JOURNAL OF DIGITAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

WWW.JDSR.IO ISSN: 2003-1998

VOL. X, NO. ,X 20XX, XX–XX

DATA PERVERSION: A PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE ON DATAFICATION

Jacob Johanssen*

ABSTRACT

This article adopts a psychoanalytic perspective and argues that users are in a perverse relationship with contemporary platforms. Following a review of recent critical scholarship on datafication, which places too much emphasis on platforms and situates users as helpless, the psychoanalytic concept of perversion is introduced. Perversion describes a relationship that is characterised by dominance, exploitation and dehumanization as well as care, love, and idealization. While the pervert (the platform and its owners and developers) is the perpetrator, the other (the user) is also actively participating in the perverse relationship. Contemporary relations are thus marked by foregrounding connectivity, convenience and communication which mask the violence of datafication. Such relations are upheld, because users affirmatively reproduce them by using highly attractive platforms which are customized for each individual. Psychoanalysis can thus offer a complex conceptualisation of the interplay between affirmation, attraction and exploitation that is immanent to platforms and users today.

Keywords: Datafication; platforms; users; psychoanalysis; perversion

* St. Mary's University, United Kingdom

1 INTRODUCTION

The term 'datafication', and associated terms like 'big data analytics,' has acquired important meaning in recent years. This is due to the influence of algorithms on digital data, as well as computers' increased capacity to collect, store, and analyse large datasets (Kennedy, 2016; Lupton, 2019). For this article, datafication is defined as both a description of as well as the effort and mechanism itself through which to gather, extract, process and analyse large amounts of (digital) data or to create such data in the first place through conversion of other analogue data into the digital format. Those data are frequently made up of various smaller data and turned into large datasets which are often automatically analysed. The purpose of creating large datasets is often commercial and datafication has become a far-reaching process that reconfigures the social world itself (Couldry & Mejias, 2019a, b). Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias argue that datafication can be understood as something that transforms human life itself and makes it a continual data source (2019a, b). While datafication takes many forms and has consequences for different sectors, this article specifically takes the transformation of human life caused by datafication, for instance in how platforms are used, as a starting point in order to inquire into the relationship between humans as users and processes of datafication (on and by platforms) that they both actively contribute to and are confronted with. It thereby makes a contribution to theoretical debates.

Datafication has various implications for users online, their data and how they are constructed and constituted through them as data subjects and profiles by companies, governments and others (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). It is often inherently tied to commercial aspects. Datasets are sold by companies to other companies. Such processes promise results that show objectively and rationally coded data that corresponds to real individuals, decisions and content online. Yet, any form of data mining involves a complex interplay of decisions made automatically by algorithms as well as un/conscious decisions by humans before, during, and after the data have been created, analysed or visualised. This not only has implications for how we see datafication, but also for how questions of subjectivity inform it. Datafication is also widely discussed in relation to discrimination, for instance when it comes to biased algorithms (Sandvig et al, 2016; Cheney-Lippold, 2017; Chun, 2018; Noble, 2018).

Datafication as the attempt to turn everything into data has implications for how we think about subjectivity and how individuals experience an atmosphere of complete datafication. Rather than writing about datafication per se, this article specifically theorises datafication on commercial platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Uber, Amazon, or Netflix. Those platforms depend on user data which guarantee a functioning of the platforms (i.e. users, who use them, create data) as well as on

collecting and analysing user data, often done for commercial purposes (Fuchs, 2014).[1]

This article makes the argument that the relationship between users and contemporary platforms is a perverse relationship. Perversion is often more commonly linked to sexual deviance, sexual fetishes and sexualities that go against norms and laws, but it is a clinical-psychoanalytic concept that is far more wide-ranging and complex. Drawing on the psychoanalytic concept of perversion, it is argued that users are simultaneously loved and abused, humanized and dehumanized, by platforms, or rather the developers and owners of them, today. This occurs through datafication processes that ultimately aim at analysing everything about human beings. Such processes are masked by the alleged purposes of platforms: to entertain, inform, connect, or provide commodities for purchase. At the same time, perversion entails that the other who is exploited by the pervert willingly participates in the relationship, because they feel loved, cared for and part of an exciting pact (Stein, 2005). Rather than merely an act of one-sided exploitation, domination or colonialism (as some scholars argue, see the next section), datafication is made possible through a relationship in which both 'partners' are active. The perverse relationship of users and platforms thus comes into being via and on those platforms, for example when an individual uses Facebook or Instagram. I do not mean to argue that platforms themselves have a soul, or similar characteristics to human beings. Instead, they serve as spaces where particular psychodynamics come into play which are shaped by platform owners, developers and users.

This article makes a contribution to the growing area of studies on digital media that draws on psychoanalysis (Turkle, 2011; Balick, 2014; Clough, 2018; Johanssen, 2019; Pinchevski, 2019; Singh, 2019). Psychoanalysis, and its specific concepts, allows for a complex perspective on particular phenomena because it places an emphasis on relational dynamics between subjects that are situated between consciousness and the unconscious. Such a perspective can further enrich studies of datafication that frequently grapple with the intersections of the un/known and in/visible, for instance, of algorithms (Bucher, 2018) or platform policies (Gillespie, 2018). I argue that commercial platforms enable a particular relation that users enter into. Some feelings, experiences and thoughts within this relation are unconscious for users, but nonetheless decisively shape it.

