

THINK PIECE 96

**“Making the future: a new software for  
the Left”**  
*Hannah O’Rourke*

# THINK PIECE

## #96

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By Hannah O'Rourke

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hannah O'Rourke is Senior Programme Manager for Labour Together. With a background in political research and campaigning, she is passionate about building networks to make politics more open, collaborative and focused on the future.

With thanks to Edward Saperia and the fellows of Newspeak House, Neal Lawson, Morgan McSweeney, Jonathan Rutherford and Dr Adrian Pabst for the enlightening conversations that informed the writing of this paper.

### ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

In this piece, Hannah O'Rourke explores the ways in which our online world is shaping our social interaction - and political awareness. She shows how the use of certain tools incentivises forms of communication and exchange which can run counter to our political values. In response, she argues that the left needs to play a more active role in building online spaces that facilitate co-operation, co-production and solidarity.

Compass is keen to keep exploring these key issues and would welcome any comments or ideas about how.

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*“Technologists cannot simply leave the social and ethical questions to other people, because the technology directly affects these matters.”*

Tim Berners-Lee, creator of the Internet, 2000

## The Age of Participation

The technology writer Clay Shirky argues that with the rise of social media we are witnessing a revolution in mass communications, similar to the one that was heralded by the introduction of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

For Shirky the near ubiquity of the smartphone and the consequential rise of social media is simultaneously both increasing our proximity to each other and providing us with the tools to participate, collaborate and create. In his view, this has led to a move away from a broadcasting model, where channels of communication are one way and controlled by institutions (for example TV and printing) towards more participative forms and media (online forums and videos). Rather than just passively consuming media, we now have the tools and technology to co-create in an unprecedented way. We are no longer content to simply sit back and consume - instead, we expect to be collaborators, participators and creators.

What should be the left’s response to this new age of participation? In trying to answer this question, it seems we face an existential challenge. The opening up of a new “online world” offers limitless opportunities to empower people, establish more decentralised forms of decision making, and give voice to the voiceless. Yet, as it is currently constituted, many of the social platforms that make up the architecture of our “online world” are transforming the very relationships on which the foundations of our movement rest.

## Who owns the means of participation?

In Clay Shirky’s new world, who sets the terms under which we participate? While this was the subject of the famous and still disputed Carr-Benkler wager<sup>1</sup>, the challenge remains. Our means of participating are mostly limited to platforms created and controlled by large technology corporations such as Facebook. Though their foundational aims may originally have been different, these companies are currently aimed to maximise profit. Like so many communal public spaces in the offline world, online public spaces have followed suit in being commoditized. Though nearly all are free to use, they subsist through advertising revenues, which means they sell access to us and information about our interactions.

Surely this is a form of the very consumption from which Shirky hoped we would be freed. Where is the co-production that the internet promised to facilitate? Can we even achieve this when these spaces are currently managed and controlled by capitalism? This underlying motivation generates a number of inherent tensions between the professed mission of Facebook to “*bring the world closer together*” and the way their platform actually structures interaction. From the datafication of social relationships to the birth of the “attention economy”, we need to understand how we ourselves are being used within this new system.

## Datafication, Commoditization?

The struggle to win favour in the “attention economy” has worrying consequences. From Facebook to Snapchat to Instagram, new online spaces are increasingly dubbed “participation farms”, designed to

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<sup>1</sup>Wikipedia, Carr-Benkler Wager, Available from: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carr%E2%80%93Benkler\\_wager](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carr%E2%80%93Benkler_wager) [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

distract us and encourage us to spend more and more time on the platform, consuming and posting in an endless cycle. The advertisers don't just pay for access - they also pay for information, information that can be commoditised, counted and quantified. Social media platforms observe and structure our interactions with each other in a way that can be quantified and therefore bought and sold. This process directly structures our online social relationships, commoditizing our interactions and creating a sense of alienation from our own thoughts, feelings and emotions.

From liking each other's status updates or hearting each other's Instagram posts, every interaction is quantified and counted. Datafication, measurement, quantification means we reduce our feelings to a limited set of buttons or "reactions". While they may provide useful signals or scaffolds of meaning for some users, it's important to remember that these "reactions" are designed by corporations who seek to quantify our thoughts, feelings and attitudes for advertisers and product placement. How can we truly understand the depth of our relationship to another person if everything is reduced to a quantifiable standard? Can a "👍" "reaction" on Facebook convey the true subtlety and complexity of feeling when you react to the news that your friend who is ill in hospital has just had a single piece of positive news about her condition? Would a "❤️" "reaction" be more acceptable? How is this changing how we relate to each other? Is this in turn making our relationships more transactional? What will be the impact of this longer term?

