Internet as Aesthetic Medium

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Abstract

The dissertation explains the internet as an aesthetic medium, authorship in the medium and platforms’ influence on the medium’s aesthetic function. This is achieved by analysing the actual art that uses the internet as an aesthetic medium. The aesthetic function of the internet as a medium is different from its informative and communicative function. It entails manipulation of the medium defined by the permanent and instant interconnectedness of the digitalised instances or representations of people, things, artificial intelligence and information to achieve a specific aesthetic aim. Internet as a medium, similarly to comics and film, allows for different kinds of authorship. A typical example of art that uses the internet as a medium is a meme. This is because memes involve meta-level discussions and group authorship, elements that are most easily facilitated by the internet as a medium. Art that uses the internet as an aesthetic medium can be single-authored if the sole author manipulates digital interconnectedness in an aesthetically significant way. Besides this general level of how the internet is characterised as a medium, there is a practical level that includes platforms on which artwork is made. These two levels are necessarily connected. Even though platforms also manipulate digitalised interconnectedness, they do not erase the internet’s potential as an aesthetic medium because artists manipulate this already manipulated content.
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Introduction

Ubiquitous internet use has a profound influence on the everyday life of the individual in today’s society. The internet has changed how the world functions; its effects are numerous in politics, social life and economy. Researchers have showed how the internet has modified the way the election process functions, how possible fragmentation of social life happens, or how monopolies evolve in the digital economy. This dissertation will focus on the problems associated with its use as an aesthetic medium. Is there such a thing as the internet as a separate aesthetic medium? If so, what are its characteristics? The aim is not only to explore the aesthetic dimension of the medium, but also to relate it to its other functions, such as epistemic or communicative. I will also investigate how artistic authorship is affected by the use of the medium. Finally, I will explore how the practical level of actual use influences its more general aesthetic possibilities.

In the first part of the dissertation, I will explore the internet as an aesthetic medium. To find out if it is useful to talk about specific media characteristics, I will examine media scepticism and "post-media" claim and dispute them. To analyse the internet as an aesthetic medium, I will describe the differences between information, communication and aesthetic medium. I will show how manipulation of communication is the key to understanding its aesthetic use. To examine this use further, I will compare the internet to other telecommunication media. I will argue that the internet as an aesthetic medium means manipulating digital interconnectedness and explain that using the example of the internet meme.

In the second part, I will explain in detail how the internet can be used as an aesthetic medium using the example of two artworks with different kinds of authorship. I will show how authorship, collaboration and intent could be shaped by the aesthetic characteristics of the medium. To explain authorship in the medium, I will first describe general notions of authorship, collective authorship, multiple authorship and co-authorship. To decide which kinds of authorship are relevant for the internet as a medium, I will compare it to media that often favour collaborative authorship: film, conceptual art and comics. I will then review two actual cases of art that employ manipulation of digital interconnectedness and conclude that various kinds of authorship could be relevant to the internet as an aesthetic medium.

In the third part, I will explore how the internet operates on the level of actual use and compare it to general aesthetic considerations that I will cover in the first two parts of the dissertation. I will define the practical level as the use of specific platforms that further restrict the manipulation of digital interconnectedness. I will show how algorithms and platforms’ design shape the aesthetic possibilities of the medium. I will argue in favour of the artist’s power to manipulate the medium,
even though it is manipulated by platforms as well. I will review the relation between the general and the practical level of the internet as an aesthetic medium and conclude that they are necessarily connected.

1 General Characteristics of the Internet as Aesthetic Medium

In the first part, I will explore the basic theory of the internet as an aesthetic medium. I intend to address media scepticism. I will argue that it is in fact useful to talk about specific characteristics of the internet as an aesthetic medium and that the notion of medium is still useful for analysing art and aesthetic experience on the internet. I will also examine what it means to say that we live in post-media time, whether it is true, and how it relates to the view of what the internet as an aesthetic medium is. Is it in any way helpful to talk about the internet as an aesthetic medium? If it is, is it useful for all aesthetic phenomena related to the internet, or only for some specific art forms?

To David Davies, medium means mediation: "In its most general sense, a medium is a means of transmitting some matter or content from a source to a site of reception."¹ I want to address the internet specifically as an artistic or aesthetic medium. My examination will rely on the distinction between aesthetic media and physical media, as well as the difference between aesthetic and information media. I will also make a distinction between the internet and other telecommunication media. This will allow us to see the distinctive function of the internet as a medium which is the permanent and instant interconnectedness of the digitalised entities.

1.1 The Difference Between Information, Communication and Aesthetic Medium

The internet is both an information and aesthetic medium. This is why any characterisation of the internet as an aesthetic medium always includes characteristics of an informational medium. That is to say, the information medium is a broader term that might not include its aesthetic aspects. The internet as an informative medium can distribute other media, e.g., a person can watch movies via a streaming service. The internet as an information medium can also distribute information only in one direction, therefore mimicking the more traditional mass media. For example, the creation of the news that we read online is usually still centralised. But at the same time, the difference between informational and aesthetic medium does not really say if the content is distributed for a mass

audience or if it is intended only for scattered enthusiasts. It only says that it can be used so that communication is not necessarily happening and information only flows one way, which includes the distribution of other media without attendance to other functions of the internet as a medium. Suppose we use the internet without utilising its functions as an aesthetic medium, but we use other functions that only distribute existing characteristics of other media. In that case, we use it only as an informational medium.

The internet is also a communication medium, meaning that it primarily facilitates communication between users. Specifically, it makes possible "the bidirectional exchange of messages and information."2 Andre Lemos uses this distinction between information and communication media to highlight the difference between the mass media and the post-mass media: "the role of mass media function is 'information,' whereas that of the post–mass media function is 'communication' (like blogs, wikis, map collaboration, chats network, social software networks, etc.)."3 But what is the difference between the internet as a communication medium and the internet as an aesthetic medium? The internet as an aesthetic medium has a more specific purpose than when used only as a communication medium. "If a medium is intrinsically a means of transmitting or communicating something, then to appreciate the medium for its own sake in appreciating a work is to attend not simply to what is communicated but to the manner in which that thing is communicated."4 We do not only exchange messages; we are also aware of the form that is a skilful result of the medium manipulation when we use the internet as an aesthetic medium. Most internet creations are the consequence of the way communication unwinds within the medium. Either the communication happening in the medium can be manipulated by an artist in the specific artwork, or the communication between users can be part of the authorship that manipulates the content. This manipulation of communication is the essence of the internet as an aesthetic medium. We will see from the example of a meme in section 2.5 how the internet as a communication medium can be employed as an aesthetic medium and how this can also be relevant for the kinds of authorship that usually occur in the medium.

1.2 Aesthetic Medium, Media Scepticism and "Post-media"

To start the inquiry of whether the internet is a specific aesthetic medium, and, if so, how strictly this characterisation determines the possibilities of its use, it is useful to define what an aesthetic

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3 Ibid.

medium is. The internet as an aesthetic medium has to have specific aesthetic properties that differentiate it from other medium uses. In this regard I will use the general notion of aesthetic medium that is proposed by Davies. He claims that: "To think of a painting as in an artistic medium is to relate its perceptible properties to the agency of a maker whose purposeful composition in that medium is the source of those properties." To him, the point is that the artist’s intention can be seen in the way she manipulates the medium. This is how, to Davies, intention and authorship are linked to aesthetic properties in the medium. I will explore this relation further in part 2.

