nel blog è interessante, in quanto rivela ciò che la piattaforma ritiene tanto importante da doverne parlare. Discord, infatti, non si esprime in modo particolare su eventi e questioni politiche di attualità, ed è per questo solo parzialmente utile nel capire la natura politica della piattaforma. È significativo che il blog eviti qualsiasi commento sulla politica, compresi argomenti che riguardano Discord direttamente come l'IA, la moderazione dei contenuti e la *Section 230*, la norma statunitense che esonera le piattaforme dalla normativa sugli editori. In generale, questa mancanza di apertura da parte di Discord sulle proprie politiche aziendali sembra essere in contrasto con quanto fanno le altre piattaforme. Tuttavia, questo non implica necessariamente un atteggiamento malevolo, ma potrebbe semplicemente riflettere la base di utenza più piccola, la diversa demografia e il profilo pubblico più basso della piattaforma.

Lo scopo del Capitolo 4 è utilizzare Discord come case study per capire se le piattaforme siano *technical arrangements as forms of order* (ordinamenti tecnici quali forme di ordine) o se sono tecnologie intrinsecamente politiche, utilizzando il quadro teorico del Capitolo 1 e il *case study* di Discord dei Capitoli 2 e 3. L'impossibilità di classificare Internet come ordinamento tecnico quale forma d'ordine è trattata nel Capitolo 1, e un'argomentazione simile può essere fatta per le piattaforme stesse. Esse non sono state create per determinare un effetto specifico: nessun teorico o ingegnere informatico ha progettato caratteristiche specifiche per produrre intenzionalmente una serie di conseguenze. Ciò significa che le piattaforme devono essere intrinsecamente politiche. E se sono

intrinsecamente politiche, verso quale parte tendono? Come si è detto nel Capitolo 1 a proposito di Internet, le tecnologie possono essere ambigue, prestandosi ad azioni che possono essere viste contemporaneamente come positive e negative. L'opinione diffusa che i social media abbiano polarizzato la società, rendendola meno democratica, è al di fuori dello scopo di questa tesi. Tuttavia, le questioni discusse in questo capitolo, legate ad alcuni elementi centrali delle piattaforme, sono chiaramente significative per la società.

La questione è quindi se le piattaforme abbiano una struttura di potere democratica o autoritaria, e se questa struttura sia strettamente richiesta affinché queste tecnologie esistano. Il concetto di democrazia utilizzato in questo capitolo si riferisce all'idea di libera partecipazione ed uguaglianza; quello di autoritarismo, invece, denota la concentrazione del potere in una sola persona, non scelta dal popolo.

L'organizzazione interna delle piattaforme tende all'autoritarismo perché le piattaforme hanno tipicamente un potere decisionale e informatico/di programmazione centralizzato. Questa preferenza è spiegata soprattutto da necessità pratiche, ma giocano un ruolo importante anche gli affari finanziari. In generale, l'esistenza di piattaforme con strutture interne differenti è possibile, ma quelle *mainstream* e che ottengono successo commerciale sembrano richiedere una struttura centralizzata ed autoritaria. Tuttavia, è difficile sostenere che gli elementi centrali delle piattaforme richiedano un particolare tipo di sistema all'esterno. La moderazione dei contenuti, la privacy e la regolamentazione hanno un effetto sul modo in cui le persone comunicano e su come si sviluppano le conversazioni pubbliche, ma questi elementi non sembrano richiedere che la società sia organizzata in un unico modo.

Questa analisi dimostra la grande varietà all'interno delle piattaforme, evidenziando, in particolare, le caratteristiche uniche che presentano le piattaforme di messaggistica. La varietà è parzialmente dovuta alla complessità di Internet come base tecnica, sulla quale le piattaforme stesse aggiungono ulteriore complessità. La conseguenza di ciò è che non esiste un'unica natura politica delle piattaforme, ma vari aspetti che presentano tendenze diverse. Questo risultato coincide con una possibilità individuata da Winner stesso, ovvero che alcune strutture tecnologiche possano avere aspetti flessibili ed altri completamente rigidi. Lungi dall'essere un aspetto secondario, questo approfondimento è un elemento essenziale per garantire che le osservazioni derivanti dall'analisi delle tecnologie del XIX e XX secolo rimangano rilevanti nello scenario dell'industria digitale del XXI secolo.

Il case study di Discord getta luce sulla persistente validità del quadro interpretativo di Winner. Tuttavia, la natura e il funzionamento interno di Internet e delle piattaforme digitali suggeriscono che l'applicabilità del modello di Winner del 1980 potrebbe avvicinarsi ai limiti della

sua utilità. Una visione olistica delle complessità politiche dei manufatti e delle tecnologie rimane indubbiamente utile e stimolante, in particolare per distinguere tra la politica aziendale e gli accordi di potere dei manufatti. Tuttavia, il pionieristico saggio di Winner risente dal fare riferimento a un'epoca tradizionale ed orientata all'hardware. Traendo i suoi esempi dai settori industriali tradizionali (ad esempio, le ferrovie) e dalle tecnologie energetiche, esso descrive la natura dei manufatti tangibili molto meglio di quella dei servizi, del mondo online e dei modelli di business ibridi contemporanei (ad esempio, la "gig economy"). Come già accennato, questo risultato è coerente con l'affermazione di Winner secondo cui gli aspetti delle tecnologie complesse possono variare, anche se equiparare la messaggistica digitale del XXI secolo ai sistemi generici di comunicazione del secolo precedente richiede un notevole sforzo di immaginazione.

Internet è innegabilmente un manufatto tecnico, anche se molto diverso da quelli prodotti nella prima e nella seconda rivoluzione industriale. Per questo motivo, nonostante i potenziali limiti di un quadro interpretativo vecchio di quasi mezzo secolo, l'intrinseca natura politica rimane un campo di indagine prezioso. L'impatto della piattaforma sulla società e sulla vita quotidiana suggerisce l'importanza di aggiornare il quadro interpretativo per mantenerne la validità in un mondo in continua evoluzione.