

## FORUM

## Publisher 2.0

## TO THE EDITOR:

Aarthi Vadde's proposal for literary indistinction elucidates one way of "keep[ing] up with literature's changing contours and constituents within a platform-based Internet culture" ("Platform or Publisher"; vol. 136, no. 3, May 2021, p. 461). Vadde describes how content from social media cross-pollinates similar spaces and has grown into an acceptable, if not wholly expected, part of the media territory. The resultant national conversation highlights several areas of concern. Still, our ability to formulate remedies is hindered by a question of context and intentionality that dwells within terms like *platform* and *publisher*. Vadde locates a similar situation in literary studies, where boundaries describing text and image lag behind or occlude the lived experience of contemporary culture. Vadde takes up the question of publisher or platform to explain how literacy and literature have changed. Increasing forms of textuality without adjusting literacy distances scholars from their objects, making codification and aggregation the primary and apparent modes of reading. Literary indistinction serves thus as a helpful concept for distinguishing between data sets and data settings.

Platform and publisher are "definitional foil[s]" manipulated to occlude the branding and use of the Internet, "the determining environment of mass-mediated life" (456). And Vadde is correct in noting that the conditions of this sociotechnical milieu were "created and popularized through a movement called Web 2.0" (456). But more needs to be said on this score. It seems to me that the trouble with user content, context, third parties—the real crux of a platform-publisher distinction—starts to spread after the creation and popularization of web-based platforms.

True, the publisher-platform dichotomy emerged after decisive events collected under the brand proposition of Web 2.0. However, we must account for how these core practices were subsequently instrumentalized and adapted from 2009 through today in a widely internetworked culture. Vadde points out the difference of the 1.0 and 2.0 ethos but does not have the space in such a short piece to show that early adopters predate web commerce but are less of an anchor for data industries of

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today. User-generated content was merely the cheapest raw material available for refining what quickly became the sector's cash crop: user data.

Legal and economic codifications allow companies to claim either publisher or platform status to protect corporate interests: when they claim to be platforms, they have no accountability for user content; when they become publishers, they publish mere data instead of content. We are confronted with a platform-or-publisher binary, but both are coherent with any company's self-description within the old Web 2.0 model. The catchphrases "the web as platform" and "you control your data" were sedimented within the first decade of the new century. However, the application and meaning change, and we are, here today, left grappling with big tech's floating signifiers.

The situation described by Vadde as "[r]eal-time publishing and delayed content moderation" is indeed an affirmation of "the cyberlibertarian ethos that 'information wants to be free'" (455). But I suggest that the libertarian-tinged Web 2.0 model is a moment rather than a movement. Including users is not an innovation of Web 2.0. Active, content-generating users are a holdover from the Web 1.0 ethos that survived the first attempt at commercializing the World Wide Web. Web 2.0 is something of a second attempt. As an industrial strategy, Web 2.0 has worked remarkably well, and, since 2009, platforms have been continually tried and tested. Today, the platforms we are forced to use and contend with are not the same ones inaugurated in the second coming of the web. These platforms are webs unto themselves.

From the perspective of the technology firms Vadde isolates, platforms develop out of an explicit corporate culture, shepherded by people who support the notion that business cultures should inform wider cultural logistics. My second observation complements the full accounting Vadde has in mind.

Recently, claims that *YouTube* radicalizes users are not only intellectually credible but politically actionable. False information traffics on digital media platforms to such a degree that there is an aesthetics of extremism, as Haley Mlotek of *Columbia Journalism Review* points out ("Looks Authentic"; *Columbia Journalism Review*, vol. 60, no. 1, spring 2021, pp. 77–80). But none of the efforts at enforcement, amendment, or repeal of the Communication Decency Act of 1996 have backed off an initial, protective stance toward

tech companies, even as these companies have mutated beyond even a shadow of their former selves. We should read both major United States political party demands for the amendment of the Communications Decency Act as indicative of a struggle over the founding myths of our contemporary sociotechnical milieu—one that starts after Web 2.0, operates through aggressive acquisition, and directly conflicts with the users and ethos that make the web function.

One such protection is the legislation's tacit endorsement of tech company growth through the shielding of those companies from civil liability in the event of any third-party transgression. Web 2.0 logic would tell us that such transgressions are user speech. But from where we are currently situated, a third-party transgression could be a now-ubiquitous data breach or a subsequent exploitation of authorized data by the likes of Cambridge Analytica.

There is ongoing reflection on how much we should privilege openness, accessibility, and diversity on the web, while at the same time we are trying to contain "the diffusion and splintering of literariness across circuits of prestige and popular attention" (461). Everyday people are at the center of both issues, so several positions remain vital to Internet cultures: provider, user, content intermediary and interactive computer service, in contrast to publishers and speakers. The meaning and use of this terminology inform how tech companies discipline users, which in turn disciplines political constituencies.

Anchoring scholarship to Web 2.0 as a movement, as Vadde writes, will make it difficult to read the Internet and fully reckon with the most pressing issues of the day. If tech companies vacillate between platform and publisher, we should leave open the possibility that they are both—and we should challenge the definitions they offer of each.

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### Reply:

I thank Lucas Power for his attentive reading of my article "Platform or Publisher," and for the time and effort he has taken to respond to my argument. For the most part we are on the same page. Power shares my understanding of Web 2.0 as a business

model that sought to rebrand the web as a platform for the open exchange of information, cultural content, and data. We also agree that Web 2.0 overstated some of its technical differences from Web 1.0, which, under the vision of Tim Berners-Lee, was already designed to let users share content and code on their own web pages. The rhetoric of Web 2.0, however, placed “participation,” which was regarded as collaborative and constantly updating, above “publication,” which was seen as static and individualist. The economic value of user participation and continued engagement is obvious; the social and literary effects of user-generated content are unpredictable and impossible to lump together under triumphalism or lamentation.

Where Power seems to think we differ is on the status of Web 2.0. He calls it a moment. I call it a movement. As he writes, “anchoring scholarship to Web 2.0 as a movement . . . will make it difficult to read the Internet and fully reckon with the most pressing issues of the day.” I admit to not knowing exactly what Power means by moment, but I suspect that he is saying the social media platforms most associated with Web 2.0 (*Facebook, Twitter, YouTube*, and the like) have grown so large and estranged from their roots that the initial premises of Web 2.0 cannot explain their latest

developments. To that I say that there are absolutely elements of today’s Internet culture that extend beyond the wildest dreams of the architects of Web 2.0, but its founding ethos of scalability and monetizable data remains unquestioned. The largest platforms could be called “webs unto themselves” or highly complex walled gardens that monitor every aspect of user activity with the intent of keeping users within their information ecology. Their models for fostering user engagement and attracting advertisers have enabled an “aesthetics of extremism,” which Power mentions and I hope will continue to explore in his research.

Extremist groups and disinformation campaigns weaponize Web 2.0 principles and take advantage of the social web that has grown out of them. If scholars want to study where the social web is and where it is going, they can meet the moment by historicizing particular movements as well as particular platforms. The web is wide. The advantage of returning to Web 2.0 as a movement is that it names the particular players, books, and networks of thought that gave birth to the “floating signifiers” of big tech.

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