Both media scepticism and the post-media claim in some way challenge the notion of specific aesthetic media, and, at least, limit the way the medium itself affects possibilities of its use. Nevertheless, some theorists, like Clive Bell and Clement Greenberg, are considered to be media purists because they hold that each medium should be used in a way that is dictated by the nature of that medium. That position is opposed by media sceptic Noël Carroll who argues against what he calls "the medium-specificity thesis" according to which "each art form, in virtue of its medium, has its own exclusive domain of development." He outlines essentialist views on media such as Greenberg’s: "a modernist work of art must try, in principle, to avoid dependence upon any order of experience not given in the most essentially construed nature of its medium." Instead, Carroll claims that "we have no idea of what features of the medium are important unless we have a use for the medium." So, he denies the possibility of defining media functions outside its practical use. In his later paper, Carroll claims that features of the specific medium do matter. For example, if a film wants to be philosophical, it has to do so on its own terms using the features that are available specifically for film and not simply restating something that was said by philosophers. Therefore, the means by which we achieve something (in this case, some philosophical statement) becomes important. So, in this instance, Carroll embraces an argument that refutes media scepticism.

Regarding the media scepticism debate, we should distinguish between two types of art that involve the internet: internet art and art that uses the internet as an aesthetic medium. Internet art is a much broader concept that includes art in the digital form produced and disseminated on the internet and art that responds to the internet culture outside the medium. This is different from the narrower concept of art that uses the internet as a medium or the type of art I am talking about in this dissertation that has to do with the manipulation of digital interconnectedness. In the case of internet art, one might endorse media scepticism because there is no strong connection between the

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5 Ibid., p. 183.
6 Ibid., p. 185.
medium and the art. But in the case of art that uses the internet as an aesthetic medium, the intuition is not so strong, and it could be that media scepticism is questionable. After investigating the meme, an example of art that uses the internet as an aesthetic medium, we will review this assertion.

Another assertion that I want to examine is the claim that we live in a post-media time. Lev Manovich writes that "on the level of aesthetics, the Web has established a multimedia document", which to him means that "the traditional strong link between the identity of an art object and its medium becomes broken." Digital technology allows the reproduction of most other media in digital form and consumption via the internet. Does this mean that it is not useful to talk about the internet as a specific medium at all? To answer this question, I will rely on the already mentioned difference between information, communication and aesthetic medium. I will also explore distinctions between material and aesthetic medium, and compare the internet with other media. Then I will review the internet as a particular aesthetic medium. Lastly, I will look into a specific art example in the internet medium in order to demonstrate the function of the internet as an aesthetic medium I have identified, which is the manipulation of the permanent and instant interconnectedness of the digitalised entities.

1.3 Distinction Between Material and Aesthetic Medium

One of the crucial distinctions I want to highlight for analysing the internet as an aesthetic medium is between aesthetic and physical mediums. Similarly, in thinking about the internet as a medium, I will differentiate between the material basis and how it functions as an aesthetic medium.

Both the internet as an information medium and the internet as an aesthetic medium are different from the internet as a physical medium. If specific material contains information, then this physical medium can be seen from a more abstract point of view as an information medium. Physical transformations of the medium are not important as long as they allow "information management" transformation. Orlin Vakarelov views information management "as an activity of manipulating the form of the information—selecting the appropriate medium for its containment, distribution, and manipulation." Therefore, the only thing that matters on the more abstract level of information media is information management transformation. This is why, to Vakarelov, "a system is an information medium to the extent that there are transformations from and to the medium to and

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from some other media … that can be regarded as information preserving transformations.”14 In other words, as long as the information is protected and whole while transmitted from one medium to another, we are talking about information media.

The distinction between aesthetic and physical medium is accepted by David Davies, who mentions Joseph Margolis and Arthur Danto as proponents of such distinction.15 Danto, for example, claims that "there is always going to be a residuum of matter that cannot be vaporized into pure content. Yet, even so, a distinction must be made between medium and matter, as may be seen from the fact that although the predicates in question may apply to drawings without content, they cannot apply to the mere matter from which the drawings are fashioned: they do not straightforwardly apply to real objects; neither do they apply to paper and ink, which are also real objects."16 So, Danto’s argument for differentiating between physical medium and the aesthetic medium is that you cannot apply the same aesthetic property both to material and the aesthetic medium. If you call a painting beautiful, you do not mean the canvas is beautiful as well. In this view, the artistic medium allows articulation by creative act and stands apart from the material that it is made from.

In the case of the internet, the purposeful composition is governed by all its possibilities as a medium. What would be the internet as a physical medium? Various resources and infrastructure such as fibre-optic cables, thick undersea cables, satellites, routers, servers, computers, and smartphones. My focus in thinking about the internet as a medium will not be to attend to physical components such as screen or software (this would only be the vehicle on which medium depends). Instead, I am interested in our use of this materiality, what is essential for aesthetic articulation and what stands out in this kind of mediation.

1.4 The Comparison Between the Internet and Other Media

In this segment, I will assess the internet as a medium compared to older telecommunication media such as broadcast radio and television, telephone and amateur radio. Each bears some similarities to the internet as a medium and has technological shortcomings that prevented it from developing what will become salient characteristics of the internet. This will enable us to see why comparable media are not used aesthetically in the same way and also establish the uniqueness of the internet as an aesthetic medium.

14 Ibid., p. 52.
I will start with traditional broadcasting media such as television and radio that seem to have an aesthetically strong impact on distribution, aesthetic design, and how things are perceived aesthetically. Even though there are some similarities between the internet and television, such as the instant spatio-temporal connection between people and a televised image of something or someone (for example, in live shows on television and radio or in already stored material), there are still significant differences. For instance, television seems to thrive in delivering messages from one specific place. More specifically, broadcasting in television and radio, even if it achieves connectedness, is done from a centralised source. This, of course, has a profound influence on what kind of media television and radio broadcasting is. Information only flows in one direction, from transmitter to the general public, which means that there is one programme that is transmitted to the receivers. The other thing is that the viewer or hearer is typically passive and just absorbs the available content. With the internet, that is not so, and user can be quite active while digitally interconnected. This is why we are not really (inter)connected with broadcasting, even though we do get instant information. However, the reason why both radio and television are significant and relevant media is that they often broadcast content that requires stored information in technologies like movies and video. This feature shows how broadcasting is quite powerful as an informational medium, which means that it distributes other aesthetic media such as video and film. This is also the feature that some media such as telephone or amateur radio lack or are not quite used in that way. It could be said that the broadcasting medium is more autocratic in nature while the internet is a more democratic type of technology or at least has more democratic potential since "anyone can produce information, 'releasing' the editorial center."17 As already mentioned, Lemos contrasts mass media functions (that include radio and television) with the "post–mass media functions." Given that latter can attain and distribute more alternative interests, information and products, it is decentralised and less mainstream than traditional mass media.

If we go even further in the history of telecommunication, we can compare the internet with the telephone and electrical telegraph. Both telephone and electrical telegraph are so-called duplex devices, which means there is simultaneous, two-way transmission. The transmitted message is either text or voice. This is quite different from television, where transmission occurs in one direction only and includes moving images. These technologies allow for connection between two users, but they are not really interconnected because they usually do not provide the possibility of linkage of more users from different random locations. They are not centralised, but because they typically connect only two users, they lose some of the features that link broadcasting media and the

internet, namely the mass audience. Another difference is that they are not used fully as informational media because they do not usually distribute other stored media.