What's more, there is a hollowness to this kind of interaction, in which an encounter becomes an exchange of likes, where the worth of your post can be judged by others' reactions. This exchange mechanism is most visible in the world of

Instagram, where users post photographs that are liked by other users. On Instagram, likes and reactions not only provide information about us but also confer market value. At the extreme end of this market "Influencers", frequent users with large followings, become brand ambassadors who are paid for "sponsored" posts endorsing products or services to their followers. At the less extreme, this system makes people more likely to judge their own worth by the number of likes their posts attract. This is leading to a troubling association for many young people between self-worth and number of likes. Is this the kind of affirmation we want or need? Can that tiny heart or like button make up for the deeper affirmation so many of us are craving?

As Michelle, age 24 explains: *"I absolutely feel insecure. I'm 24, I'm a young professional in Toronto, but I have had Instagram since I was in university. I do feel a pressure to look particularly good. I would never post a photo that wasn't flattering of me. I feel anxiety over how many likes I get after I post a picture. If I get two likes, I feel like, what's wrong with me?"*<sup>2</sup>

The anxiety Michelle expresses is backed up by broader research into young people's attitudes to social media. A 2017 study by The Royal Society of Public Health asked 1,500 young people aged 11-25 to track their mood whilst using the five most popular social media sites. The study suggested that Snapchat and Instagram were the most likely to inspire feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. Seven in ten said Instagram made them feel worse about their body image and half of

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<sup>2</sup> Gajanan, M (2015) Young women on Instagram and self-esteem: 'I absolutely feel insecure'. *The Guardian*, 4, November. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/nov/04/instagram-young-women-self-esteem-essena-oneill> [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

14-24-year-olds reported that Instagram exacerbated feelings of anxiety.<sup>3</sup>

### Performative Friendship

Social media is now ubiquitous, and we need to understand how it is changing the way we relate to each other. It was borne from humanity's most basic need to connect and communicate as a collective, but its current forms are working to change these essential modes of connection.

Unlike what has gone before, social media in the online sphere seems to cross the boundaries between public and private spheres, generating a reality that can be difficult to navigate. When we participate in social media, we are at once broadcaster and consumer. We broadcast our lives, carefully edited and curated, while at the same time consuming other people's broadcasts.

On Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms we can curate our own past and present. You can go out, get drunk and an unflattering photo is taken but you're having fun... you can de-tag it – it's like it never happened. You go through a painful break up – you can erase that person from your online past – every photo, every memory de-tagged or deleted. We are editing our past and presents to reinforce our own public narratives about ourselves. Our online life may be completely divorced from our offline life, a highly-edited, filter-applied, constructed reality in which only selected angles are uploaded to survive the digital record.

Platforms conflate the public and private sphere, operating in a space in between which we may not yet be prepared to navigate. The highly edited conception of

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<sup>3</sup> RSPH (2017) Instagram ranked worst for young people's mental health [online]. 19 May 2017. Available from: <https://www.rsph.org.uk/about-us/news/instagram-ranked-worst-for-young-people-s-mental-health.html> [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

our digital selves, disinhibited but at the same time selective, must also have impacts on our own memories and conceptions of ourselves. Is forgetting or re-remembering pain an important function? What about Facebook's "*time hop function*" which shows old photos or interactions from years ago? Can this bring unexpected pain? Is this within your own control? What if you edit something out which was actually formative? If we no longer have photo albums or written down diaries, where are these memories kept?<sup>4</sup> Just as literacy changed the way we recorded our own histories with a move away from the oral tradition, arguably digitalisation is likely to have a similar impact.<sup>5</sup>

Your constructed identity in one community may also be different to your constructed identity in another. How can you manage this? The fluidity with which we move between different platforms, conversations and interactions is both infinitely freeing, but also dizzying. If the self is a complex constellation of mirrors, fragments reflected through our interactions with others, our constellation has suddenly become infinitely more complex.