Additionally, in foregrounding the psychoanalytic concept of perversion, a prism is opened up that allows to transcend binary perspectives on datafication, and

[1] The term 'platforms' is used here as an umbrella term to include social media, like Facebook or Instagram, as well as apps such as Uber, ecommerce platforms like Amazon, or streaming platforms like Spotify. While they may have varying business models, all are commercial platforms that depend on user data. They 'are digital infrastructures that enable two or more people to connect.' (Srnicek, 2017, p. 43).

by extension networked media more broadly, that either show platforms as completely exploitative and dangerous, or as being harmless tools that users draw on in their everyday lives. It is psychoanalysis that makes space for contradictory modes of experience in which, for instance, feelings of hatred and love are often messily intertwined and un/consciously motivated (Johanssen, 2019).

2 PERSPECTIVES ON DATAFICATION

By and large, structural social theories (theories that emphasise social-structural rather than individual-subjective dimensions of a phenomenon) have sought to define and analyse the current conjuncture of big data by arguing that we are in the age of 'data colonialism' (Couldry & Mejias, 2019a, b), 'data capitalism' (West, 2017), 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff, 2019), 'big data capitalism' (Fuchs 2019) or 'platform capitalism' (Srnicek, 2017).

Many scholars are critical of datafication because it amounts to surveillance. The purpose of datafication on social media for example is primarily to be able to sell certain user data to enable targeted advertising (Fuchs, 2014). Data mining practices are 'discriminatory by design' (Kennedy, 2016, p. 48). Data mining involves the structuring of individual data profiles whereby they are classified according to criteria and often marked as more or less valuable. The precise criteria according to which such data mining occurs are unknown to the general public and, in fact, carefully hidden by its creators and users (Gillespie, 2014; Mosco, 2014). A famous exponent of such a position is Shoshana Zuboff and her arguments on 'surveillance capitalism'. She defines it as 'constituted by unexpected and often illegible mechanisms of extraction, commodification, and control that effectively exile persons from their own behavior while producing new markets of behavioral prediction and modification.' (Zuboff, 2015, p. 75). User data are 'hunted aggressively, procured, and accumulated— largely through unilateral operations designed to evade individual awareness and thus bypass individual decision rights––operations that are therefore best summarized as "surveillance."' (Zuboff, 2019, online). This extends to the active shaping of user actions, she argues. Rather than merely predicting them through data analytics, companies have turned to actively modify user behaviour so that it 'reliably, definitively, and certainly leads to predicted commercial results' (2019, online). The goal, as Zuboff puts it, is to automate and control humans and human behaviour itself.

Couldry and Mejias (2019a, b) make similar arguments as Zuboff when it comes to surveillance in the datafied society. They use the term colonialism not in the metaphorical but in the literal sense to analyse the impacts of datafication. For them, data colonialism refers to 'something [that] is taken from things and processes, something which was not already there in discrete form before.' (Couldry & Mejias, 2019b, p. 2). This means that humans have become the raw material that can be appropriated via datafication.

Like traditional colonialism, which expropriates both territories and humans, under data colonialism humans are exploited and appropriated without much ability to resist. Data colonialism occurs through social relations in which human data are extracted and appropriated from humans with the aim of profit maximization (Couldry & Mejias, 2019a). Such relations are termed 'data relations' by Couldry and Mejias (Couldry & Mejias, 2019a, p. 27). In short, humans exist to be conquered and used as far as the viewpoint of platforms goes. Practices of data colonialism know no limit; they are about constant exploration, expansion, extraction, exploitation, and extermination in relation to human data (2019a, pp. 91-108). Luke Munn's (2019) argument in relation to Uber illustrates this. He writes that Uber behaves like an imperial power that is primarily interested in growing its user base by conquering cities across the world. Profit is secondary, what matters is user growth (Munn, 2019). In our world, everything and everyone become datafied and part of data relations.

In their book, Couldry and Mejias specifically focus on the human subject whose data are colonised (2019a, chapter 5). They argue that data colonialism fundamentally threatens human autonomy in relation to the social world. Individuals become mere entities 'plugged into an external system' (2019, p. 164). This results in the very understanding of the self that individuals hold being disrupted and undone. There is a contradiction between how the individual sees their own complex identity and how it is mirrored and thrown back at them through datafication (Johanssen, 2019). The datafied self no longer has any space of their own and their freedom is limited. The notion of data relations is particularly useful and can be enriched by putting forward that those relations often take particularly perverse forms.

Antoinette Rouvroy (2013) has similarly argued that data mining and algorithm-based profiling ignore the embodied self behind a user's data and instead construct a dichotomy between them and a statistical subject. For corporations, 'the subjective singularities of individuals, their personal psychological motivations or intentions do not matter.' (Rouvroy, 2013, p. 157). Human experience is reduced to 'measurable observable behavior' (Zuboff, 2019, online), as Zuboff notes.