The medium that is even more similar to the internet is amateur radio. Amateur radio operators communicate via different means, including Morse code, analogue voice, analogue transmission of images and digital transmission of voice and text. The oldest method among these is Morse code, which has been used from the 19th century. Morse code is digital because it is encoded in the binary form of transmission (represented as dots and dashes, with the duration ratio of 1:3) and the lack of transmission (also in the 1:3 duration ratio, where silence with the length of 1 represents intra-letter space between dots or dashes, and silence with the length of 3 means space between letters). When transmitting or receiving Morse code, a human becomes an encoder and decoder and does the computer’s job.

Since it is decentralised and allows instant connection between two users and instant interconnection, amateur radio may be the most similar to the internet. The instant interconnection via amateur radio means that more users can join the same radio frequency within the small portions of the electromagnetic spectrum allocated to amateur radio. It has more possibilities than the telephone and electrical telegraph because not only voice or text messages are transmitted. Amateur television and slow-scan television are used for transmitting images, videos and sounds. These methods might be obscure but are innovative and make amateur radio use more diverse. But even with such functionality, amateur radio cannot fulfil all necessary conditions that characterise the internet as a medium. What amateur radio lacks is the characteristic of being permanent. Even though amateur radio is characterised by its user to user, non-centralised functioning, it does not have permanent points that hold on to information and that can be accessed at any time. The interconnection via the internet is usually asynchronous because it allows access to information at the chosen time, which gives users time to respond to existing content creatively.18 Face-to-face, as well as amateur radio communication, primarily allows synchronous connection. This makes amateur radio as an aesthetic collaborative medium limited in comparison to the internet.

1.5 What is the Internet as Aesthetic Medium?

So far, I have established differences between information, communication and aesthetic medium, and the distinction between material and aesthetic or information medium. As it follows from earlier sections, the internet can be all those kinds of media. I also compared the internet to other telecommunication media and revealed which functionalities seem to pull them apart. However, I

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still need to specify characteristics of the internet as an aesthetic medium, that is, determine what the specific aesthetic function of the medium would be.

I already mentioned that the manipulation of communication is happening while we use the internet as an aesthetic medium. Or more precisely, my central thesis is that the internet as a medium is characterised by the permanent and instant interconnectedness of the digitalised instances or representations of people, things, artificial intelligence (AI), and information. This means that when an artist is using the internet as an artistic medium, she expresses herself through such interconnectedness of digitalised representations. In other words, we can assert that by using the internet as a medium, artists manipulate such digitalised interconnectedness to achieve some kind of artistic statement or purpose.

This characterisation is so broad that it includes using any kind of internet platforms such as Facebook or more individualised blogs, Google or different forums, because each has a specific form of interconnectedness, but it also allows for different kinds of artistic expressions. Since the point of the internet is interconnection, what is interconnected is an essential piece of the puzzle. It is not humans or AI that are interconnected; it is their instances or representations in the medium. I mentioned both digitalised instances and representations, because not all that is interconnected on the internet is a representation of something; sometimes what is interconnected can be just an instance of digitalised code that stands for itself and does not refer to something outside its digital existence.

By digital, I mean that the binary code usually represented by numbers 1 and 0 is used to transmit or store different data formats that include instances or representation of people, things, AI and information. By interconnectedness, I mean a connection between any part of the network and any other part (or parts) of the network. The internet is called a network of networks because it enables internetworking between different devices and networks of devices. For the user, that means that they can be connected to any other user or all other users simultaneously. Unlike some older telecommunication media, information is not transmitted only from a singular centralised source, and there is no limitation such as the sole connection of two users. I mean by instant that there is an (almost) immediate connection that allows erasing the spatio-temporal gap between users while digitally represented. When I say permanent, I mean that all that is interconnected, i.e., the digitalised instances or representations of people, things, AI and information, not only exists in a moment, but is also usually stored in some form either on servers or via peer-to-peer technology in which case, everyone is a server and a user at the same time.
There is usually something that is lost in this necessity of a digitalised form of things in interconnection. For example, Mitch Parsell claims that communication on social networks might cause loss of perceived nuances in individual identity and instead promote stronger identification with group membership such as liberal or conservative. Forming of narrow and closed online communities furthers polarisation of opinions. In other words, the fact that we are talking about represented people and things means we get quite the different result from manipulating such representations than it would be face-to-face.

1.6 How Memes Are Made By Using the Internet as a Medium

Why do I think the internet as an artistic medium is characterised by this specific function (that is, manipulation of digitalised interconnectedness)? I will show why by applying it to actual art. To Daniel Wack, "artistic medium is an art critical concept. As an art critical concept, what a medium for an art form is can only be known through artists discovering its possibilities in the creation of works within the form." To describe the functions of the internet as an artistic medium, I will review an actual example that either employs those functions or questions them.

As a paradigmatic form that is native to the internet, I will consider the internet meme. This is the kind of internet phenomenon that employs most characteristics of the internet as a medium. A meme is considered to be a form of cultural information that spreads across internet platforms and often evolves. One of the most well-known types of the internet meme is an image macro that usually contains an image at the centre and text at the top and the bottom. What Simon J. Evnine calls "memographic practice" and the creation of image macros, are practices that can best be explained as a typical and convenient use of digitalised interconnectedness. Memographic practice is "a meta-level of activity in which examples of these image macros are discussed, commented on, up-voted, downvoted, criticized, collected, replied to in kind, and so on." While the Evnine definition of a meme employs the functions of the internet as a medium, understanding memes only as images with text, which is more similar to the artwork done by Barbara Kruger, means that they do not use such functionality. If we acknowledge how characteristics of the medium affect what the final work will be, that means that the internet as a medium is especially beneficial for certain kinds of artworks.

22 Ibid.
A specific example of a meme is the Success Kid23 meme, which in the form of an image macro usually consists of a specific image and superimposed text. The image is always the same – a photo of a baby with a clenched fist full of sand and a self-satisfied facial expression on a background with various shades of blue. The theme is an unexpectedly successful event. The text is usually changed according to the rules that evolved following the existing instances and the memographic practice. In the case of the Success Kid meme, such meta-level discussions were happening on platforms like Reddit, Tumblr or Facebook, where users commented, upvoted or downvoted instances of the meme. Examples of text at the top and the bottom for the Success Kid meme are: "LATE TO WORK; BOSS WAS EVEN LATER", "OPENED WINDOW TO LET FLY OUT; IT FLEW OUT" and "HAD STUPID OPINIONS AS A TEENAGER; FACEBOOK AND TWITTER DIDN'T EXIST SO THE WORLD NEVER FOUND OUT".

Based on this meme example, a successful art form that can only be made in the internet medium, we can conclude that the meme is necessarily the result of the specific function of the internet as an aesthetic medium. In section 2.5, I will explain in detail how the manipulation of digitalised interconnectedness is happening in the meme case and what we could say about the authorship of such artwork. In the third part of the dissertation, I will review whether memes are consequences of using the internet as an aesthetic media in general or if their creation is determined by specific platforms in which they are made.

1.7 Against Media Scepticism and "Post-media" Thesis

Now that we have a general characterisation of the internet as an aesthetic medium, I can review the media scepticism position that claims that there are no specific characteristics and limitations of the particular aesthetic medium. The meme example showed how, instead, the internet does have some particular features that are worth examining. Manipulation of digital interconnectedness seems to be the aesthetic function that is uniquely attributed to the internet.