Are we presenting honest versions of ourselves online or just parts of ourselves? Are we both able to reveal glimpses of the most real and truest parts of ourselves, while at the same time potentially

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<sup>4</sup>A. Ghezzi, Â. Pereira, Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic (Eds.), (2014) *The Ethics of Memory in a Digital Age: Interrogating the Right to be Forgotten*. [Online]. Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies. Available from:

[https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/The\\_Ethics\\_of\\_Memory\\_in\\_a\\_Digital\\_Age.html?id=uWipBQAAQBAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/The_Ethics_of_Memory_in_a_Digital_Age.html?id=uWipBQAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y) [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

<sup>5</sup> Edward Saperia, Dean of Newspeak House, in conversation on the following essay: T, Chiang, (2013) *The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling*. [Online]. SUBTERRANEAN PRESS MAGAZINE: FALL 2013. Available from: [https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/e/2PACX-1vT55oZSh2rOz-fOvZnBr56BYxQII6dXUVrOJHzwT2C0t5CKCKK5\\_kH2RQMA6BQbqLi46cpoqcRZUONk/pub](https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/e/2PACX-1vT55oZSh2rOz-fOvZnBr56BYxQII6dXUVrOJHzwT2C0t5CKCKK5_kH2RQMA6BQbqLi46cpoqcRZUONk/pub) [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

constructing different realities around them?<sup>6</sup>

And what of our relationships to each other? How is this changing the dynamics of our friendships? As Professor Deborah Chambers argues in her book *Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online Intimacies and Networked Friendship*, social media networks facilitate a form of “mediated intimacy” and may be changing how we perceive and experience friendship. For social media users there is always an “imagined audience”, meaning that friendship can become more performative. Though Chambers does not believe that this form of friendship has been invented purely by social media, she does acknowledge its role in exacerbating and accelerating it. For Chambers:

*““Friends” on social network sites differ dramatically from “friends” in the traditional sense. A unique feature of these websites is that they display and publicise: they display our personal networks and publicise our friendships. Once quintessentially private, personal and intimate, these relationships are now rendered public. They must therefore be carefully managed. We are being “judged by the company we keep” in new, highly visible ways.”<sup>7</sup>*

Indeed, Chambers has argued that the growth of online social networks, alongside wider social changes has resulted in a new more “democratised” conception of friendship where choice

more strongly features. Instead of being forced to stay rooted in communities of place, individuals are more free to move cities, form their own “families” and build communities of their own choosing online. This has led to the rise of ““networked individualism” characterised by a move from tight bonds to more fluid, loose systems of interaction centred on individuals with shared interests rather than groups or places”.<sup>8</sup>

While this offers a freeing up of the traditional ties and often censorship of community and a “democratisation” of relationships, it is also worrying and feels instinctively wrong that the unit of interaction becomes the individual alone. How can you build consensus and common ground among people who are so loosely connected? How can we navigate difference if interaction is down simply to choice and self-selection? In a loose ties network, is it still possible to construct shared larger narratives around concepts such as nationhood?

While an online world of inexhaustible opportunities for interaction may lead to more enriched social life online, there are still questions surrounding the durability of these interactions. Recent research has found that while the quantity of online relationships for frequent social media users was no different, they were more dynamic. It was found that users were “more likely to both lose old and gain new ties” suggesting “that Internet use is associated with more, and more dynamic, social interaction”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Suler J (2004) The Online Disinhibition Effect. [Online]. CYBER PSYCHOLOGY & BEHAVIOR, Volume 7, Number 2004. Available from: [https://www.academia.edu/3658367/The\\_online\\_disinhibition\\_effect?ends\\_sutd\\_req\\_path=true](https://www.academia.edu/3658367/The_online_disinhibition_effect?ends_sutd_req_path=true) [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

<sup>7</sup>Chambers, D (2014) Online friendship: the public display of changing personal ties in late modernity. [Online]. The History of Emotions Blog. Available from: <https://emotionsblog.history.qmul.ac.uk/2014/03/online-friendship-the-public-display-of-changing-personal-ties-in-late-modernity/> [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

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<sup>8</sup> Chambers, D (2017) Networked intimacy: Algorithmic friendship and scalable sociality. [Online]. European Journal of Communication 2017, Vol. 32(1) 26 –36, p.28. Available from: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0267323116682792> [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

<sup>9</sup> Vriens, E & van Ingen, E (2017). Does the rise of the Internet bring erosion of strong ties? Analyses of social media use and changes in core discussion networks. [Online]. new media & society 2018, Vol.

