

Contesting Platform Power

The Oppositional Affordances of Data Activism



Venetia Papa

DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND SOCIETY

Contesting Platform Power

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Contesting Platform Power: The Oppositional Affordances of Data Activism

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

I dedicate this book to my rainbow: Matisse.

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About the Author

Venetia Papa (PhD) is an Assistant Professor in Journalism and Digital Media at the Department of Communication and Internet Studies, at the Cyprus University of Technology. She has previously worked as Assistant Professor at the Department of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Cyprus. Venetia received her PhD in Communication and Internet Studies from the Cyprus University of Technology (CUT) and the Université Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint Denis, and her MA and BA in Media and Communication studies from the University of Nice Sophia Antipolis, in France. Her research work focuses on the most significant emerging trends within the evolving field of media and technology studies. It explores the conditions, perils, and potentialities of the digital age and technologies, and the ways these have revolutionized the forms of life and everyday practices of individuals and collectivities, by influencing the making of their identities (civic, collective, and professional). Based on her background in media studies, she adopts an interdisciplinary approach in her object of study, drawing on critical media studies and critical software studies perspectives by incorporating concepts, methods, and tools from other disciplines. Her most recent work focuses on the evolving concept of platform affordances, in relation with user engagement, journalism, and agency within platforms. Recently, her research has expanded to examine also AI affordances, exploring the socio-technical dynamics of artificial intelligence and its implications for users and journalists.

She has published over 20 articles in peer-reviewed and top-tier journals (*European Journal of Communication*, *Digital Journalism*, *Journalism Practice*, *Information, Communication & Society*, *Journal of New Media Technologies*, *Journal of Feminist Media Studies*, and *Popular Communication*, among others). She co-authored the book, *Mobilisations Numériques: Politiques du conflit et technologies médiatiques* (Les Presses des Mines, 2017, in French) where she explores the role of digital technologies in mediating political conflicts.

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Acknowledgments

The initial idea for immersing myself in this research took shape during the period 2017–2018, shortly after I completed my PhD. At that time, I began exploring new avenues to expand my work on social movements and platforms. My doctoral research (2011–2016) focused on exploring the meanings of civic and collective identities and their intersections with Facebook, and I had the opportunity to engage in an academic and personal exploration of Facebook as a dynamic interactional sphere. I thought, at the time, that collectivities could flourish in such spaces. This research allowed me to analyze user discourses and behaviors within the platform, and this laid the groundwork for my broader interest in how digital technologies—and platforms in particular—can shape social and political life. These early investigations would later inspire the central questions of this book and my research, particularly those centered on user agency, platform power, and the emerging practices of data activism. Since that time, Facebook and other social media platforms have emerged as the places where most of our daily interactions are occurring online.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Untangling Platform Power and Data Activism

Keywords: Platformization; platform power; activism; agency; artificial intelligence

In today's digital landscape, nearly every action we undertake online is meticulously tracked, stored, and monetized. From chatting with friends and browsing e-commerce sites to sharing photos, dining out, and ordering food, our digital footprints are constantly recorded. These everyday interactions fuel vast data-driven economies that shape personalized advertising, influence consumer behavior, and even determine our online experiences and actions. What if all this discussion falls into the perspective of data capitalism? Zuboff (2019) and Couldry and Mejias (2019) argue that data capitalism is characterized exactly by this—the large-scale appropriation of human behavior that is then transformed into predictive products that benefit powerful corporations like social media companies. The connection between platforms and users as producers generates a process that Anne Helmond, back in 2015, described as platformization. Platformization can be understood as the “penetration of digital platforms economic, infrastructural, and governmental extensions into the cultural industries, as well as the organization of cultural practices of labor, creativity, and democracy around these platforms”.

In the context of this book, the concept of platformization refers to the process through which digital platforms like Facebook mediate, structure, and increasingly dominate various aspects of society, culture, and the economy. As van Dijck et al. (2018) argue, platformization is not just about the emergence of platforms like Facebook and Google, but about the profound structural transformation they bring to users and their public life. These platforms act as intermediaries that facilitate interactions while also setting the conditions for participation, access, and visibility. Through their algorithmic infrastructures, they control the flows of information, thus shaping what content is prioritized, who gets to speak, and how economic transactions take place.