Similarly, regarding the post-media claim that reproduction of other media within digital technologies has potentially erased the relation between the medium and the artwork, it could be said that such media reproductions do not mean that the internet as a medium does not have some distinctive features and that there is no difference between media (even though they may share some common features). If we watch a movie over a streaming service, we comprehend its meaning by attending to the features that are characteristics of film as a medium; that is, we rely on the narrative and the moving picture. In this case, we use the internet not as an aesthetic medium but as

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23 Some examples of this meme can be found on Know Your Meme website: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/success-kid-i-hate-sandcastles, archived at https://perma.cc/C8M6-HPUT.
an informational medium because in the context of watching movies, the internet only distributes features of other media, more precisely, film. This is why the idea that we live in a post-media time might be overstated, particularly if it involves omitting the peculiarities of the internet as a medium. Even though the mixing of media is common in the context of the internet, there are still some characteristics that are only reserved for the internet as an aesthetic medium.

It seems that both media scepticism and the post-media thesis do not possess strong enough arguments to conclude that it is not necessary to discuss the specifics of the internet as an aesthetic medium. On the contrary, it seems that characterising the internet as permanent and instant interconnectedness of the digitalised instances or representations of people, things, AI and information might help us grasp specific possibilities of this medium.

2 Authorship, Collaboration and Intent

In the first part of the dissertation, I explained what the internet as an aesthetic medium is on the general level, and I gave the example of the meme as an artwork that is made in the medium. But there are still some questions that are left unanswered. We still do not know exactly how the meme meets the conditions of being an artwork in this medium. What does it mean to say that the artwork is made by using the internet’s aesthetic features and what is the relation between memes and some other artworks that are also created in the medium? To answer those questions, we also need to explain the authorship in works such as memes. In the second part of the dissertation, I will examine further consequences of the internet as a medium on authorship, collaboration and intent. I will first add another example of artwork that uses the internet as an aesthetic medium and then compare it to the meme to show different approaches to authorship, collaboration and intent while creating in this medium. To explain authorship on the internet, I will explore general notions of authorship, collective authorship, multiple authorship, and co-authorship. I will also compare the internet with other collaborative media. This will be the basis for my explanation of how memes use the internet as an aesthetic medium in reality and what kind of authorship they endorse.

2.1 Example: Traditional Conception of Authorship in Artwork That Uses the Internet as Aesthetic Medium

To explain the authorship of a meme, I will add a contrasting case that is not quite like the meme but still illustrates how specific artworks can highlight different aspects or functionalities of the internet. This example depicts how authorship is traditionally connected to the artwork and its
salient properties, even though the example itself is made by using the internet as an aesthetic medium. This example also follows Davies’ conception of authorship and intent neatly.

The Berlin-based artist Simon Weckert often examines how specific algorithms and technology influence our society. In his artwork called *Google Maps Hacks*, he investigates our reality shaped by online platforms such as Google Maps. It included a performance in which a person slowly walked in the empty street while pulling a handcart that was filled with 99 smartphones. All of them reported their location to Google Maps, and the application itself, in response, changed the colour of the street depicted on the maps from green to red, indicating a traffic jam. This then affected the behaviour of nearby drivers that were instructed to avoid that street. In other words, the artwork showed how algorithms employed by Google Maps have a clear consequence on human behaviour, demonstrating the immense power that technology has in shaping our choices and actions. The author also questioned the objectivity of technology and the trust that we have in it when it can be so easily hacked in situations like these. This work was done in the context of other artists’ artworks and his more general interest in how the map itself as an instrument of power that includes different kinds of representations of the real world has changed and evolved.24

Here, the artist manipulates the digital interconnection of people, things, AI and information to achieve some kind of artistic purpose. Therefore, we are talking about utilising the internet as an aesthetic medium. The artist’s intention and manipulation of the medium result in some salient properties of the work that highlight his aesthetic aim. David Davies claims that this is precisely the relation between aesthetic medium, authorship and intention. But the problem is that not all creations made in the medium have such structure of authorship and intent. In fact, some internet creations, such as memes, use quite a different paradigm of authorship that might affect both evaluation and acknowledgement of such works.

What are the differences between these two examples with regards to authorship and intent? Is the meme the only example that really uses all the possibilities of the medium concerning the kind of authorship it endorses?

To answer that question, I will define both authorship in general and collective authorship. I will also look into collaboration in other media and then compare it to the collaborations that use the internet as an aesthetic medium.

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I presented two artworks as examples of art that uses the internet as an artistic medium. In order to explain how they actually use the internet as a medium, I have to also explore their authorship. In this section, I will look into few general accounts of authorship and collective authorship. I will also look into the distinction between multiple authorship and co-authorship. This will be the basis of my later elaboration of the different kinds of authorship in memes and Google Maps Hacks example.

What is authorship in general? According to Livingston and Archer, authorship requires responsibility for the authored artwork that includes all its artistic and moral implications. They highlight as a crucial component of authorship sufficient control in manipulating the artistic process and creating a work of art. According to that account of authorship, an agent is not an author if such requirements are not fulfilled. To put it simply, if an agent’s control in either the initiating and designing stage or in the actual execution stage of artwork creation is missing or severely limited regarding artistic properties, following Livingston and Archer, we cannot attribute authorship to her. Therefore, we can establish that such an agent is only a contributor and not an author of that artwork. Similarly, to Paul Sellors, "authorship is not a concept to be derived from a text but an intentional action of an intending agent that causes a text." He argues against all "anti-intentionalist" accounts that presume that the author is dead and the audience has more power to inscribe meaning to the artwork. That is in line with perhaps an even more precise definition of authorship given by Christy Mag Uidhir: "To be an author of a work under a description is to be directly responsible, at least in part, for that work being under that description, that is, to be directly responsible for the way in which that work satisfies the conditions for being under that description (e.g., to be an author of a work as a poem is to be directly responsible for the way in which that work satisfies the conditions for being a poem )." What Mag Uidhir means here when he says "a work under a description", is a work that is made in a particular art form or medium such as a poem or a painting. So, the author is responsible for fitting an artwork into specific art form or medium. That is to say, the author has to have intent in making a certain artwork with its features manipulated in a way that fits a specific medium.

To explain authors that manipulate digital interconnectedness, we need to investigate what is happening with intent in collaborative art. Mag Uidhir differentiates between singular authorship

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and collective authorship. In singular authorship, only one agent is the author of the artwork under the specific description, and in collective authorship, we have more agents that are authors. Not all things that are collectively produced imply collective authorship to him. Suppose they are controlled by the intentions of other agents that mould the artwork into a specific description, such as movie directors. In that case, they do not have to be collectively authored even though they are collectively produced. If, on the other hand, the additional agent does not strictly follow the intention of the first agent and she creates content that is also specifically intentional and has a purpose of the work in mind, then this is a case of collective authorship. He maintains that in equal collaborations, the collaborator responsible for the artwork in a particular medium is instructed and influenced by another collaborator and vice versa. Other philosophers also point out that in the case of collective authorship, it is necessary to have shared intentions in achieving a specific artistic aim. For example, Sellors agrees that postulating something like "we-intentions" is the best way to explain the relationship between individual intentions within groups in artworks with collaborative authorship. He clarifies this using the example of a symphony: "If we intend to perform a symphony, I will act to bring about this group intention by means of playing my part. My individual intention to play my part is an unnecessary intention because my action is already accounted for under the we-intention."