Has it almost become too easy to form a connection? Too easy to find the next interaction, too easy to move on? One technology writer, Sarah Jeong, argues that Facebook has helped to make it easier to connect with people as it reduces the amount of emotional labour involved in building a relationship with them. If it's your friend's birthday, rather than going out buying a card, thinking of which one your friend would like, thinking about what to write, buying a stamp and sending them a card, you can simply write on their wall, add an emoji of a balloon, and still have made a form of connection.<sup>10</sup>

Yet has this lowering of the barrier to forming a relationship reduced the relationships we have in some way?

Building, sustaining and developing relationships with other people are hard. They take work and effort, effort that is demonstrated by the fact that we actively care about an other. If showing this care requires less effort, does that in some way lessen our care? Is the meaning of friendship changing in a world where people can have thousands of online friends?

And in this transient world, will relationships that are less binding become more commonplace? Will this change the structures of our families? When multiple interactions online are just a click away, is there less pressure on offline relationships to be as all encompassing? Is it possible to “unbundle” a relationship as different parts of your online social network will be able to fulfil different functions?<sup>11</sup>

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20(7) 2432 –2449. Available from:  
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1461444817724169> [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

<sup>10</sup> Jeong, S (2018) I tried leaving Facebook. I couldn't. *The Verge*, 28, April. Available from:  
<https://www.theverge.com/2018/4/28/17293056/facebook-deletes-facebook-social-network-monopoly> [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

<sup>11</sup>Khazan, O (2017) We Expect Too Much From Our Romantic Partners. *The Atlantic*, 29, September. Available from:

While the conception of the “networked individual” offers a freeing up and democratisation of relationships, we must ask what effect these changes may have on our relationships offline and the way our society is structured.

### Connected Snapshots

This is explored most fully in the work of Sherry Turkle, a psychologist at MIT who for the past 30 years has been looking into our relationships with technology and each other. In her books *Alone Together* and *Reclaiming Conversation* she explores how our current forms of technology could be damaging our abilities to interact with one other in the offline world. For Turkle, “texts, tweets, Facebook posts, emails, instant messages, and snapchats—simultaneous, rapid-fire “sips” of online communication—have replaced face-to-face conversation, and that people are noticing the consequences. Over-reliance on devices, she argues, is harming our ability to have valuable face-to-face conversations, “the most human thing we do,” by splitting our attention and diminishing our capacity for empathy.”<sup>12</sup>

In these interactions we rely on snapshots, not fully formed pictures to interpret or understand people ...only understanding half of what is there. As Sherry Turkle says, we consume other people “*in bits and pieces; it is as though we use them as spare parts to support our fragile selves.*” One video game blogger beautifully expresses this feeling of half formed understanding in his blogpost “Abstract People”:

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/09/we-expect-way-too-much-from-our-romantic-partners/541353/> [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

<sup>12</sup>Cassani Davis, L (2015) The Flight From Conversation. *The Atlantic*, 7, October. Available from:  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/10/reclaiming-conversation-sherry-turkle/409273/> [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

*“Living downtown in a major city, I’ve become desensitized to the people around me. I recognize that they’re people but it only comes through in a moment now and then. Strangers I walk by are reduced to a single overheard sentence.*

*“Really good pho is really good.”*

*“You only YOLO once.”*

*“Cars don’t hit pretty girls.”*

*Internet comments are throwaway interactions, strangers I pass by and forget I ever knew. Living downtown in a major city is nothing special next to living on the internet. Is it enough to know that if I were to engage with any of these passing sentence-people, they’d have more to say than just that one sentence?”<sup>13</sup>*

With only this half-picture, where is the incentive to forgive people their flaws or understand them? How can you put someone’s opinions into context if you don’t hang around long enough to understand them in all their infinite complexity? Put simply, are we unable to take the time to understand people?

This lack of time means our judgements of others become more rushed. We no longer seek to form a judgement of a person based on knowing them, interacting with them, or understanding them. Instead people are now judged on the basis of one comment, one tweet, one contribution. Their whole character dissected and judged using the evidence of one interaction.

