From Writing Texts Towards Writing Platforms: A Story of Mastodon

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Twitter's 2022 buyout and subsequent decline caused many writers to explore alternative platform spaces and created an opportunity for teachers of writing to reevaluate what literacies digital writers need. This paper follows the story of writers who joined Mastodon and struggled with the design decisions and governance protocols of the platform. Guided by these writers' reflections, I argue for expanding the definition of writing from writing texts to include writing platforms. I ground this notion of writing platforms in a set of four literacies: platform geographies, governance, technical reasoning, and identities. By teaching these literacies, we may better position writers to develop the tools they need to create, participate in, and maintain equitable digital spaces.

We all know the modern tragedy of Twitter: a vibrant, if imperfect, public sphere that was bought by billionaire Elon Musk in 2022 and turned into an uneasy, more dangerous version of its former self, full of disinformation and sponsored right wing content. In response to the platform and policy changes since then, some 30 million writers left Twitter. This paper asks: where did they go, what did they create, and how do their stories change what it means to teach digital writing in what Kalodner-Martin (2023) called the era of "platform precarity"?

To answer these questions, I draw from a textual corpus of users' online writing to tell a story of Mastodon, an open-source alternative to Twitter where writers create and maintain their own servers and communities. In the two years since Musk bought Twitter, some five million writers joined Mastodon to try its federated communities and decentralized ActivityPub protocol. In theory, decentralization should lead to a more democratic and involved public sphere; in practice, writers almost immediately came into conflict with the governance model of Mastodon. These tensions surrounded several key areas: platform governance, server structure, content moderation, interface design, and circulation protocols. This paper outlines how these tensions serve as an entry point for disrupting traditional notions of what a digital writer can, and should, be able to do in online spaces.

Guided by these writers' reflections, I offer a framework for shifting notions of writing beyond just writing *texts* to writing publics, platforms, interfaces, and networks. Using this framework, I argue, we may better position writers to

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develop the tools they need to create, participate in, and maintain equitable digital spaces. This paper advocates for the role of centering users' stories in efforts to reimagine digital platforms and offers writing teachers and digital scholars specific suggestions for helping writers develop these literacies.

Governance in Action: Mastodon

Mastodon is a free and open source, federated, decentralized social networking site created by German computer science and philosophy student Eugen "Gargron" Rochko in 2016. In terms of functionality, it is similar to Twitter: users write and post messages, called "toots," that can be read, responded to, "boosted" (or "retweeted" in "bird-talk"), and "favorited" ("liked") by other users. Toots appear on a scrollable news feed in reverse-chronological order and can be indexed and searched for using the #hashtag and @handle systems that many of us are familiar with.

Since its beginning, Mastodon has grappled with tensions over how the platform should be run and designed. The source of the tension between Mastodon's developer and its users is rooted in the platform's "benevolent dictator for life" (BDFL) governance model. BDFL describes a governance structure in which the original developer of the project, who often feels a sense of authorial ownership, retains permanent control over changes to the code, as well as to the direction and values of the project. Though these developers may be quite good-natured (indeed, they often begin the project in response to a social problem or community need), the "authoritarian" nature of their control can create tensions between themselves and the community that the project intends to serve. As a project grows and its user base becomes more complex, more varied, and more engaged, conflicts can emerge between users and developers that are not appropriately mediated by a single person's communication strategy, however well-intended they are. In short, software in a BDFL structure very quickly becomes subject to the whims of the creator rather than the needs or wants of its users.

While Mastodon operates as free and open-source software, Rochko must approve each change to the code and design of the platform. This BDFL model worked well enough when Mastodon was quite small, but as it attracted more writers with varying interests (including some who disagree with Rochko's original vision of the platform), tensions over key design decisions emerged between its writers and its developer. We can sort these issues into three categories: disagreements over design decisions, frustration with the platform's governance structure, and struggles over feature recognition.