Bacharach and Tollefsen criticise we-intentions because they do not require interactive interrelations between individuals with we-intentions: "There is no requirement that participants in a joint action be aware of, or respond to, the we-intentions of others." To them, such a possibility of private we-intention means that this notion is still not enough to explain collaborative authorship. Instead, they propose group membership as a crucial factor in establishing the difference between contributors and co-authors in a collaborative artistic context. This is why they accept Margaret Gilbert’s plural subject theory in which "a necessary and sufficient condition for being a plural subject is the existence of a joint commitment." According to this theory, the collaborators are doing a specific action, such as artwork creation, "as a body". These joint commitments can be more minimal or more strict and defined, depending on the group and its proposed artistic aims. If there is no action done "as a body", if there is no joint commitment of the agents, then they are not co-authors of the work but can be mere contributors. Examples that

28 Ibid., p. 54.  
29 Ibid., p. 62.  
32 Ibid., p. 28.  
33 Ibid.  

18
Bacharach and Tollefsen give for these kinds of roles are caterers responsible for food while filming or a paint mixer who ensures quality paint for painters. Neither of these is committed to the artistic aim of making an artwork, nor are they responsible for its artistic, political and social implications.

To find out what kind of authorship artworks like memes have, we have to explore another distinction that is often highlighted, the one between multiple authors and co-authors and see how they manipulate digital interconnectedness. In the case of co-authorship, there is significant interaction between collaborators. If collaborators are all making their content individually and are individually responsible for it, then that work is authored by multiple authors. According to Bacharach and Tollefsen, an example of multiple authorship is Wikipedia because the collaborators there do not work together interactively; instead, each contributor is only responsible for their contribution. They cannot be considered as co-authors of whole Wikipedia. But this is not the case. Darren Hudson Hick has a better explanation of how Wikipedia works. He considers controversial the claim that Wikipedia contributors are all working completely separately and states that Wikipedia is co-authored. This is not only because they have a joint commitment in making Wikipedia as such, but more importantly, as he says, "users make use of 'talk' pages for each entry to hash out the details of the entry, and 'user' pages to communicate and collaborate." To him, if some artwork does not have separate "units of authorship", then that artwork is co-authored. But he still admits that there can be a difference between co-authorship on Wikipedia and co-authorship in science. It seems that Wikipedia co-authors could share less responsibility (which means less authorship) than, for example, lead co-authors of a scientific paper. So, to him, there are often differences in the degree of authorship and responsibility. We will see how this can be applied in the meme case. Where the responsibility lies and what kind of authorship exists there, will be investigated in section 2.5.

Before I apply these distinctions to the artworks that employ the internet as a medium and offer an explanation of meme authorship and Google Maps Hacks authorship, I will look into collaborative practice in other artistic media.

2.3 Collaboration in Film, Conceptual Art and Comics

Now that we have the general account of collective authorship, multiple authorship, and co-authorship, it is time to see how the internet as a medium compares to other media that are similar
with regard to authorship and how the manipulation of digital interconnectedness is different from manipulation in other media. This will be required for a more detailed explanation of the artworks in sections 2.4 and 2.5. In order to determine the nature of collective creation in the case of memes and similar internet phenomena, I will investigate some other collaborative practices in arts. I will cover a few takes on authorship in comics, film and conceptual art. I will compare these accounts of authorship to the authorship of the two art examples that I am interested in: the meme and Google Maps Hacks.

If we look at the film as a collectively produced artwork, we could observe how different theories of authorship explain it. The most prevalent one is "auteur theory", in which typically the movie director is considered the person responsible for its artistic value. It is the auteur or director that expresses herself by making a movie and manipulates the medium. That means that the film director has overreaching artistic control that diminishes the impact of other creative contributors, which usually makes her a single author. Directors such as Jean-Luc Godard, Werner Herzog, Sofia Coppola and Wes Anderson are claimed to be such auteurs.

Another theory is that films have multiple authors. This is the theory supported by Berys Gaut, who reviews "auteurists" view of film authorship and notices that it is in tension with realities of film production that is commonly a collective undertaking. He distinguishes three main ways in which auteur theory tries to secure single authorship in cinema but fails. First is "the restriction strategy", which claims that collaborators other than the single author/director "did not affect the artistic significance of the film, merely its non-artistic features." That means that other movie collaborators only contribute in a manner that is not relevant to the artistic aspect of the work. This, of course, is not correct, as he claims, because it seems that other movie collaborators such as actors or screenwriters also contribute to artistically salient features of the work.

The second strategy employed by proponents of auteur theory, as stated by Gaut, is "the sufficient control strategy", according to which "the artist need not be someone who has total control, but merely sufficient control, over the artwork. Sufficient control displays itself not just by the artist’s direct personal input into his work, but also in the fact that he uses others’ talents, absorbing them into his own work." The refuting argument Gaut provides here is similarly strong because the collaborator that has more control over the artistic process should also get acknowledgement for authorship of the piece.

38 Ibid., p. 155.
The third strategy that Gaut proves wrong is "the construction strategy", which claims that the author of the movie is only a critical construct and not an actual person. He denies such claims in most cases of mainstream film because only a real author can cause artistic action with intended results. Otherwise, Gaut observes here that the proposition of the author as a critical construct cannot defend the possibility of single authorship in film because other collaborators can also have distinct personae and therefore be constructed authors.  

But to determine which contributors can be considered as authors, we need additional criteria, already mentioned in section 2.2. For example, for Sellors, "some sound recordists will count as authors under a notion of collective filmic authorship while others will not. It will depend on the recordist’s contribution to the filmic utterance." In other words, the collaborator is the author of the film if she accepts we-intentions that are constitutive of the film’s creation.

It is useful to apply this discussion that examines collaboration in a film with collaboration in the meme case. If the authorship of the meme is to be correctly established, we should be careful not to diminish the possible authorship of all collaborators that contribute significantly to the artistic properties of the work. I will examine in section 2.4 if there are such collaborators in the Google Maps Hacks case.

Conceptual art is full of collectively produced artworks that are often attributed only to the singular author. Hick, for example, mentions that Jeff Koons is considered the sole author of the Cracked Egg artwork, even though he employed another sculptor who manufactured the work following Koons’ precise instructions. In this case, as Hick notices, only Koons has artistic control over the creative process. His explicit command can only manipulate the salient artistic properties, and only with him lies the responsibility for artistic implications of the work. This could be said for a number of conceptual artists such as Damien Hirst, Yoko Ono, Claes Oldenburg and Sol LeWitt. We will see how authorship in conceptual art cases relates to the Google Maps Hacks in the next section. On the other hand, we can already anticipate that in the case of memes, we cannot say that the control lies in the hands of one person who is the meme’s sole author.

Another art medium that could be relevant for investigating collaborative art practices is comics. Different collaborators are considered authors depending on how the comic is produced and what the audience is appreciating in it. Mag Uidhir notes that there is a big difference between comics

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40 Ibid., p. 160.
made in the Golden Age and those produced today. The former were "produced under the old, assembly-line, studio system of production to be, in a sense, 'authorless' comics. Under this system, colorists, inkers, and letterers often weren't entirely aware of exactly what they were coloring, inking, and lettering." Such colourists, inkers and letterers cannot be considered authors because they cannot grasp the relation between the parts and the narrative as a whole that is required to achieve sufficient artistic control. Contemporary comics seem to give much more importance to visual form, and because of that, some previously overlooked roles have more artistic significance. This is why, Mag Uidhir adds, illustrators are now considered equal to writers, and it is more common that contributors such as colourists and inkers get recognition too. So, we can conclude that comics can have different kinds of authorship depending on how contributors are involved in the process of making comics. In the following two sections, we will see whether the internet as an aesthetic medium allows for such different kinds of authorship.