What all of the above accounts have in common is that they situate datafication (and related processes) as something exterior to humans; as (automated or manually executed) processes that affect humans from the outside. Human subjects lack the knowledge, means, or power to adequately resist such practices they are faced with. Datafication refers to something that is done to them. While from a structural perspective such arguments may have some truth in them, I argue that they are too simplistic and one-sided. Datafication in the form of surveillance may take such forms where an external power spies on individuals or collects their data without their consent, as for instance revealed by Edward Snowden or the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Additionally, datafication also takes the form of corporate surveillance where (often low-paid) workers are continuously tracked. However, such instances are extreme forms of datafication. The scholars named

above fail to account for the complexities that are inherent to mundane, everyday datafication. In the logic of the above accounts (a review that is by no means exhaustive), humans are confronted with big, anonymous powers like Google, Facebook, Tencent, or governments and they cannot help but have their data extracted, analysed and used for purposes they do not fully understand or consent to. Such scholarship points to definitions of datafication and our current conjuncture in which users' behaviour is accessed and monitored (Van Dijck, 2014, p. 1478). Users are frequently discussed in passive terms and their data are seen as being collected and monetized rather than taking into account that it is users who produce and create their data in the first place. Datafication is not only something that is done to users, but they actively participate in such relations as well. Such critical perspectives on platform power are important. I want to take them as a starting point and think further about the active role that users assume. I do not think that terms like 'data colonialism' or 'surveillance capitalism' capture the full complexity at the heart of platforms and their users.

Christian Fuchs (e.g. 2014) has incorporated a more active position in his work on digital labour when he argues that users actually work for free when they use commercial social media and create data which is, secondly, used for targeted advertising and other means of profit maximization by social media companies (see also Jarrett, 2016).[2] For the most part, however, critical scholarship on such questions renders users passive and helpless. Such a perspective fails to account for the triadic relationship of users, data, and platforms in which users play an active and often highly voluntary part. While I agree with the critical stance on datafication that the above scholars adopt, I argue that a psychoanalytic perspective which takes account of the contradictory dimensions of such a relationship can enrich critical works like the ones discussed in this section. Users often want and *desire* datafication and wider surrounding dynamics. They wilfully enter into particular data relationships. The relationship is specifically a perverse one. Conceptualising it as perverse also allows an analysis of the ideology of tech companies which are seemingly about care, user empowerment and communication.

Conceptualising datafication as a relation, and not as an obscure force, omnipotent power, or one-sided process is helpful for taking account of both the users and the platforms that are responsible for datafication (behind which are of course other humans). The conceptualisation of a perverse relation also allows for critical as well as positive dimensions to be analysed in such a relation. Perversion in this context is not meant in a pathologizing way, or used to blame users for being

[2] Deborah Lupton presents an exception and has put forward the notion of 'data selves' (Lupton, 2019) by which she means an intertwinement of human bodies and more-than human phenomena which takes specific account of human agency.

allegedly sexually perverted, sick or stupid. As I discuss below, perversion functions in a relationship in which both parties are active participants.

3 PERVERSION AS A CLINICAL CONCEPT

As briefly mentioned, perversion is more commonly associated with sexual practices. The quintessential practice of the perverse in adult sexuality is often named as BDSM: sado-masochism, dominance and submission, or bondage and discipline. Dynamics in which mainstream sexual norms and practices are often changed, reversed, or altered. BDSM, under explicit attention to consent, plays with pleasure and pain, humiliation and degradation, as well as meticulous care, love and idealization. It usually functions along a binary power dynamic where one partner takes the dominant part and the other the submissive part. One gives up all power and agency and hands it to the other. Such dynamics can be thrilling, sexually arousing and liberating for those who practice them (Weiss, 2011; Simula, 2019). 'Perversion is thus not only polymorphous sexual anarchy, but also a powerful means of expressing hostility and hatred' (Stein, 2005, p. 780) through care and love. Within the sexual realm, this is not necessarily problematic for as long as perversion is practiced by consenting adults.

I argue that there is a particular perverse dimension to datafication as it occurs on commercial platforms: a perverse double bind that simultaneously treasures users and exploits their data, cherishes them as subjects and abuses them as objects. Danielle Knafo and Rocco Lo Bosco (2017) have recently written about perversion as a phenomenon in the contemporary age. On a basic level, perversion points to a relationship between individuals (often a dyadic one, for instance in couples) that is fundamentally structured by love and care as well as exploitation, humiliation and destruction. It is a concept which has been conceptualised differently by clinicians (Knafo & Lo Bosco, 2017). Perversion, for many psychoanalysts including Freud, is at the core of sexuality but moves outwards to penetrate all spheres of society and human relationships. For Freud, sexuality is in itself inherently perverse, because it is initially outside of any social norms or particular prohibitions. For the young infant, sexual stimuli can be found in any object and any part of the body. Sexuality only becomes particularly codified and associated with specific pleasures, erogenous zones, sexual orientations, etc. as the individual grows up (Freud, 1981).

It may already become apparent at this stage, that similar dialectical relations can exist when we consider corporate platforms, such as Instagram or Facebook, that are grounded in both exploitation of and love for users on the part of the platform owners, and simultaneous feelings of degradation and intense validation on the part of the users.