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Similarly, platformization profoundly reshapes user agency and influences how individuals interact, produce content, and exercise control over their online identities. While platforms present themselves as open and participatory spaces, they impose specific constraints on user behaviors through algorithmic filtering, content moderation policies, and data-driven personalization (Gillespie, 2018). This dynamic creates a paradox: users are granted certain affordances to engage, but their actions are continuously shaped, guided, and even restricted by the underlying platform features and algorithms. As Nieborg and Poell (2018) highlight, platforms not only mediate interactions but also actively structure participation, ultimately determining what forms of content and communication are possible.

Such discussions highlight the importance of adopting a critical platform studies perspective. Indeed, since the mid-2000s, platform studies have gained significant traction among media scholars, who have positioned platforms not merely as technical infrastructure but as sociocultural and political constructs (van Dijck, 2013). This growing body of research has emphasized the role of platforms as dynamic entities that shape and are shaped by broader societal forces, including politics and digital labor. Rather than viewing technological objects as deterministic forces, scholars have increasingly recognized them as participants in human action as entities that can enable, constrain, influence, or even obstruct specific forms of engagement (Latour, 2007) and participation. Understanding the interplay between platforms and users requires a shift in perspective, one that acknowledges how tech companies strategically design affordances to integrate individuals into their business models (Plantin et al., 2018). This book adopts a critical lens to interrogate, among other issues, how affordances function as mechanisms of power while also exploring how data activists and users subvert, repurpose, or resist these structures to reclaim agency in an increasingly platformized world.

However, this book seeks to point out how users can resist the power of platforms. What if, instead of being passive subjects of algorithmic control and curation, they could actively reclaim their agency through the very technologies designed to monitor, predict, and influence their behaviors? At the core of this book are fundamental questions on the dominant narratives within platforms, which go beyond an approach of technological determinism. In an era where platforms operate as gatekeepers to information—structuring social interactions, economic opportunities, and political participation—it is crucial to explore the ways in which users might push back. This book does exactly that: it investigates the landscape of data activism and examines how individuals and collectives might leverage data activist tools, software, and counter-technologies to contest the dynamics of platform capitalism.

By engaging with concepts such as affordances, agency, and resistance, this work highlights the practices that allow users to disrupt algorithmic control, subvert data extraction mechanisms, and reshape their digital interactions. Rather than portraying users as powerless within platform ecosystems, this book foregrounds the tactical interventions and counter-discourses that could redefine the relationship between users and platforms. It explores the growing ecosystem of

data activist projects, from obfuscation and encryption tools to artificial intelligence (AI) counter-systems that expose the hidden mechanisms of digital surveillance. Ultimately, this exploration seeks to answer a pressing question: Can users reclaim control in an age of pervasive algorithmic governance—and if so, how?

The argument of this book starts with the phenomenon of “Google bombing.” In the early 2000s, Internet users discovered a way to manipulate Google’s search algorithm to generate unexpected results. Google bombing is an attempt or technique implemented by individuals or groups to manipulate search engine algorithms, particularly Google’s, to influence the results related to a specific webpage or idea. How is this achieved? Typically, this is done by creating numerous hyperlinks with specific anchor text pointing to the targeted webpage to boost its visibility in terms of rankings. The mechanism behind Google bombing relies on Google’s PageRank algorithm, which considers both the quantity and quality of links pointing to a specific webpage. When many websites link to the same webpage using a specific phrase, the algorithm assumes that the page is relevant to that term and boosts its ranking in search results. As a result, Google’s algorithm interprets the page as highly relevant for that term, even if the content of the page does not directly correspond to the phrase. This practice has been widely used for political and activist purposes, often to critique individuals, institutions, or advertisers. It proved to be very useful for some activists; for instance, in 2003, critics of then US President George W. Bush used Google bombing to make his White House biography appear as the top result for the search term “miserable failure.” Similarly, opponents of the Church of Scientology successfully made its official website rank highly for the phrase “dangerous cult” in 2008.

Other examples include efforts to label Electronic Arts (EA Games) as the “worst company in America,” which reflected public dissatisfaction with its business practices. Google responded to these manipulations by updating its algorithm to reduce the effectiveness of Google bombing. Notably, in 2007, the company modified how it interprets anchor text to make it harder for coordinated link campaigns to influence rankings. Further refinements came with prioritized content relevance and quality over simple link-based ranking signals. As a result, while Google bombing still occurs, its impact has been significantly reduced. Retrospectively, Google bombing can be seen as an act of data activism, understood as engagement “in politically motivated use of technical expertise in view of fixing society through software and online action” (Milan & Van der Velden, 2016, p. 60).