2.4 The Authorship of the Google Maps Hacks Artwork

How can we characterise the authorship of the Google Maps Hacks? And does this kind of authorship diminish the work’s description as one made by using the internet as a medium? As we could see with comics and films, the same medium can have different kinds of authorship. But what kind of art is Google Maps Hacks?

Katerina Bantinaki explains that conceptual art as such often has "the assumption that those collaborators who bear direct responsibility for the production of a work of art (and, thus, can be credited with authorship) have a clear conception from the start of its final artistic properties and identity, so that there is no scope for creative contributions from other parties participating in the collaboration." Is the case with Google Maps Hacks that the author has such a strong vision of what every aspect of the work should look like? This is a fairly close description of what kind of author Weckert is, and I will show why.

Consequently, is Google Maps Hacks conceptual art? Bantinaki also adds that conceptual art often implies that "the work of art is completed (but also exists) in the mind of the artist, and its materialization in a physical form is not only optional but, when it occurs, it is merely a perfunctory...

44 Ibid., p. 58.
affair." This other assertion might be questionable when applied to Google Maps Hacks. Weckert got an idea for the artwork when passing near workers that were making constructions on a building in an empty street and noticed that his mobile phone indicated a traffic jam. Even though a reflective process was essential to the creation of Google Maps Hacks, Weckert still had to be skilful in manipulating the medium because features of this medium informed his creative process. By putting the mobile phones in the cart, he manipulated the elements of that medium. The crucial point is the interaction of conceptual idea and his work that is based on knowledge of the medium. This is why this artwork is both conceptual art and art that uses the internet as a medium. It has a clear artistic purpose that is set by the artist’s creative thinking, but at the same time, he uses the internet as a medium to achieve his artistic aims. His collaborators fall more on the side of mere contributors, far from any substantial artistic contribution (as far as this is known to us). It seems that they are not even what Bantinaki calls co-creators because even if their "labor is reflective or intellectually creative rather than automatic, it may be geared solely toward overcoming technical issues." Drivers are definitely not such co-creators, but I would say that even the performer that was pulling a cart is not a co-creator because we cannot know whether he contributed anything more than merely performing according to fairly strict instructions by the artist.

Could we say that using the internet as a medium is always collaborative because if we use it, we essentially manipulate interconnectedness? If we look again at the Google Maps Hacks, the artwork indeed contains interconnected people with mobile phones in their cars. But what kind of collaborators are they? Are they collaborators? They contribute less to making this artwork than people who offer technical help in the Jeff Koons case because they do not know anything about the aims of the artwork. But it does not end there; it is not that they behave as they would without the existence of this artwork. In a way, we can say that they are elements of the medium and are manipulated because they are not even aware that their actions are part of the artwork. So, we could definitely say that this is an example of singular authorship in which the author manipulates the medium (the medium includes mobile phones that manipulate drivers’ behaviour). Drivers that avoid the street, on the other hand, are more similar to the colour that the painter manipulates.

Therefore, we can assume that Weckert’s authorship is similar to Jeff Koons’ or Damien Hirst’s. That means that Google Maps Hacks is single-authored because all decisions lie with one person. It seems that the performer only behaved according to Weckert’s instructions. We don’t really know if there is more creative interaction between them, but we can assume that the whole performance is conducted by Weckert, who is credited as being the sole author.

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47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., p. 25.
Based on this example, we can conclude that using the internet as a medium is similar to comics or film regarding accommodation of different kinds of authorship. Now it is time to examine the more intriguing case of meme authorship.

2.5 Interwoven Artistic Agency

It seems that online creations such as memes employ a specific kind of collaboration that follows from characteristics of the internet as a medium.

We already differentiated between two kinds of collaboration: multiple authorship and co-authorship. Could the authorship of memes be explained by the former or the latter? If we look at how the meme is made, it seems that each image macro, an instance of the specific meme that contains image and text, is usually created by a single contributor. Could we, therefore, say that memes have multiple authorship because, as Hicks noted, multiple authorship involves works that are "made up of discrete, identifiable units of authorship"? I think we can draw a parallel here with Wikipedia and its contributors that are not working separately but are more intertwined because of the meta-discussions that inform their joint aims. Similarly, each meme or instance of image macro includes "memographic practice", a meta-level practice of interactive commenting that makes the practice of making memes a joint commitment. Otherwise, memes would be only unconnected and isolated images with text, and we already established that this is not the case. Because memes are not mere images with text, they cannot be considered to have been authored by multiple people.

Can we, then, conclude that memes are co-authored? That would mean that all contributors involved in any segment of making a meme would be responsible for it, including meta-activity of commenting or "memographic practice" and creation of image macros. But could we really hold responsible a contributor in meta-discussion for the artistic and political implications of each image macro? And also, can we hold responsible each individual creator of an image macro for all implications that follow from all the discussions around particular memes, across all platforms, even those that the contributor is not aware of? It seems that there is only limited responsibility of an individual image macro maker for all implications of a particular meme that originate from the memographic practice in all corners of the internet. Additionally, it seems that contributors of meta-level discussions have limited artistic control on the level of individual image macro making. Therefore, they are also less responsible for creating each individual image macro—this is why we cannot maintain that memes are co-authored.

If the meme is neither co-authored nor multiple authored, what kind of authorship does it have? It appears that the individual creator of memes already has a defined framework created by memographic practice, and she can express her own creative idea that has to be implemented within it. But the problem with the meme is how much the intended purpose of the meme is determined by each contributor and how much it is determined by context and a possibly unknown original source. The question is how such collaboration affects the artist’s autonomy; is the artist’s autonomy in such cases limited, and if so, what is the cause of its limitation?

To answer those questions, I will draw from Andrew J. Corsa’s notion of group authorship. His account of group authorship implies that a group can be the author and not isolated authors or interconnected individual authors. That is, he allows an account of authorship that is neither multiple authorship nor co-authorship. He claims that such groups can "perform acts of cognition" and are agents that have "intentional mental states."  

The making of the meme is tied to an unusual combination of group collaboration (meta-discussions that inform the creation of the meme) and individual meme-maker; this collaboration is something like a master artist (but not entirely) that puts some restrictions on what the meme is about. This is the source of limitation for the autonomy of individual meme creators. But the problem is that the creator of the singular instance of the meme also has artistic agency, control and responsibility. The group is responsible for setting the optimal conditions for meme development, but the singular contributor has significant creativity displayed within those boundaries.

So how can we characterise a meme as a group authored? I propose that the author is the larger group that consists of individual creators of a meme instance and the group that leads meta-level discussions about memes. Neither individuals who make singular instances of a meme nor group involved with meta-level discussions are separately authors of the meme. This is because a singular instance of a meme or image macro cannot, in isolation from other instances and meta-level discussions, be considered a meme. Similar to Corsa’s example with the remix, "each individual is involved in the authorship" of the meme "only insofar as each belonged to the group that authored it."