In this kind of limited online encounter, the other person can quickly become dehumanised, a mere receptacle for one person’s own pain or anger. This

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<sup>13</sup>Drogen (2018) Abstract People. 8, April. Available From: <http://drogen.tumblr.com/post/172746841648/abstract-people> [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

dehumanisation makes it easier for people to treat each other in a way that would be unacceptable in the offline world and perhaps is inherent in online behaviours such as “trolling”. The lack of eye contact and other information online creates an “empathy gap” which may further exacerbate this behaviour. So what happens when this empathy deficit is corrected?

Back in 2015 a man started trolling the journalist and feminist Lindy West by impersonating her dead father and criticising her writings. Lindy understandably found this cruelty incredibly upsetting and bravely decided to make this attack and its emotional impact the subject of her next article. After publishing her article, the next morning, she received a message from her troll apologising in which he explained:

*“I think my anger towards you stems from your happiness with your own being. It offended me because it served to highlight my unhappiness with my own self...I can’t say sorry enough. It was the lowest thing I had ever done. When you included it in your latest Jezebel article it finally hit me. There is a living, breathing human being who is reading this shit. I am attacking someone who never harmed me in any way. And for no reason whatsoever.”<sup>14</sup>*

It’s clear from his words that, for him, Lindy had been dehumanised.

Yet this kind of incivility does not just play out in extreme cases of “trolling”; it also seems to have infiltrated wider online discourse. Online comments on articles are harsher, even Facebook discussions among “friends” are less tolerant and sometimes meaner than conversations in

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<sup>14</sup>West, L (2015) What happened when I confronted my cruellest troll. *The Guardian*, 2, February. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/feb/02/what-happened-confronted-cruellest-troll-lindy-west> [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

person. Nowhere is this more evident than in the current addiction to “moral outrage”<sup>15</sup> which plays out in the Twittersphere. On a platform structured by character-limited “tweets” there can surely be little surprise that there no longer seems to be any space for nuance. The inclusion of the qualifying words “perhaps”, “maybe” or “could be”, become a waste of valuable space compared to the definitive “is”. From an increase in trolling to the recent attempts of Twitter to hide comments that are unconstructive, there is ample evidence that people are becoming more extreme in their reactions to differences of opinions, less tolerant. To what extent this intolerance was shaped by this platform’s design remains unknown. Yet there are important questions raised here: how is this changing our ability to relate to each other and how could this outrage be shaping our politics?

In a world with harsh immediate judgement, where you can be called out for a throwaway comment, there is an inherent caution, policing of the self. With no clear, agreed codes of practice or standards of behaviour, you are constantly walking on uncertain ground. When hundreds of individuals or communities collide on mass platforms in the online world, one community’s acceptability could be another’s condemnation.

These divisions aren’t helped by the modern phenomenon of filter bubbles. To win a monopoly in the economy of “attention”, platform algorithms become increasingly accurate at providing us with information we will engage with, creating “filter bubbles”, which ironically enough make it harder for us to engage with people who are different to us or new thinking that challenges us. The formation of these carefully-curated echo chambers

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<sup>15</sup>Vince, G (2018) Why good people turn bad online. *Mosaic*, 3, April. Available from: <https://mosaicscience.com/story/why-good-people-turn-bad-online-science-trolls-abuse/> [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

have facilitated the spread of fake news, ushered in an era of post-truth and further fragmented our online world. These divisions mirror divisions in the offline world. Instead of helping us to connect better with each other and overcome these fissures, be they political, cultural or economic, many platforms are driving us even further apart. It’s a far cry from the promise of a pluralistic, open, diverse and limitless freedom dreamed of by the early adopters of the internet.

Despite the claims made by more than one internet giant that these commercial platforms are connecting us and bringing us together, in their current form they may be undermining the very skills we need to do this. They are making us less open, not more and less empathetic by helping us to connect to those who are like us rather than understand those who are different. Success in the next century will be built on openness, pluralism, tolerance and connection – the very things the internet was created to foster. Yet rather than liberating and fostering these traits, arguably the way these platforms are constructed could be making us more intolerant, less willing to invest in each other, more rigid in our judgements and less open in our attitudes to difference - in short, more inhumane.

They are stifling our ability to have open attitudes, our willingness to make mistakes, to learn and to change. There is a rigidity to these platforms’ language which could create a rigidity to our thinking if we are not careful.