Rochko's original vision of the platform was as an alternative to Twitter that would not become inundated with the latest political news and hot takes,

and that explicitly banned hate speech. To accomplish this, Rochko fostered a platform culture that encouraged writers to hide political news under content warnings or to not post them at all. As the digital journalist Ana Valens (2019) wrote, "Visiting Mastodon feels like strolling through the first 'apolitical' social network. There's no urgency to talk about the Trump administration's policies or break down ongoing political events." Early writers on Mastodon took pride in the platform's apolitical circulation policy; the space came to be seen as a kind of safe reprieve that, by disinvesting from political content, also disinvested from toxic and politically-oriented users. Rochko also—to much praise from Mastodon's writers—aggressively banned far right Nazi's from the platform long before pre-Musk Twitter would admit to even considering that kind of content moderation. And so, Mastodon came to be known as a kind of alternative space where one could practice social media without being bombarded by a toxic news cycle and without engaging with the worst users of corporate platforms.

This kind of public may have been nice for some, for a while, but for other writers the deemphasis of political discussion made it difficult to write about important events affecting their lives. This sentiment became especially strong among the vibrant community of queer writers and servers that were a large portion of Mastodon's writers and that, over time, grew uncomfortable with Mastodon's apolitical feeds. For these writers, Mastodon's circulation policy became a much-discussed design feature that denied them the ability to write about crucial events that impacted their lives (Cassian, 2018; Hart, 2017; Valens, 2019). As Valens (2019) put it, queer writers "cannot be apolitical by nature. Being queer isn't a hobby; it's a political identity. And so while Mastodon seems fine on the surface, there's a much larger schism at play."

In addition to circulation policy, Rochko pursued a number of design decisions—specifically, anti-harassment design decisions—that writers like Cassian became uncomfortable with. As Cassian (2018) wrote in a much circulated Medium blog, queer writers who came to Mastodon to escape harassment commonplace on mainstream platforms found themselves having to continually block what Cassian calls "White Guy Avatars," or other writers who offer unsolicited criticism or make abusive comments. But they found that after blocking abusive writers, they continued to see posts from those writers in other timelines. When the community brought this up as an issue with Rochko, Cassian wrote, they were met with ridicule and indifference; Rochko believed that this is a positive feature that comes with the server-oriented communities on Mastodon. Likewise, when Rochko proposed a "trending tags" feature that would work similarly to Twitter's, writers expressed concerns on Github that the feature is too often used on Twitter to attract and abuse vulnerable people. These concerns, Cassian argued, went unheard.

In short, queer community concerns were not always heard by Rochko, who gained a reputation for being dismissive and for pushing his own vision of the platform. The disparity between Rochko and the platform's queer community was especially noteworthy given the size of that community. As Allie Hart (2017) wrote, while the queer community "made up a significant portion of [Mastodon's] early adopters and have contributed to the project in meaningful ways, they have never had any real decision-making power." In other words, while queer writers like Cassian and Hart were engaging quite meaningfully in the platform's development, and were practicing what I would describe as highly sophisticated forms of platform-level design-thinking, their status as "agentive" writers was very much in question in a BDFL governance structure.

Finally, this sense of being "left out" extended to recognition. Rochko became notorious on Mastodon for refusing to credit writers for development or feature ideas. He is known to ignore features requested by writers for some time until later implementing them and attributing them in release notes to himself or, on one occasion, to "community consciousness" (Valens, 2019). In an interview with the Dailydot, Rochko defended this practice, arguing that he doesn't credit writers with feature ideas because they don't actually design the system or write the code (Valens, 2019). He also defended his BDFL model and decision-making practices as more "efficient" than other forms of governance. As he puts it:

> When you separate the decision making between different people that can come and go, you sort of have a tragedy of the commons where nobody is fully responsible for it and people have disagreements over all sorts of things, and you add the bureaucracy of [a] voting system, etc. . . . Often times you'll get requests from the community that are directly mutually exclusive to each other, and you have to make a choice, like, which direction will you go or how do you make a compromise. (Valens, 2019)

For writers who come to Mastodon seeking to exert more control over the "social" nature of the spaces they write in, these kinds of responses can be quite alienating. I find that Rochko's apparent division between *programmers who contribute* to a project and *writer/users who consume* a project is a direct cause of this alienation. By suggesting that only those who write code can have a sense of authorial ownership over a feature or platform, Rochko has effectively divested Mastodon's nonprogramming writers from meaningful agency (an attitude not uncommon in tech circles). These decisions have had consequences; while Mastodon is relatively successful among alternative social media platforms, it experienced a kind of exodus of queer writers who

have sworn off the platform until its governance structure changes (Cassian, 2018; Hart, 2017). As Valens (2019) put it, Mastodon is at a kind of crossroads. It has to choose what kind of platform it wants to be: a "community-driven government system to protect vulnerable users" or a BDFL governance model that matches Rochko's vision of the platform.