Perversion becomes particularly problematic however when it is pathologically and universally used to mask exploitation and destruction through feelings of love, care and (self)-discovery. For that reason, perversion beyond its sexual-consensual imperatives is of particular interest to psychoanalysts. For

instance, when they see patients who are in perverse relationships. Such relationships can be deeply destructive and dangerous, in particular for the one who is ab/used by the pervert (Bach, 1994) and yet patients often report great difficulty in getting out of the relationship because they feel so deeply entranced by and intertwined with the pervert (for case study discussions see e.g. Baker, 1994; Stein, 2005; Celenza, 2014). It is this form of pathological perversion that I take to be similarly present in (data) relations that are enacted by platforms and individuals.

Danielle Knafo and Rocco Lo Bosco name six characteristics that unite different psychoanalytic discussions of perversion. Perversion is universal; it functions across a spectrum of varying degrees; it may relate to trauma and loss which is disavowed and masked through perversion; it may feature sado-masochistic dynamics in relationships; it features experiences of excitement, mastery and illusion; and it is expressed differently by men and women (Knafo & Lo Bosco, 2017, pp. 52-54).

The British object-relations tradition within psychoanalysis in particular has stressed that perversion takes place in relationships. The perverse relationship is often one that comes about because of seduction, enmeshment, intertwinement, or a kind of stumbling movement in which one partner finds themself at the mercy of another while simultaneously desiring and seemingly needing just that (Stein, 2005).

The perverse subject, or pervert, regards the other in a relationship as an object. They are treated with hatred, cruelty and humiliation (Bach, 1994; Stein, 2005). At the same time, a perverse relationship resembles one of recognition and care while those attributes are in reality betrayed (Stein, 2005, pp. 780-781). A perverse relationship constitutes the creation of a singular world that shuts out reality and external influences. New rules for and in the relationship are created. Perversion is thus often an attempt to ignore, subvert or actively go against the law. The pervert's object – whether it be a real person or a physical object - is (ab)used and manipulated while at the same time being idealized and cherished (Khan, 1979; Celenza, 2014).

This article unfolds the theoretical argument that a similar dynamic is at play in the relationship between many contemporary platforms and their users. Under the guise of communication and connection, Facebook for example lures its users into a relationship that is in reality based on exploitation. Users are addressed as unique individuals who are encouraged to express themselves online through the various functions of the platforms and yet they consent (whether to their knowledge or not) to being sold as data profiles to advertisers. This double mechanism with which Facebook, and other platforms, binds users has perverse tendencies. The psychoanalyst Masut Khan argued that the pervert's object resides in a space between her and the other, between fantasy and reality. Therefore, it can be 'invented, manipulated, used and abused, ravaged and discarded, cherished and idealized, symbiotically identified with and deanimated all at once' (Khan, 1979, p. 26). This in-between space at the intersections of user and platform symbolises the

rupture between a sense of who users think they are and who they are in the eyes of Google, Facebook, Twitter, Weibo, Netflix, Uber and others. Users are loved and instrumentally used at the same time. Theorising this relationship as one of perversion opens up a unique perspective through which to analyse it. It places an emphasis on the dynamics between users and platforms, rather than just on platforms themselves. This psychoanalytic perspective opens up an angle that foregrounds ambivalence, contradiction and a love-hate relationship that is at the heart of profit-driven 'data relations' (Couldry & Mejias, 2019a, p. 27) today. Users are often very aware of the exploitative relationship they are in, but feel unable to leave a platform (Karppi 2018). It is this psychodynamic of knowing particular negative aspects of a commercial platform, but of also un/consciously feeling loved and cared for by a platform's structure that can be explored further through psychoanalysis.

4 DATA PERVERSION IN THE PLATFORM

The key characteristics that Couldry and Mejias (2019a) isolate when it comes to data colonialism – the ever-expanding practices of wanting to own, use, and analyse as much user data as possible – point to desires of omnipotence and mastery on the part of the tech companies that we similarly find on the part of the pervert in the perverse relationship. They want to own and manipulate the other at any cost. This works through practices of how such platforms address users as individual subjects, as I outline further in the next section. On the surface, platforms like Facebook, or Netflix are about particular services (communication, maintaining friendships, streaming series and films). They are convenient, easy to use, and popular. Such platforms depend on the collection, tracking and analysis of user data (Kennedy, 2016). 'But there is nothing comforting about this. Even though the new social knowledge is produced through operations that bypass human beings, it is actual human beings, not "doubles," who are tethered to the discriminations that such knowledge generates.' (Couldry & Mejias, 2019b, p. 344). The human subject is abstracted into data and 'traded in proxy form' (2019b, p. 345). We can further analyse such relations by paying attention to their perverse elements. The pervert – i.e. the platform – wishes to own, manipulate, dominate, and play with the other (the users) in the perverse relationship. This is accomplished by 'making submission to tracking a requirement of daily life' (Couldry & Mejias, 2019a, p. 157, italics in original). The term 'submission' is interesting here, for it suggests that users are in a perverse, sado-masochistic relationship to platforms. They are made to submit in exchange for services – and domination. All this happens while platforms fundamentally deny or downplay their datafication practices and restrict external access via their APIs (Bruns, 2018). They emphasise sociability, convenience, entertainment, connection, and care. They create a new reality where legitimate concerns that users have are negated. This is the ultimate aim of the pervert: to create a reality that shuts out everything else that is beyond the relationship. The

reality that platforms create is that users need them in order to be able to live full lives and be an ordinary human being. Such strategies of user retention and keeping users attached to platforms show themselves in a particular way. Stein defines the perverse relationship as:

> Two features common to both sexual and non-sexual perverse relations are (1) the seductive and bribing aspects of perversion, and (2) its means-ends reversal, that is, the turning of the means into an end in itself, and the bending of a purported end into a means for something else, i.e. a hidden agenda. Perversion as a mode of relatedness points to relations of seduction, domination, psychic bribery and guileful uses of 'innocence', all in the service of exploiting the other. (Stein, 2005, p. 781, italics in original)

Such a description can also serve to designate what is meant by data perversion. Users are seduced into using platforms because they offer particular means (e.g. calling an Uber, watching a film on Netflix, buying a book on Amazon, chatting to a friend on Facebook). Those means really do exist and bind users to those platforms. Platforms fulfil a purpose for users and often make their lives easier. However, in reality, as we see with Stein above, those means are just means to an invisible end. The hidden agenda is data collection for the purposes of profit maximization and user growth.

We can see how such dynamics operate by drilling down further into datafication as such. Datafication often makes use of a particular, binary logic: target or waste (Kennedy, 2016). Users are automatically classified into categories which are often constructed based on particular types (in the case of targeted advertising for example). John Cheney-Lippold (Lippold, 2017) has discussed this and comes up with the term 'measurable type'. Based on the data we produce, any data and not just social media data, we are turned into measurable types, or digital subjects. It is not only that user data are sold, they are also used to determine who users are for social media companies such as Google, Facebook, Weibo and Twitter for example. Based on usage of such platforms, patterns are established. Those patterns lead to the automatic creation of profiles (data shadows) of who users are for them.

> Measurable types are most often subterranean, protected and unavailable for critique, all while we unconsciously sway to undulating identifications. Every time we surf the web, we are profiled with measurable types by marketing and analytic companies […]. We are assigned identities when we purchase a product, walk down a street monitored by CCTV cameras, or bring our phones with us on vacation to Italy. (Cheney-Lippold, 2017, p. 66)

This intense monitoring and datafication of individuals leads to a practice of subjects being coded as if they are someone or fit to already established categories rather than being directly addressed in their full complexity, Cheney-Lippold has argued. Additionally, the digital mirror-images of users' online selves are never fixed and always dynamic, depending on if their behaviour online changes. The, at times, fundamental discrepancy and contradiction between who users think they are and who platforms like Facebook or Google think they are introduces an 'alien' (Cheney-Lippold, 2017, p. 193) dimension into the contemporary moment of data-driven subjectivities. This perverse act of cherishing users and offering them connectivity, information and communication, only to be then turned against them in the form of data mining and profiling amounts to a fundamental practice of dehumanization that is inherent in perversion (Knafo & Lo Bosco, 2017).

Such a relationship means that the subject feels alienated form themself, feels a gap or distance between themself and the data shadow or data double. The goal on the part of the pervert is 'to erase difference'. This is done 'by assuming—and seductively "demonstrating" through creating a semblance of intimacy—that one knows the other from the inside out, that people are knowable by the force of one's will' (Stein, 2005, p. 790). This is precisely what happens in the perverse relationship between users and platforms. Users are clustered together according to specific categories so that similarities and differences can be analysed (Chun, 2018). All of this is done under the illusion of providing knowledge, transparency and connectivity to users. It is suggested that platforms know what users want and can provide it. Datafication is not only about mining data from individual subjects, it is about collecting massive datasets so that patterns can be found and conclusions about millions of individuals can be drawn. Users are both valued as individuals and devalued by becoming just small data points amongst millions of others. The other is thereby rendered 'into a mechanized and digitalized entity, a robotized mechanism, occasionally multiplied into an anonymous crowd of uniform, faceless robots.' (Stein, 2005, p. 778). Such acts demonstrate the violence of datafication that many scholars have highlighted (Fuchs, 2014; Couldry & Mejias, 2019a; Zuboff, 2019).

However, and this is a crucial dimension of perversion as a psychoanalytic concept, such forms of dehumanization and exploitation can only work in a relationship if they are coupled with and masked by intense feelings of love, care, and idealization. The pervert purports to deeply love and worship the other, in order to be able to manipulate her. While perversion is a form of exploitative seduction, it is nonetheless accompanied by love, care and warmth at the same time. The same dynamics are in place on the part of perverse platforms today: they love, idealize and care for their users. Otherwise the platforms would cease to exist. They depend on continuous user engagement and therefore must provide functioning services, more content, new features, constant updates (Chun, 2016) to keep users attached and within the relationship. Contemporary platforms are so effective at achieving this, because they address users individually and communicate how valued each and

everyone of them is to them. Users feel valued and cared for by the platforms that they use. Such feelings of warmth, communication and care are genuine on the part of the platform owners, because, after all, users lead to revenue. However, it is important to stress that perversion is not a one-sided form of exploitation, violence, or manipulation of the other against her will. It goes beyond forms of colonialism in that sense. Perversion constitutes a relationship, a 'perverse pact' as Stein (2005, p. 774) calls it, in which the other willingly (un/consciously) participates. It 'is essentially a power strategy geared to derail the other by subtly seducing him into becoming a willing partner and excited colluder in the pervert's project' (2005, p. 782). How then do users come to be voluntary partners in perverse data relations? The next section moves from the perspective of the platform to that of the user.