For example, the *Bad Luck Brian* meme usually depicts a dorky teenager coupled with the text that conveys humiliation or misfortune. To understand the thematic constraints, creators of the new

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51 Ibid., p. 30.
52 Ibid., p. 40.
53 Some examples of this meme can be found on Know Your Meme website: [https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/bad-luck-brian](https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/bad-luck-brian), archived at [https://perma.cc/J5LQ-S5FE](https://perma.cc/J5LQ-S5FE).
instances of the meme use the previous ones as a guide. In the case of Bad Luck Brian, that would be different variations of the text at the top and the bottom of the image, such as: "GETS LAID; OFF" or "LOOKS ON THE BRIGHT SIDE; GOES BLIND". The creator of a new instance participates in the authorship of the meme Bad Luck Brian only in the context of the memographic practice and the existence of previous instances; she gets to partake in the authorship only if she is part of that group. This larger group that is author consists of all the earlier creators of instances of the meme, as well as users that commented, discussed, upvoted and downvoted specific instances of the Bad Luck Brian meme or the process in general.

Discussions that count as memographic practice are different from other types of discussions and critical takes on artworks. The discussion of memes counts as part of the work because it defines how the meme is created, it shapes its narrative, and which aesthetic properties it possesses; it directly influences the creation of the meme. On the other hand, critical discussions of other art such as movies, painting and music, often do not have any influence on the creative process of the said art. It is mostly performed by audience or critics after the artwork is finished. Such discussions usually do not affect how the artwork is made, their thematic aims or their aesthetic properties.

But how does the author of the meme precisely manipulate digital interconnectedness? Contrary to the Google Maps Hacks, the authorship of the meme is not singular. It is not the case that the sole author manipulates interconnected digitalized instances or representations. In this case, creators themselves, as members of a group, are interconnected because each member does not simply manipulate all other users but accepts their creative output as a guide for her own. Each member is aware of the evolving narrative and norms54 around which a single instance of the meme is created. Manipulation is happening step by step, initiated by each member of the group. Not only are members of the group interconnected, but instances of the memes are also interconnected, or the material that is to be further manipulated.

But suppose we apply group authorship to phenomena similar to memes that use the internet as an aesthetic medium. In that case, there can be some additional complications regarding the nature of such groups. The internet allows closely interwoven artistic agency or a fast succession of collaborative artistic practices that include humans and AI. This means that the groups that are forming are dynamic and evolving, as well as the collaborative art that they make. Because of the nature of the medium, the work is never exactly finished. The cultural implications around memes can evolve and change in ways that are not coherent. This can happen when the internet community changes its artistic, social or political views, or if an online community appropriates

images from an unrelated source and changes its meaning altogether. In the first case, with incompatible evolving group aims (each such change often means a change in the group’s membership), if the group is sufficiently changed, this should also affect the art created within that community. In the case of appropriation, the appropriator is the only one responsible (in the case of memes, it is the online community that appropriated it) for artistic and political implications of the appropriated work. For example, the Pepe the Frog meme that depicts a green anthropomorphic frog is based on a laid-back character created by the artist Matt Furie in the comic Boy’s Club. Eventually, Pepe became a meme that swiftly propagated on the internet and was used to promote white supremacy, while the Anti-Defamation League declared it a hate symbol. The moment Pepe the Frog was appropriated by the alt-right, that online community became the author of the meme, which means that it had responsibility for its artistic and political content, and not the original artist.

3 Practical Level of the Internet as Aesthetic Medium

So far, I have mainly talked about the internet as a medium on more of an abstract level. I explained how we essentially manipulate digital interconnectedness when using the internet as an aesthetic medium. I mentioned some examples of actual art and described what kind of authorship uses the medium’s possibilities the most. But it seems that the actual internet use for the artist can be much more restrictive than this view suggests. It is not only artists or users that manipulate the medium, but also different internet platforms. The scope of artist’s manipulation is narrowed because they are already in a situation that is shaped by different platforms. Does this possible lack of control diminish the internet’s potential to be an aesthetic medium? To determine the possible limitations of the medium, we have to look at the practical level of the internet as an aesthetic medium. In the third part of the dissertation, I will determine what this practical level is, examine the influence of the practical level on artistic creation and discuss its relation to the abstract level or more general digital interconnectedness.

3.1 Do Algorithms and Platforms’ Design Matter?

Let us look at how aesthetic forms appear on the internet. We could say that it is not only characteristics of the internet in general that allow for the development of new aesthetic forms. They are also heavily influenced by more specific platforms that further shape the possibilities of it as an aesthetic medium. In this, algorithms employed on platforms such as Google can have a powerful influence on a massive scale. In addition to that, algorithms used on smaller websites can also have an effect, but on fewer people. They act as a frame for the user’s further action and often lead users to specific behaviours.

The internet as a medium and its articulation are relevant for artistic purposes and can have numerous implications for political and social life. Even political conversations are affected by the design of online places. Some of the properties that can influence the direction in which conversation is going are specific software constructions and digital tools that allow moderation.\[^{57}\] Proper design of the functionalities of the internet as a medium can lead to more democratic decision making. With its moderation tools website design can have a significant impact on achieving deliberative democracy (the type of democracy that uses discussions in decision making).\[^{58}\] It seems that a proper design choice allows this environment to develop; it is not up to the medium \textit{per se}. This is why we cannot label the internet as such as helpful for democracy or not. With this example we can see how the design of platforms can override, restrict and shape the general possibilities of the internet as a medium.

This is the reason why internet sites that employ their own rules, algorithms and design shaped according to their creators’ interests can have a significant role in medium manipulation. That can involve making profits or achieving political and cultural domination. Such specifically designed platforms can also affect internet identity. Usually, online identity is formed and transformed by some kind of system created by social network sites that often use popularity to establish it.\[^{59}\] Or, to put it another way, the online self is under the influence of outside forces that constitute rules of its development.\[^{60}\]

Broad application of algorithms and website design have not only a complex influence on online identity and aesthetics but also epistemology. False news is spread much faster than true news by


\[^{58}\] Ibid.


\[^{60}\] Ibid.
humans. In the case of bots this is so to a lesser extent. As a result, technology is used to shift the epistemic environment online and shape it in a preferable direction. For example, algorithms and machine learning are often used to identify fake news on social networking services such as Twitter or fake news articles in general.

But the trouble with algorithms can be that they can work with different ideologies and help spread propaganda. How specific sites are designed and what tactics are employed depends on the political and social beliefs of agents that aim to shape internet environments according to their preferences and agenda. One such example is Russian meddling in democratic processes and different social issues in Europe and United States. This meddling is not only evident in the form of fake news or targeted advertising, but also in meme production, and it is therefore aesthetically relevant. For example, in 2016 the meme depicting "a weathered veteran" was produced by Russian agents and further disseminated by misinformed Facebook users, as mentioned by philosophers O’Connor and Weatherall. The fact that memes can originate from such deceiving forces changes and adds to both the political and artistic intention of internet creations.

Sites such as Facebook can restrict the use of the internet as an aesthetic medium because they impose additional choices in design that further determine aesthetic possibilities. This is why it is hard to talk about the aesthetic possibilities of the internet in general when most internet users are on platforms that modify it in different ways. This is what limits and shapes the potential of aesthetic creativity online.

### 3.2 Example: Memes and Platforms’ Design

Now it is time to see how exactly the influence of platforms themselves works in the aesthetic sphere and how not only authors, but also platforms, manipulate digital interconnectedness. I already mentioned memes as an artistic phenomenon that is native to the internet. If we look at the phenomenon of memes from this more practical level, we can ask not only how memes are created in relation to individual internet users/creators, but also what their relation to platforms on which they thrive is. This is why it is instructive to see where most memes come from and how their influence is generated. According to researchers that analysed "over 160M images posted between July 2016 and July 2017" on "Twitter, Reddit, Gab, and 4chan’s Politically Incorrect board"
most memes came from places that are characterised by political extremism like /pol/ that was most successful in generating memes and r/The_Donald subreddit that was most efficient in their distribution. Of course, these findings are specific for the time they were investigated in, which means that the platform’s potential influence is prone to change (r/The_Donald subreddit is defunct since June 2020, when it was banned for breaking Reddit’s rules). Nevertheless, it is worth examining why boards like /pol/ are such massive generators of memes and determine whether their design and moderation allow them to be so successful in this regard. The same features of the platforms’ design also will enable the dissemination of extreme political views and are a breeding ground for conspiracy theories.