In this situation, the question of governance becomes central to how writers experience and express their agency in digital platforms. Writers like Cassian and Hart clearly felt that their input, expressed as a community concern in response to oppressions and experiences they felt on other platforms, was devalued and unrecognized on Mastodon. They ultimately left the platform for it. Their stories suggest that there is quite a bit for users, writers, and developers to figure out if we are to enact equitable governance practices on writing platforms. The next section explores what it is we can take away from these stories.

Writing Platforms

It would be easy to see Cassian's and Hart's frustrations and departures as yet another failure in the history bin of overly ambitious, obscure, and alternative tech projects. It seems almost instinctual to do so; however, many writing publics criticize Web 2.0 corporations. When I mention Mastodon to people, the initial reaction is often dismissive. How could any platform contend with Facebook and Twitter? There is a logic to this response, but for writing scholars it misses the point. Cassian's and Hart's stories are in many ways a resounding success, both for them and for the platform. Mastodon set out to center the rights of its users in response to the failures of mainstream, centralized platforms. In doing so, it created the space for writers to engage with platform literacies in ways they never could on Facebook or Twitter. Cassian and Hart employed a number of highly sophisticated critical literacies, including:

- applying a combination of technical and design thinking needed to understand platform decisions;
- evaluating the implications of these technical design decisions across identity categories, including and especially queer writers;
- pursuing productive communication practices between developers/users/writers of different knowledge backgrounds and skill sets;
- articulating a critique of the design decisions of Mastodon when the platform failed to suit their needs; and
- reflecting on how to theorize and assess governance in particular spaces and for particular purposes, etc.

When given the chance to engage with platform design as a practice of agentive writing, Cassian and Hart did so until their ambitions exceeded what the platform had to offer. What Cassian's and Hart's stories show, I argue, is that writing in the era of what Kalodner-Martin (2023) called "digital precarity" shifts beyond just writing *texts* to writing *platforms*, publics, interfaces, and networks. That is, writing becomes more than just producing content, remediating texts, or cultivating an audience; it comes to include designing the space in which writing is produced and circulated. Writing scholars have been familiar with this direction for some time—see, for example, Selfe and Selfe's 1994 "Politics of the Interface." But the set of literacies that Cassian and Hart employed acquire new importance in a digital era where mainstream platforms are becoming increasingly hostile to writers. New spaces are necessary, and the question of writing the platform comes with them.

I call this set of knowledge practices and habits *platform literacies*, and identify four platform literacies in Web 2.0:

- platform geographies,
- design reasoning,
- platform governance, and
- platform identities.

Jim Brown (2015) has described a version of these literacies in his notion of "ethical programs." Ethical programs, as he describes them, are ways in which individuals or communities make protocol decisions about how information flows to them and through what channels (p. 160). We make and modify our own ethical programs daily anytime we choose who to follow, choose what to read, choose where we go, etc. To make an ethical program is a procedural and deliberative practice, a means of practicing agency by controlling a local interface with others. I want to take Brown's notion of an ethical program and expand it to include this broader set of platform-level design decisions. My central argument is that writing with agency in Web 2.0 requires platform literacies, and that as writing teachers we should commit to theorizing and teaching these literacies. Without these literacies, it is difficult to imagine writers having the tools they need to create, participate in, and maintain equitable platforms. My vision here is that they involve teaching not just *passive* user roles ("how do I write effectively *on* this platform?") but active design thinking[1] and contribution ("how do I effectively *write the platform*?"). To

1 By "design thinking," I mean a shift in thinking about the platform from the perspective of a writer to the perspective of a designer. Part of my argument here is that to write *well* in the current configuration of the web requires blending these perspectives, and by extension the intellectual traditions and disciplinary communities that comprise them. The space between writing/rhetoric and design is shrinking, and productive interplay between those communities is increasingly valuable.

do this, writers need to be able to do some new things. In the next section, I define and describe four platform literacies.