Therefore, in the 2020s, Facebook Inc. analytics chief Ken Rudin said, “Big Data is crucial to the company’s very being.” This comment highlights how deeply embedded data analytics are in Facebook’s business model, powering everything from personalized advertising and content recommendation algorithms to user engagement metrics and platform optimization. At its core, Facebook’s reliance on big data is not just a technical necessity but a defining characteristic of its operational philosophy of influencing users’ interactions. Since then, algorithmic media have evolved rapidly in both sophistication and

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influence, reaching their zenith with the proliferation of social media and big data applications, which have become deeply embedded in everyday life. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X widely employ data mining techniques to transform various aspects of users' social interactions into algorithmically governed relations, while proprietary algorithms increasingly wield decision-making power over individuals. This has sparked growing concerns that we are entering a new paradigm of "data colonialism," wherein human existence itself is commodified and appropriated through digital infrastructures (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Concurrently, this shift has been seen as fostering a "soft" biopolitical form of control that subtly regulates individuals through algorithmic governance (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). Rieder (2016, p. 40) underscores the epistemological dimension of big data practices, describing them as "empiricism on steroids"—an intensified form of data-driven knowledge production that enables fully automated decision-making in both markets and governance. These automated processes are not only economically attractive but also imbued with a veneer of social and even ethical legitimacy.

Critical perspectives on algorithmic power highlight how the top-down imposition of datafication often correlates with a loss of human agency (Rieder, 2016). This disempowerment stems not only from the opacity of algorithms but also from their ability to function in an "a-semiotic" and instantaneous manner, which renders their operations largely inscrutable to the public (McKelvey, 2014). As algorithmic media construct and shape user subjectivities, individuals often find themselves subordinated to data-driven power structures (Gehl, 2015). However, meaningful intervention is possible when new forms of mediation render algorithmic processes publicly intelligible (McKelvey, 2014, p. 597). In response, data activists take on the role of intermediaries working to restore agency to datafied publics (Baack, 2015, p. 1). Through their efforts, they seek to develop "counter-imaginaries of datafication"—that is, alternative visions and frameworks that challenge dominant platforms and advocate for more transparent and accountable digital ecosystems (Kazansky & Milan, 2021).

Therefore, at the core of this book also lies the intersection of three key concepts—data activism, affordances, and agency—which serve as the foundational axes guiding the analysis. Data activism emerges as a response to the pervasive datafication of society; it encompasses a range of practices, from resistance against corporate and state surveillance to the creation of alternative tools that empower users to challenge data exploitation (Kazansky & Milan, 2021; Milan, 2017). Affordances, in turn, provide a conceptual framework for understanding not only how technological structures enable or constrain specific actions but also how users, activists, and developers can appropriate, modify, or subvert these affordances to reclaim power within digital environments (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Davis & Chouinard, 2016). Finally, agency is central and runs through both data activism and affordances. It underscores the capacity of users to act, negotiate, and reshape their interactions within platforms in ways that challenge platform control and algorithmic governance (Couldry & Powell, 2014).

By exploring the interplay between these three dimensions, this book critically examines how data activists create oppositional affordances, from hidden and

meta-affordances to entirely new or anti-affordances, thereby opening up new pathways for user empowerment in the socio-technical landscape of platforms. But how are the ideas of this book conceptualized? Rather than treating data activism, affordances, and agency as isolated theoretical constructs, this book integrates them into a dynamic framework that allows for a nuanced understanding of the user, activism, and their practices within platforms.

First, the concept of data activism, a grassroots response to the pervasive power of platforms that seeks to combat top-down control over personal data. Data activism encompasses a variety of resistance strategies and tactics, ranging from technical interventions such as encryption and obfuscation to more structured initiatives like advocacy campaigns, trainings, and the development of specialized applications and tools aimed at empowering datafied citizens. While scholars have contributed significantly to the understanding of data activism—offering detailed typologies (e.g., Brunton & Nissenbaum, 2015) and exploring its role in shaping alternative epistemologies (e.g., Milan & Van der Velden, 2016)—there remains a gap in the empirical and theoretical exploration, particularly concerning the subversive software tools employed by these activists.

This book aims to fill that gap by focusing specifically on the software and technological interventions emerging from data activism. Rather than viewing data solely as a mechanism for surveillance or commodification, these tools reframe data as a site of resistance and reappropriation, thus enabling individuals to intervene in the broader technological infrastructure. As Kazansky and Milan (2021) argue, these initiatives do not merely challenge dominant data regimes but actively construct “counter-discourses and data countercultures” (pp. 63–64). By shedding light on these data tactics, this book critically examines how subversive software can reshape power dynamics in a datafied society by offering users the means to reclaim agency and challenge algorithmic control.