Therefore, we can look more closely at /pol/, the board that was investigated as a prime creator of fresh memes. Researchers observed that the board is designed to encourage the evolution of memes; in other words, only the most resilient memes survive in this system that does not rely on popularity (there are no upvotes and downvotes). Instead, to gain attention and replies from other users, the most successful meme-makers produce provocative and often politically inflaming content. Prominent features of /pol/ such as anonymity, ephemerality (threads are deleted after a short period) and extremely permissive moderation are also reasons why the memes are generated so fast (and at the same time are often racist). In terms of ideology, platforms similar to 4chan profess belief in free speech implemented so extremely that it eventually produced the rebellious "anti-PC" right. That is to say, what is normalised on these sites is under the influence of the specific philosophy and according to how the whole platform is designed. On similar platforms, it might be questionable what the real intent of any individual user is, because it is sometimes hard to distinguish between ironic and sincere comments in such an anonymous yet fleeting context. It seems that finding out what is the individual’s intent might not be that relevant. Instead, it is more fruitful to determine the bigger effect of the platform: what kind of culture is developed there and how it spread. This is how the internet as a medium on a practical level can direct the creator’s intent and further restrict it.

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67 Ibid.
But, at the same time, we should be careful not to overestimate the influence of the algorithms and design of the platforms as the exclusive determinant of what kind of culture will be developed within them. Technology might not be the only factor that contributes to the proliferation of the alt-right and emergence of the "post-truth"; another one could also be the human factor: political campaigning and the broader culture. That means that the internet as an aesthetic medium can be restricted and shaped by platforms, as we saw in the example of 4chan. At the same time, this influence of the platforms’ design is not the only element that can impact how the internet is used as an aesthetic medium; broader cultural influences matter, too.

3.3 Gaming the Algorithm: Alt-Right vs K-Pop

In the previous sub-section, we could see how specific platforms can affect the spreading, content and creation of memes. Could we say that the internet cannot be considered an aesthetic medium because platforms greatly influence any artistic content created within them? That is to say, the potential objection could be that the artist that uses the internet as an aesthetic medium cannot manipulate the digital interconnectedness because it is already manipulated by the design and algorithms of the platforms. I do not think that that would be a fair assessment of the medium because there might be more freedom for users to escape or work within platforms’ constraints.

Hence, it is not just the case that the design of the platforms influences the content and the intent of its users, but also users themselves sometimes manipulate algorithms of online platforms. One of the reasons for r/The_Donald’s success in distributing memes might be attributed to how this subreddit community manipulated Reddit’s algorithms. With this manipulation, they managed to spread a large amount of posts from r/The_Donald to r/all, Reddit’s page that shows popular posts from all subredits. In this example, users accepted the limitation set by the platform and subverted it to achieve faster spreading to more mainstream places. Of course, r/The_Donald, often a racist and offensive community, is not the only one that strategically manipulates algorithms. On the other hand, there is the example of K-pop fandom that masterfully exploits social media. K-pop fans show significant social engagement and activism, either in flooding racist hashtags on Twitter.72


or disabling the police app. Therefore, these platforms and their algorithms can be part of the medium that the artist manipulates; in this sense, they do not limit the aesthetic manipulation of authors that use the internet as a medium. If they are manipulated, they do not constrain artistic manipulation, and the internet’s potential to be an aesthetic medium is not diminished.

Now that we confirmed that the internet is indeed an aesthetic medium despite the limitations set by platforms, we still need to discuss how the characterisation of the internet as digitalised interconnectedness relates to the practical level of internet platforms.

3.4 Abstract and Practical Level

The practical level discussed in the third part of the dissertation seems to influence the internet as a medium profoundly. Therefore, it is essential not to overlook it. If we approach the internet as a medium considering only general possibilities of the interconnected digital representation from an abstract level without putting it in the context of actual internet use, we might end up holding a somewhat utopian idealistic picture of its prospects. In fact, if we focus only on the abstract level, we might miss the main problems associated with the internet as a medium. The practical level is the one that can direct internet use towards a particular aim. It is, therefore, essential to ask what the relationship between these two levels is. Are they necessarily or contingently connected?

If the practical level and abstract level are necessarily connected, then that would mean that the abstract level cannot exist without the practical one. I think that is precisely the case. If we find ourselves in the situation of using the internet, that will always be via a specific protocol or service that can be part of a particular platform or hosted on an individual’s server and using individual’s software (such as e-mail, internet forums or blogs), or more restrictive platforms, such as, Facebook or Google (restrictive in a sense that they manipulate the internet usage more than others that specifically make an effort to avoid manipulation, e.g. DuckDuckGo search engine). Any creator who manipulates the medium and explores its creative possibilities will depend on how she uses it on this practical level. Results, problems, techniques and hacks are changing depending on the particularities of the internet use.

That is not to say that it is not relevant to dissect characteristics of the internet on the general level. Some problems can only be elaborated if we look at the medium as a whole. One such issue is net neutrality or the principle that internet service providers have to ensure equal treatment of all internet traffic. That means that user should be able to access all content on the internet under the

same conditions, without any discrimination. The way net neutrality is implemented directly affects
digital interconnectedness and, in a way, determines what the internet is as such. Even though
thinking about the internet in general abstracts from differences in its practical use, any changes on
this level also affect the practical level.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I tried to determine whether the internet could be considered a distinct aesthetic
medium and if so, what its features are. When we think about the internet as an aesthetic medium,
we have to bear in mind its general characteristics which are distinct from other telecommunication
and aesthetic media. The artist who uses the internet as a medium has to manipulate the permanent
and instant interconnectedness of the digitalised instances or representations of people, things, AI
and information to achieve her creative aim. It seems that, indeed, the internet as a medium has
characteristics that qualify it as a specific aesthetic medium. Even though the development of the
internet as a medium and other technologies makes the use of hybrid artistic forms possible, it is
nevertheless useful to explore what features are artistically possible exclusively on the internet.

The internet as a medium can accommodate different kinds of authorship. Single authorship can
exist when an artist exclusively manipulates digital interconnectedness. Group authorship follows
from characteristics of the internet as a medium. In it, the digital interconnectedness is manipulated
step by step by each member of the group. It allows closely interwoven artistic agency that makes
the group and content they are forming dynamic and evolving.

If we focus on internet use, we can notice that the internet includes different platforms and
algorithms that shape its possibilities even further, specifying and limiting how the medium can be
manipulated. This affects not only ordinary use, but also any creative expression through the
medium. Therefore, it is fruitful to analyse the internet both on an abstract and on a practical level.

Some issues concerning the internet as a medium are more general, and others are a consequence of
how individual platforms are designed. Both are necessarily connected and have a profound
influence on using the internet as an aesthetic medium.

For additional research, it would be interesting to explore other differences between platforms in
terms of artistic use (what platforms would be optimal for internet creativity), and also which
general rules of the internet as a medium should be established to better fulfil its role as an aesthetic
medium.
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