In short, it may be that they are reducing and commodifying our abilities to love, think, feel and act - the very essence of what it means to be human. They are making it harder to participate and to collaborate, the very things Clay Shirkey begs us to do.

Overall these changing structures to our relationships may be making it harder for

us to form the ties that bind, the very collective relationships that originally helped us to build the Labour movement. This increasingly transactional sphere is breaking the deep roots which are the essence of humanity, love and therefore the building blocks of any collective progressive movement. The Labour movement is about realising that we achieve more together than we achieve alone. With the rise of an individualistic transactional and transient interaction, are we weakening the very relationships that allow us to fulfil this?

### **Labour - the first New Power movement?**

If we seek to understand the future, we could perhaps turn to the past.

In the era of the industrial revolution a similar process of major change occurred in which factors simultaneously combined to increase our capacity to participate, but also changed our social fabric. Shifts like urbanisation led to an increase in our literal proximity to one another; communications developments like the printing press and penny post helped to facilitate the spread of ideas and connections. Yet, like the internet, these new forms were soon commoditised. Urbanisation gave way to industrialisation which threatened many of the basic relationships that make us human. And arguably it was this increased proximity, combined with a struggle to protect these relationships and our value to each other as a collective, that gave birth to the Labour movement.

However, this birth was not guaranteed. It was not easy or inevitable. Like today, social changes like industrialisation and urbanisation created new spheres and new forms of human relationships. Workplaces, factories, pubs, coffee shops began to mushroom. The idea of paid leave became more widely accepted. A whole range of consumerist forces were

awakened. We had to channel these forces and shape these new spheres once, and we do so again now.

We did it through participation and making. The Labour movement was not born; it was made.

EP Thompson argues that “the working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.” His mission was “to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the “obsolete” hand-loom weaver, the “utopian” artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.”<sup>16</sup> For Thompson, collective participation was the engine of class consciousness. Working people and class identity was not simply the by-product of non-human abstracted historical or economic forces but was forged, built, and created through the messy links and relationships of people and humanity. Our consciousness of each other and our own power to change things came through relationships, collaboration, and participation.

It came through the creation of new spaces, institutions, communities. From the chartists schools and choirs to the working men’s clubs and cooperatives. The Labour movement’s identity was forged through new communities and institutions which gave people the space to participate and create. While factories, enclosure and workhouses sought to divide and commodify our relationships with one another, coffee shops, trade unions and working men’s clubs sought to unite and protect them.

This messy participatory process of constructing class consciousness does not feel that far away from the vision of a “full stack society” called for in Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms’ book *New Power*. This book is a development of

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<sup>16</sup> Thompson, E. P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London, 1966. *Preface*

Shirky's thought and a practical bible for operating in a "new power" world where participation is king. For the authors, this vision of participation is epitomised by Reddit Place.

*"Reddit Place becomes a metaphor for what a full stack society might look like – with many expressions of political, economic and cultural participation represented on one big digital canvas.*

*Everyone who contributed felt like an owner because each of those million people really was one. Building this kind of world will be messy – and it certainly won't be without pockets of hate, co-optation, and a whole lot of distraction. But it is a world all of us can create together, and it is the one most worth fighting for."*<sup>17</sup>

"New Power" is expressed through crowds that erupt to make movements like the Ice Bucket Challenge and #metoo which question the "old power" authority and structures. New Power introduces the idea of ACE (action, connection and editability) in communications. For Heimans and Timms, movements need to be based on action, rooted in connection and be able to be edited, changed, adopted and made relevant to communities. For the authors, they need to be made with people feeling some sense of ownership of them. The "meme culture" of today is essentially a maker culture in which everyone has the resources to contribute, participate and share. In the same way that chartist communities developed their own choir songs, associations and occupations created their own trade unions, Labour's early history could be called the first ever ACE movement.

Yet, as the *New Power* book concludes, this cannot simply be about the crowd of unstructured mass or jumble of ideas. Indeed, the authors censure the decentralised leadership of the Trump movement for this same problem. For

them, movements also need to be structured in ways that allow for participation and human collaboration. Just as *New Power* talks about the need to shape the power of the crowd, so too did the Labour movement have to forge the institutions in those early days, the Labour Party eventually becoming one, to channel the power of their wonderful decentred, making culture.