However, this book stands out from previous works on the subject because it uses the theoretical underpinnings of affordances to sow the seeds for further critical analysis of the software and applications of data activists while also suggesting a new typology that can aid researchers in identifying and analyzing such practices. While data activism remains a central theme throughout this book, what sets this work apart from previous studies is its deep engagement with the concept of affordances. Rather than analyzing data activism solely as a form of resistance to datafication, surveillance, and platform power, this book explores how data activist initiatives are shaped by and, in turn, reshape the technological structures they seek to challenge.

Second, by integrating affordance theory into the discussion, the analysis demonstrates that activist interventions do not merely oppose dominant platform logics but actively engage with the designed properties and constraints of digital infrastructures. Building on the theoretical premises of affordances as both enabling and constraining factors in digital environments (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Gibson, 1979; Norman, 1999), this book situates data activism within the broader framework of activism. The concept of data activism, as employed in this book, is situated within the broader genealogical arc of digital activism. Digital activism,

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as outlined in works such as *Firebrand Waves of Digital Activism* (Constantinides et al., 2024; Karatzogianni, 2015; Karatzogianni & Schandorf, 2023), refers to the diverse uses of digital technologies for political expression and intervention, from online campaigns and networked protests to hacktivism and media activism. This broad umbrella has historically encompassed a wide spectrum of ideologies and practices, including both collective and individual forms of online actions. Within this broader tradition, data activism emerges as a more focused subdomain concerned with the politics of data, algorithmic governance, and platform logics. While digital activism may target a variety of issues using digital tools, data activism is specifically oriented toward resisting datafication and reclaiming control over personal and collective data practices. By situating data activism within this broader genealogy, the book recognizes its tactical and epistemological affinities with earlier forms of digital resistance while also marking its unique focus on the material and algorithmic dimensions of contemporary digital life. More specifically, digital activism broadly refers to the use of digital technologies—especially the Internet, social media, and platforms—for political and social mobilization (Christensen, 2011; Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012; Karatzogianni et al., 2020; Karatzogianni & Souvlis, 2023; Papa, 2017), which has extended research flourished over the last 10 years (Constantinides et al., 2024; Papa & Ioannou, 2023); data activism marks a more recent and analytically distinct strand within this tradition. It emerges in response to the datafication of everyday life, focusing not only on the mobilization of bodies or messages but on the politics of data itself—its collection, ownership, circulation, and algorithmic processing (Milan & van der Velden, 2016). As such, data activism shifts the terrain of struggle from visibility and communication to the infrastructures, protocols, and practices that structure platforms and influence social, economic, and political outcomes.

As such, this book draws from and contributes to this evolution by focusing on data activism as a specific mode of critical engagement with platform capitalism and algorithmic governance. It views data activism not merely as a subcategory of digital activism but as a reflexive and tactical formation that arises from the epistemic and material challenges posed by big data, surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), and AI infrastructures. Whereas early digital activism was often oriented around expressive politics, information dissemination, or mobilization (Karatzogianni, 2006), data activism is more attuned to the hidden infrastructures and affordances of sociotechnical systems, aiming to expose, subvert, and reconfigure them. Therefore, when this book claims to situate data activism within the broader framework of activism, it acknowledges digital activism as the historical and conceptual backdrop while emphasizing the specific affordances and imaginaries that data activism brings to the fore. The tools, tactics, and discourses analyzed here operate at the intersection of activism, software, and infrastructure, engaging critically with power not just through protest or advocacy, but through code, design, obfuscation, and algorithmic resistance.

Therefore, this book explores how activist tools and software operate within the boundaries of platforms' preexisting functionalities (e.g., affordances) while

also creating new, counter-hegemonic possibilities for action. By focusing on affordances, this book provides a theoretical lens to understand how data activists tactically interact with platform infrastructures, engage in subversive practices, and suggest interventions that might enable new forms of agency within datafied societies. Many scholars have often strongly criticized the concept of affordances for its perceived technological determinism and suggested that it overly attributes agency to technology while downplaying the role of human interpretation/interaction and social context (Hutchby, 2001; Nagy & Neff, 2015). Critics argue that early formulations, particularly those influenced by Gibson (1979), implied a fixed and objective relationship between users and technological environments, while disregarding the ways in which affordances are shaped by cultural, social, and political factors and contexts. However, in this book, it takes a more nuanced perspective that moves beyond such deterministic interpretations. Instead of viewing affordances as fixed properties of technology, there is an alignment with perspectives that conceptualize them as relational, contextual, and deeply embedded in socio-technical configurations (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Davis & Chouinard, 2016).