5 USERS: FEELING LOVED AND VALUED IN THE PERVERSE PACT

A further dimension is added when we consider that users themselves place a great amount of trust into the services that they use. Many believe that for instance targeted advertising, recommendation systems or other automated mechanisms online enhance their lives – and they do. Through their actions they are complicit in the forms of dehumanization they are subjected to.

Couldry and Mejias argue that consent is often implicit within data relations. Users vaguely know or know nothing at all about how their data are used, tracked, or sold on various platforms. Users opt into data relations because otherwise the platforms would be unavailable to them. They claim that if the fact that platforms own user data would be more explicit, users would contest this more often (Couldry & Mejias, 2019a, p. 29). This may be true, but at the same time, there is now widespread knowledge or at least assumption on the part of many users about questions of data ownership (Perrin, 2018; Brown, 2020). The Snowden leaks and the Cambridge Analytica scandal contributed to wider diffusion of such knowledge (Dencik & Cable, 2017; Fuchs & Trottier, 2017). Users are thus perhaps more willing to participate in data relations than Couldry and Mejias think. Why then is this the case? It could be a lack of alternatives and social pressure (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013). Users simply have to opt in because otherwise they would miss out. This explanation is too simple. Zuboff argues that users defend against datafication, tracking and surveillance:

> User dependency is thus a classic Faustian pact in which the felt needs for effective life vie against the inclination to resist instrumentarian power's bold incursions. This conflict produces a psychic numbing that inures users to the realities of being tracked, parsed, mined, and modified. It disposes users to rationalize the situation in resigned cynicism, shelter behind defense mechanisms ('I have nothing to hide'), or find other ways to stick their heads in the sand, choosing ignorance out of frustration and

> helplessness. In this way, surveillance capitalism imposes a fundamentally illegitimate choice that twenty-first-century individuals should not have to make, and its normalization leaves users dancing in their chains. (Zuboff, 2019, online)

However, such an argument renders users as innocent and defensive beings who give up resistance in apathy. Instead, I argue that users actively participate in their own domination and exploitation, not because they are duped or manipulated. There is something thrilling about it. The perverse character of such a relation helps to explain the willingness on the part of the users to consent to giving up data ownership. It is not just that users opt in because they have no alternative option, contemporary data platforms are so effective because (1) they show users that they are loved and needed by those platforms and (2) that users can feel themselves valued and powerful because the platforms are customised for them. The social character of Amazon, Facebook, Uber or Netflix shows itself in individual user accounts. Users construct profiles and their experience of using the platform is shaped by the data they create. Users can use platforms, social media in particular, according to their desires and create content, exchange opinions, find friends, etc. They can use them according to their own thoughts and goals. Platforms (literally) recognize them and suggest exciting opportunities whenever users log on. Stein writes about 'the talent of the perverse person to give her object, the chosen other, an exquisite feeling of entitlement, through keenly sensing the other's wishes and desires and exquisitely fulfilling them, thereby ensuring the other's bondage.' (Stein 2005, 794). Facebook serves as a good example here to illustrate how users are recognized, valued and cared for. 'What is on your mind?, Facebook asks its users. 'What is happening?', Twitter wishes to know. The more time users spend on those platforms and the more data they generate, the more are they rewarded through the inherent interface features of the platforms. At the end of one year, Facebook sent me a celebratory message: 'Jacob, you've made 20 friends on Facebook this year! Thank you for making the world a bit closer. We think this is something to celebrate!'. A few months later, I received the following: 'Jacob, your friends have liked your posts 6,000 times! We're glad you're sharing your life with the people you care about on Facebook.'. After responding to a Facebook survey, I was told: 'Thank you, Jacob! We'll use your feedback to improve Facebook. If you want, you can add comments too.'. It perhaps speaks volumes that upon hiding an advertisement on Facebook, users can select from a number of reasons why they chose to do so: 'Knows too much', 'irrelevant', 'too personal', 'sensitive topic', 'already purchased' or 'repetitive'.

Such messages, distinctly aimed at myself as an individual subject who is in (data) relations with other users, denote a happy feeling of a community on the platform. They address me in positive ways and value my existence on Facebook. They do not say who else has been viewing part of my data and how much money

Facebook has made from my data being sold for targeted advertising. I, and everyone else, feels valued and cared for by such messages.