Platform Literacies

Platform geographies: First, writers need to be able to think through how platform design impacts communities and publics. How does the design of the platform create or cultivate certain kinds of publics or ways of relating to each other? Benjamin Bratton (2005) calls this method of inquiry "platform geography": the mapping of design decisions onto social relations (p. 110). There are many illustrative examples. To return to Mastodon, for instance, the platform's interpretation of a news feed creates new rhetorical dynamics for writers and their communities. Where Facebook has a single feed dictated by the content friends write, Mastodon has multiple feeds, including a server-wide feed that displays not just content you follow but content others on your server follow. This creates a new rhetorical consideration in which choices about who to follow become not just a matter of personal interest but an interpretation of community values. Writers must learn to cultivate an awareness of community interests and then contribute to or perform those interests through their everyday follows. Different servers on Mastodon have their own ways of dealing with this, from anything-goes to community-drafted rules for what kinds of content writers are encouraged or discouraged from following. In other words, the design of the platform—its decentralized server structure and feed design—creates ways of relating to each other that require different rhetorical considerations and literacies.

We can find similar considerations of platform geography in the design choices of mainstream platforms. How does Facebook's closed network of friend-only, personal posts change how writers engage or imagine publics in comparison with Twitter's more open, public-oriented follow and hashtag system? How might a platform's content moderation policy—say, Reddit's empowered moderators vs. Facebook's algorithms and hired screeners—affect the kind of content that circulates? We can also extend design thinking beyond cloud or interface architecture to the physical geographies of place: as Dustin Edwards (2020) has shown in "Digital Rhetoric on a Damaged Planet," the centralized servers of mainstream platforms demand large-scale data centers that demand millions of gallons of water a year but are built in dry, drought-stricken areas. The network design of the platform, then, creates new relations between the writers of the platform and people who live near the centers where the writing is stored, relations that may be inequitable or unsustainable.

Composition and rhetoric scholars have mostly worked with platforms through a form of critical interpretation. Michael J. Faris (2018) in "How

to Be Gay with Locative Media," examines the rhetorical effect of Grindr's homonormative advertising given its unique power as popular a platform for gay men. Michael Trice and Liza Potts (2018) in "Building Dark Patterns into Platforms" show how determined Gamergate activists disrupted publics on Twitter, Reddit, and Github through an organized communication strategy. We need to take this work further and "get under the hood" in more direct ways. Scholars outside writing studies—Safia Noble's (2018) *Algorithms of Oppression* or Cathy O'Neil's (2016) *Weapons of Math Destruction*—have begun this work, but there is still a lot to think through. As Bratton (2005) put it, though platforms like Facebook and Google may operate at the scale of historical institutions like the state or market, we have yet to fully attend to them: "As opposed to the public rights of citizens of a polis and the private rights of homo economicus in a market, we are severely lacking in robust and practical theory of the political design logic of platforms, even as they remake geopolitics in their image (or demand a different language to describe what the political is now or ever was)" (p. 44). A good example of recent work that attempts to do this might be Gelms and Edwards's (2019) "A Technofeminist Approach to Platform Rhetorics," which identified five tenets or lines of inquiry for evaluating the rhetorical work of platforms: social inequalities, labor, material infrastructures, networks of support and activism, and lived experience. The ability to identify and critically assess the social relations that follow from design decisions is a new, high-level, and iterative literacy that writers must develop and practice.

Design reasoning: Second, writers need to be comfortable engaging in technical discourse without necessarily fully understanding everything about platform design. I see this as a technical writing skill that is becoming more broadly necessary now. For example, I don't know how to set up a server or how to create an information protocol. But to participate fully on an equitably governed open-source platform, I would need to know what a server is, what a protocol does, where computation occurs, and where data is stored to have some sense of the effects of design. A little bit of technical knowledge about computer systems can go a long way towards understanding the social impact of those systems, and thus to making informed decisions about the appropriateness of a system for a given platform or user.