By framing affordances as relational and dynamic rather than static, the emphasis is on how they might be shaped, contested, and negotiated by users in different contexts. Thus, rather than reinforcing technological determinism, our analysis highlights how affordances provide a conceptual lens for understanding the socio-technical struggles between platforms' power, algorithmic governance, and oppositional user practices. Through this perspective, affordances are not just constraints imposed by technology but can also be sites of resistance and transformation within the evolving landscape of data activism. Therefore, this perspective aligns with scholars who challenge this deterministic view and emphasize the relational and dynamic nature of affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) in relation to platforms. Rather than seeing affordances as only properties of technological systems, adopt an approach that recognizes them as discourses that can be negotiated through user engagement, institutional power, and socio-technical practices.

This perspective allows me to explore how affordances are not merely "given" by technology and designers but can be co-constructed through tactics and creative repurposing—particularly in the context of data activism—where users can actively reshape digital infrastructures to challenge dominant platform logics and power. But why, precisely, is our case different? In this book, affordances are considered as features of platforms that can directly/or indirectly make normative claims about "what users should do" (Stanfill, 2015, p. 1062) and act to "configure the user" (Hutchby, 2001, p. 451). By interpreting affordances as producers of discourse, this approach explores how structural ideals position certain behaviors as "correct" or "normal," while simultaneously reflecting and non-deterministically reinforcing social logics (Stanfill, 2015, p. 1060; see also Fotopoulou & O'Riordan, 2017). Grounded in Foucault's (1972) assertion that discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (p. 49), discursive interface analysis adopts a critical perspective on the power dynamics between platforms and users. It interrogates how platforms and

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applications subtly enforce norms, expectations, and ideologies through their design, thus shaping user behavior in ways that reflect broader social and political structures. The study of data activism becomes particularly relevant through this perspective, as it highlights the ways in which activists challenge dominant narratives and reconfigure interfaces to resist data extraction, surveillance, and algorithmic control. Ultimately, discursive interface analysis allows us to interrogate how platforms mediate meaning, structure user engagement, and condition the possibilities of resistance.

Third, agency is another central concept in this book, particularly in its connection to affordances and data activism. While much has been written about surveillance capitalism and platform control, less attention has been paid to how users can actively resist these forces within technological infrastructures in connection with data activism. The concept of agency has long been debated in social theory. It has often been framed within the tensions between structure and action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Giddens, 1984). In the context of platforms and algorithms, agency refers to the capacity of users to navigate, resist, and repurpose technological infrastructures in ways that challenge the dominant logics of data extraction and control. Similarly, in their chapter, Schandorf and Karatzogianni (2017) reframe agency as emerging not from individual rational actors but from technosocial assemblages—entanglements of humans, data, code, platforms, and material infrastructures. This posthuman perspective offers a lens for understanding data activism, where political agency is distributed across networks of users, algorithms, and tools. For example, the affordances of such tools not only mediate but also actively shape activist practices, enabling new modes of visibility, coordination, and subversion (*ibid*). From this view, agency is no longer the sole property of human subjects but a relational and emergent property of data-driven environments, where resistance is enacted through the interplay of socio-technical affordances and affective, discursively motivated actors (*ibid*). This book engages with agency not as a fixed attribute of individuals but as a relational and dynamic process that is deeply intertwined with the socio-technical environments in which users operate (Couldry & Hepp, 2013).

Drawing on critical platform studies (Gillespie, 2018; van Dijck, 2013), agency is conceptualized as being shaped by both the constraints and possibilities afforded by platform features and functionalities. Platforms suggest specific forms of participation while simultaneously controlling others, thus conditioning user behavior through design choices, algorithmic curation, and business models that prioritize data monetization. However, agency is not entirely subsumed under platform control; rather, users and data activists negotiate these structures, sometimes finding ways to subvert or repurpose them for their own ends. This negotiation aligns with the notion of tactical agency (de Certeau, 1984), where users engage in everyday acts of resistance that challenge the hegemonic order of digital capitalism. In this book, agency is examined through the lens of data activism, particularly in terms of how activist projects create oppositional affordances that enable users to reclaim some degree of control over their digital identities and interactions. By developing tools that foster user awareness,