Societies, newspapers, trade unions, motions, the structures of Labour Party local meetings - all these rules, patterns of behaviour grew out of a need to structure and channel the crowd.

But what of today? If we accept the need to once more embrace a "maker" culture in politics in an era of unprecedented access to each other, what are the spaces, institutions and communities of today?

From Mumsnet to subreddits to Facebook groups, new forms of community are being developed based around interests, experiences and values. Online movements like #metoo and online communities such as the "Skint Dad Community Group"<sup>18</sup> on Facebook are the engines of a new consciousness. They are rendering us more visible to each other, highlighting the injustices we face and binding us together in a form of collective experience. #MeToo made millions of women worldwide feel less alone and empowered to speak out. The "Skint Dad Community Group" provides tips, support and advice for parents that are working but just about managing to provide for their families. People share tip offs about offers, advice on how to earn extra money through work like online survey completion, advice about tax credit payments, information on what to do when universal credit payments go awry. Everyone is saving for Christmas, looking for school uniform deals in August and sharing ideas for free activities in the

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<sup>17</sup> Heimans, J & Timms, H (2018) *New Power*, Macmillan, London, 2018, p.336

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<sup>18</sup>Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1134779056635269/?fref=nf> [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

summer. These very real communities are giving people a way to reach out to each other and recognise that they are in similar situations. How does this translate into political action? How can these different emerging groups come together and construct a shared vision of the society we want to live in? What kind of politics do we need to build that can facilitate this? For those of us on the progressive left today, this is our challenge.

### **Making the Future – a new social software**

Shirky argues that we need to create social software that will allow for collaboration association and participation in the online space. Just as we built the trade unions and developed a process for motions in our local party branches, we must do the same for the next century in a new online world.

We are going to have to construct these new forms of political organisation – they cannot be simply conjured into existence. Just as the Labour movement first built its first associations, so we too need to build our own online infrastructure.

When capitalism built the shop, we built the co-op, when capitalism built the pub, we built the working men's club. When capitalism builds Facebook, Uber, Instagram... what will we make?

Indeed, this should not be an unachievable task. The very ideas of cooperation, socialism and human relationships were the basis on which the internet was first formed. As Bill Thompson has argued "*The history of the Internet is a triumph of mutualism: all the many interests have worked together to create a system which is transforming the world...It has become the online equivalent of common land, a 'dot.common's'*"<sup>19</sup>. As the progressive left,

<sup>19</sup>Thompson, B (2015). e-mutualism? or the tragedy of the dot.common's? [Online]. Available from:

our goal therefore must be to populate and protect the commons.

So what could a new social software look like?

1. **Not for Profit Platforms.** Are platforms more like utilities now? Should they be nationalised? Do they exist as part of the state or are they actually more like a civic or public sphere? Can we expect these platforms, as they currently exist (corporations accountable to shareholders and motivated by profit) to provide the space we need them to or do we need to set something else up entirely? Just as the Labour movement raised subscriptions for new associations and halls, do we need to crowdfund new platforms for this kind of cooperation to take place? Could we resurrect or create forms of e-mutualism, as proposed by Bill Thompson in his 2000 pamphlet?
2. **Public Interest Algorithms.** In *New Power* the authors call for the need to create algorithms that work for participants and society at large rather than the platform's advertisers, owners or investors? These algorithms would also have a degree of transparency about how they work. They could give users the opportunity to use a range of dials to control their experience (they could decide if they want more or less content they disagree with) – to enable them to filter in different perspectives.
3. **Social Technical Design.** Much user experience work is focused simply on the individual's experience, with little sense of how this might affect a group dynamic. A Labour social software would put

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<https://medium.com/@billt/e-mutualism-or-the-tragedy-of-the-dot-commons-489bfd965ea> [Accessed on 20 August 2018] 9

collaboration and collective experience at the heart of any UX - could this be considered when companies are designing new platforms? Couldn't UX designers think of the end user not as an individual, but as a community? The book *New Power* explores Holacracy, a tech platform which was created to structure collaboration in the workplace, but was too highly structured. One former user said: *"It felt like being part of a code... an algorithm that is optimised for machines but not humans. Instead of feeling more whole, self-organised and powerful, I felt trapped. The circles I was part of did not feel empowering at all but took away my natural authenticity and feeling of aliveness"*.<sup>20</sup> There is a growing field of study looking at this kind of engineering: it is called socio-technical design<sup>21</sup> and the left should be at the forefront of shaping it.