> The other is made to share a vague but intense hope of great fulfillment and often love, and, if the strategy is sophisticated enough, the seduction of the other is made to seem like mutual self-discovery, or like a desire originating from within the seduced person, rather than the premeditated strategy of the seducer that it is. (Stein, 2005, p. 782)

Such feelings are similar to feelings of seduction, because I know that Facebook collects my data for particular purposes. Nonetheless, I am willingly participating in the perverse pact: 'a relationship between two accomplices, a mutual agreement woven of complex, twisted relations and excited games, embedded in multilayered degrees of awareness and obliviousness.' (Stein, 2005, p. 787). Facebook has given us the opportunity to ignore or negate questions of data ownership, surveillance, etc. because communication, care, and love is foregrounded on the part of the platform. We affirmatively respond to such a strategy by continuing to use the platform, uploading our data, and sharing it with others and often receiving recognition, care, and love from others in return (Balick, 2014). Through such an ideology, which is inherently perverse because it masks the commercial interests of platforms, we happily consent to signing 'an implicit contract […] against reality' (Stein, 2005, p. 793). This contract, signed literally by agreeing to any platform's terms and conditions, is 'aimed at a constant mutual reassurance and the professing of a love that is false' (2005, pp. 793-794).

6 CONCLUSION

This article responds to recent critical scholarship on datafication and presented the argument that users are in a perverse relationship to the platforms they use. Through datafication platforms believe that they are able to fully capture subjects and turn them into commodifiable datasets. In that sense, a subject is made to be mirrored in various datasets they have created online and reassembled by apps, social media companies, streaming services, data brokers and other stakeholders. This is done over and over on a large scale and gives rise to 'big data': large datasets that are made up of thousands of different data points. Individual, subjectively created data thus constitutes the elements of big data and is at the same disavowed through it being bundled together with vast amounts of other data such as meta-data or data that the subject may have left behind involuntarily. Platforms, such as social media, are dependent on individuals who create and use data, but a real meaning and economic asset is only acquired through an accumulation into large datasets. Individual subjectivities and how they are expressed online thus become embraced and disavowed by platforms at the same time. The subject is lured into producing ever more data and turned into a commodified entity that is surveilled

and used. Subjects are thus affecting their data creation, voluntary and involuntary, and are likewise affected by datafication processes which often result in their data being merged with other data, sold and bought.

The relationship between users and the services and platforms which mine / use their data is complicated and symbiotic. Users have become embedded in a perverse relationship. There is a strong imbalance between how the users perceive the relation to platforms and how the platforms (and their owners, developers and other staff) perceive their relations to users. While users are, so it appears, cared for by e.g. Facebook, Netflix or Uber in so far as they are given platforms that they can use, where rules are laid down and enforced (Balick, 2014) beneath the surface, this feeling of security is broken and users are denied mastery over their data and their destiny. Users are subjected to love and care, and to abuse and exploitation at the same time by Facebook, Netflix and others through enabling communication and sociality as well as destruction and reshaping of their online subjectivities through datafication. The clinical concept of perversion furthermore suggests that users play an active part in entering into and sustaining such a relationship. They want to feel valued, cared for and idealized. At the same time, they know what happens to their data and nonetheless remain on the platforms. The positive aspects are emphasised and the dark aspects of datafication are negated or downplayed by users as well as by platforms. Data perversion should thus perhaps be responded to with another psychoanalytic notion: a healthy form of paranoia.

Drawing on the psychoanalytic concept of perversion in order to advance theorisations of big data is useful because it can add further layers of complexity to this topic. Psychoanalysis shifts the focus to (seemingly) contradictory, ambiguous and ambivalent modes and moments within the human subject and intersubjective relations. Such relations include mediated and datafied relations as they express themselves on commercial platforms that rely on big data analytics for their business models. Psychoanalysis upholds that subjects are often embedded within particular psychodynamics that are damaging to their mental health. Yet, they find themselves deeply drawn to and unable to leave such relations, because they are un/consciously and affectively invested in them. Naturally, the platforms that they use also provide convenient services (communication, connection, sharing of content, accessing resources, etc.) that are deeply meaningful to users. Regarding platforms as inherently exploitative or useful only scratches the surface. A psychoanalytic perspective can shed light on how users and owners, developers, and support staff have un/consciously created a complex symbiosis.

FUNDING STATEMENT (AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS)

No funding was used as part of the research for this article.

REFERENCES

Bach, S. (1994). *The Language of perversion and the language of love*. Northvale, NJ: Aronson.

Baker, R. (1994). Psychoanalysis as a lifeline: A clinical study of a transference perversion. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 75(4), 743-753.

Balick, A. (2014). *The psychodynamics of social networking: Connected-up instantaneous culture and the self*. London: Karnac Books.

Brown, A. J. (2020). "Should I stay or should I leave?": Exploring (dis) continued Facebook use after the Cambridge Analytica scandal. *Social Media + Society*, 6(1), 1-8. 10.1177/2056305120913884.

Bruns, A. (2019). After the 'APIcalypse': social media platforms and their fight against critical scholarly research. *Information, Communication & Society*, 22(11), 1544-1566. /10.1080/1369118X.2019.1637447.

Celenza, A. (2014). *Erotic revelations: Clinical applications and perverse scenarios*. London: Routledge.

Cheney-Lippold, J. (2017). *We are data: Algorithms and the making of our digital selves*. New York: NYU Press.