Platform governance: Writers need to be able to negotiate writing the platform across different levels of technical knowledge. Writers working on or with open-source platforms come with a variety of technical backgrounds. Some have programming backgrounds, others design backgrounds, and many (most) are simply everyday users looking to read and produce content. But every writer, I argue, should have a sense for what a productive deliberative relationship is between people writing code for a platform and people

talking about what they want the platform to do but who don't necessarily know how to create an interface. This does not mean that everyone needs to be able to code for the project or develop assets, but rather that writers should be involved in the governance and design of the platform, or at least know what models of governance exist and which might suit their needs as writers. The idea is to avoid the "Mastodon" model, where expertise is assumed to lie only with those who have technical knowledge, and where developers only listen to developers because they feel everyone else doesn't count as a knowledge producer. As writing teachers, we are well positioned to offer strategies for identifying and practicing productive deliberative discussions that overcome the expertise/ignorance binary.

Historically, achieving distributed governance in the context of software development has been quite tricky. What tends to happen over time is that a small number of developers (those who are more active or, especially in corporate settings, those who are assigned as project managers) come to acquire the most decision-making powers while most writers become shut out. This process is exacerbated by a pervasive attitude in software development that privileges those with technical coding knowledge—or, as Brock (2019) noted, those who are *perceived* to possess coding knowledge—over other users (p. 82). The result is that decision-making in development communities tends to skew to those who appear to have the most coding experience, regardless of their other qualities. Naming and challenging this dynamic, I believe, is important for creating a space for non-programming writers to participate.

Platform identities: Finally, writers need to be able to negotiate writing the platform across different identity backgrounds. As we saw with Cassian (2018) and Hart (2017), there's a continued need to think through how identity mediates platform design, how experiences on a platform are uneven, and what design decisions can be made in response. Writing and literacy studies folks have a long tradition of scholarship linking identity and literacy to build on here. Here, writing the platform well means going beyond the true but trivial observation that design impacts different writers differently; rather, it means contextualizing design affordances within larger contexts social inequities and historical trajectories. Bridget Gelms and Dustin Edwards's (2019) articulated a writing-oriented example of this practice in their concept of a "technofeminist" approach to platforms, emphasizing the social inequalities that mediate through platform design. Likewise, critical design theorist Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020), drawing from sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, offers a "matrix of domination" framework for identifying how design principles "erase certain groups of people, specifically those who are intersectionally disadvantaged or multiply burdened under white supremacist heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism" (p. 19). Costanza-Chock argued for what

they call "design justice" or a "framework for analysis of how design distributes benefits and burdens between various groups of people . . . focus[ing] explicitly on the ways that design reproduces and/or challenges the matrix of domination" (p. 23). If writers are to practice writing the platform and participate in design decisions, I argue, they need to frameworks like design justice to identify the causes and consequences of design decisions across identity categories.

With these kinds of questions in mind, we turn now to examining each tenet and why we see them as necessary points of entry into platform rhetorics.

Conclusion

These ideas represent an expanded and ambitious idea of what it means to write. We've already seen arguments that Web 2.0 has changed definitions of writing (see Dush's [2015] writing as content, Vee's [2017] coding literacies, Gallagher's [2017] writing to algorithmic audiences). What we might call "platform writing" is no different.

The four platform literacies I outlined are in some ways a new and unique response to existing configurations on the Web, but are also in other ways familiar to writing studies and intuitive to many writers. However, the design of mainstream platforms today keep us from developing them further until we are pushed to, like Cassian and Hart. I see in open-source platforms like Mastodon the potential to challenge this dynamic, but even there it is only a potential because of the inequitable governance policies that exist on Mastodon. But still we saw users like Cassian and Hart engaging in many of these literacies on their own as writers. As writing teachers we have the unique power to model and teach the activity of "writing" in a way that corresponds with our vision of how the web should be structured.

We can do this, first, by studying in more details those writers, like Cassian and Hart, who are already pushing the bounds of literacy in digital context. Ultimately, I think, we learn what Web 2.0 writing is by looking at what writers are doing and why. But we can also begin formalizing what we do know to prepare writers for the digital literacies I have discussed. We can do that by building better relationships with computer science, data science, and informatics departments that are closely tied to the task of design in Web 2.0. We can reimagine our teaching of technology and writing to be more ambitious (beyond tired proclamations of multimodality) by building in these four literacies.

The steps I have outlined above are just a beginning. A great deal of work remains to think them through more thoroughly and to realize their potential in practice and in pedagogy. To do this work, writing scholars will need to

continue to reimagine what it means to be a writer across changing digital contexts, mediums, and political economies. This work is very much worth doing, though, if writers are to take ownership in the production and circulation technologies through which we write and share texts.

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