4. **The Digital Self.** We need to spend more time thinking about how our online selves are constructed. The internet is at once helping us to record and curate, but also to edit and forget. Perhaps we should have some record of our digital footprint, data which is fully our own where we choose what to show others and what to keep for ourselves.<sup>22</sup> We should also open up a national conversation about how our digital self relates to wider online communities.

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<sup>20</sup> Heimans J & Timms H (2018) *New Power*, Macmillan, London, 2018, p.245

<sup>21</sup> Whitworth B & Ahmad, A (2013) *The Social Design of Technical Systems: Building technologies for communities* [Online]. Available from: <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/book/the-social-design-of-technical-systems-building-technologies-for-communities/socio-technical-design> [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

<sup>22</sup> Tim Berners Lee has been doing some work on this concept through Solid. Available from: <https://solid.mit.edu/> [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

5. **Time Well Spent.** We should also consider how the attention economy is commodifying our time, monetising our interactions. How can we gain control and freedom from apps and platforms which are designed to keep us in thrall to them? The Time Well Spent movement through the Humane Technology Centre is about resisting this commodification. It is gaining ground in the USA and it is something that may be worth engaging with here too.<sup>23</sup>

6. **Emerging Online Communities.** We need to better understand what these communities are, how do they function. How do they relate to offline communities? Can a thriving online community give rise to an offline community? What is the link between the two? One of the largest community online communities is the Leedsface Facebook Group which allows people with a connection to Leeds to share information, news and stories about the city.<sup>24</sup> This community has been running for over 6 years with over 74,000 members. People post job adverts, ask for recommendations, ask for help, share jokes, news and events. How can we connect up these communities? How can we create a software that empowers them, inspires action and fosters solidarity?

7. **A Richer Text Format.** We need to consider the deeper impact of online communication on our ability

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<sup>23</sup> Available from: <http://humanetech.com/> [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

<sup>24</sup> Millington, M (2018) Meet the "power admins" running the biggest online community in Leeds. *Mosaic*, 5, April. Available from: <https://www.leeds-live.co.uk/news/leeds-news/meet-power-admins-running-biggest-14531775> [Accessed on 20 August 2018] Actual Group Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/leedsface/about/> [Accessed on 20 August 2018]

to relate to each other. Online typing means we miss out on 90% of the social cues and information we can gather from body language etc. How can we help bridge this information gap? More creative mediums of expression such as video, GIFS, memes are one way we can ensure our interactions are richer, have more emotional depth and resist commodification. The exponential growth of emojis and its development as a pictorial language developing organically through communities is a sign that people are looking for ways to develop more flexible and meaningful interactions online. Can we create new forms of emotional expression online and new ways to express ourselves?

8. **Co-production.** Platforms such as Wikipedia inspire a sense of co-production – is this a model for future work? How is this managed and organised? Currently a small percentage of people are actively involved in this kind of co-production; as skills develop and as more people seek to participate and create things together, how can we structure these interactions? How this way of working stop people feeling alienated from the products of their labour?
9. **Managing Difference.** In a world plagued by division, how do we ensure that the online world helps to heal fractures not exacerbate them? We should find new ways of using the internet to facilitate encounters between people and find common ground.

Right now we are faced with a choice. The new online world represents a new place for the left to create, build and shape a new culture and structure for social relations. It is a new frontier in the fight

against commodification and alienation which we have left woefully undefended.

We cannot let this space go uncontested.

Online tools like google docs and Slack offer us new forms of association and collaboration, but these are tools built for the corporate world. Imagine if we created something for our own movement? These new methods of collaboration could open up new forms of thinking, relating and even new forms of collectivism, beyond class, beyond identity politics. A new social software offers great hope and freedom for our politics. Built on the foundations of kindness, freedom, care, tolerance and equality, it could change the world.

The online experience shows us that people are still reaching out for each other. The most shared videos on YouTube (excluding music) are often moments of kindness, connection, shared humour or understanding. From the news reporter's baby who interrupts his interview on camera to the powerful words of a gamer blogger reaching out into the ether for some form of real connection. There are countless moments of humanity shared across the online world - resisting rational quantification and commodification. These moments hold up a mirror to what we are, the best and worst of what we can be, and most importantly what we can build.