Chun, W. H. K. (2016). *Updating to remain the same. Habitual new media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Chun, Wendy H. K. (2018). 'Queerying homophily'. In: Apprich, C./Chun, W. H. K./Cramer, F./Steyerl, H. (Eds.): *Pattern discrimination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press and Meson Press, 59-98.

Clough, P. T. (2018). *The user unconscious: On affect, media, and measure*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Couldry, N. & Mejias, U. (2019a). *The costs of connection: How data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2019b). Data colonialism: Rethinking big data's relation to the contemporary subject. *Television & New Media*, 20(4), 336-349. 10.1177/1527476418796632.

Dencik, L., & Cable, J. (2017). The advent of surveillance realism: Public opinion and activist responses to the Snowden leaks. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 763-781.

Freud S. (1981) *Three essays on the theory of sexuality. The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume VII. A case of hysteria, three essays on sexuality, and other works*. London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Fuchs, C. (2014). *Digital labour and Karl Marx*. London: Routledge.

Fuchs, C. (2019). Karl Marx in the age of big data capitalism. In: Chandler, D. & Fuchs, C. (eds.) *Digital objects, digital subjects: Interdisciplinary perspectives on capitalism, labour and politics in the age of big data*. London: University of Westminster Press, 53–71.

Fuchs, C. and S. Sevignani. (2013). What is digital labour? What is digital work? What's their difference? And why do these questions matter for understanding social media? *triple C—Journal For A Global Sustainable information Society*, 11(2), 237–293. 10.31269/triplec.v11i2.461.

Fuchs, C., & Trottier, D. (2017). A critical empirical study of computer experts' attitudes on commercial and state surveillance of the Internet and social media post-Edward Snowden. *Journal of Information, Communication & Ethics in Society*, 15(4), 412-444. 10.1108/JICES-01-2016-0004.

Gillespie, T. (2014). The relevance of algorithms. In: Gillespie, T., Boczkowski, P. and K. Foot (Eds.): *Media technologies. Essays on communication, materiality, and society*. Cambridge, MA: the MIT Press, 167–194.

Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the internet. Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Jarett, K. (2016). *Feminism, labour and digital media: The digital housewife*. New York: Routledge.

Johanssen, J. (2019). *Psychoanalysis and digital culture: Audiences, social media, and big data*. London: Routledge.

Karppi, T. (2018). *Disconnect. Facebook's affective bonds*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Kennedy, H. (2016). *Post, mine, repeat: Social media data mining becomes ordinary*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Khan, M. (1979). *Alienation in perversions*. New York: International Universities Press.

Knafo, D. and Lo Bosco, R. (2017). *The age of perversion: Desire and technology in psychoanalysis and culture*. London: Routledge.

Lupton, D. (2019). Data selves: *More-than-human perspectives*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Mosco, V. (2014). *To the cloud. Big data in a turbulent world*. London: Routledge.

Munn, L. (2019). Cash burning machine: Uber's logic of planetary expansion. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 17(2), 185-201. 10.31269/triplec.v17i2.1097.

Noble, S. (2018). *Algorithms of oppression. How search engines reinforce racism.* New York: New York University Press.

Perrin, A. (2018). Americans are changing their relationship with Facebook. *Pew Research Center*, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/05/americans-are-changing-their-relationship-with-facebok.

Pinchevski, A. (2019). *Transferred wounds: Media and the mediation of trauma*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rouvroy, A. (2013). 'The end(s) of critique: Data-behaviourism vs. due process'. In: Hildebrandt, M. & De Vries, K. (Eds.). *Privacy, due process and the*

computational turn: The philosophy of law meets the philosophy of technology. London: Routledge, 143-168.

Sandvig, C., Hamilton, K., Karahalios, K., & Langbort, C. (2016). Automation, algorithms, and politics. When the algorithm itself is a racist: Diagnosing ethical harm in the basic components of software. *International Journal of Communication*, 10(2016), 4972–4990.

Simula, B. L. (2019). Pleasure, power, and pain: A review of the literature on the experiences of BDSM participants. *Sociology Compass*, 13(3), e12668. 10.1111/soc4.12668.

Singh G. (2018). *The death of web 2.0. Ethics, connectivity and recognition in the twenty-first century*. London: Routledge.

Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Stein, R. (2005). Why perversion? "False love" and the perverse pact. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 86(3), 775– 799. /10.1516/PFHH-8NW5-JM3Y-V70P

Turkle, S. (2011). Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less *from each other*. New York: Basic Books.

van Dijck, J. (2014). Datafication, dataism and dataveillance: Big data between scientific paradigm and ideology. *Surveillance & Society*, 12(2), 197–208. 10.24908/ss.v12i2.4776.

Weiss, M. (2011). Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the circuits of sexuality. Durham: Duke University Press.

West, S. M. (2017). Data capitalism: Redefining the logics of surveillance and privacy. *Business & Society*, 58(1), 20-41. 10.1177/0007650317718185.

Zuboff, S. (2015). Big other: Surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization. *Journal of Information Technology*, 30(1), 75-89. 10.1057/jit.2015.5.

Zuboff, S. (2019). Surveillance capitalism and the challenge of collective action. *New Labor Forum*. https://newlaborforum.cuny.edu/2019/01/22/surveillance-capitalism/.