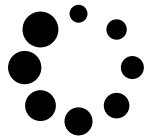


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Investigate *Interveillance* and  
Digital Bodies Politics within  
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by S()fia Braga

- Centralised social media platforms
- Interveillance
- Online narratives
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- Subversion

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# I Stalk Myself More than I Should: Online Narratives to Disrupt and Investigate *Interveillance* and Digital Bodies Politics within Centralised Social Media Platforms



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## Abstract

Today we find ourselves immersed in digital environments made available by centralised social media platforms on a daily basis. While these platforms did provide users expanded connectivity and visibility, they also confined the same user in an economic system focused on collection and commodification of personal data for profit, and in return used them as resources of free labour. In light of this analysis, is it possible to carry out an artistic practice within centralised social media platforms, therefore take an active part in them, while remaining critically engaged, in the attempt to highlight some of the structural dynamics and problems of these realities?

In this paper some fundamental aspects of the aforementioned channels will be discussed through the analysis of selected works and two methods utilised by the author to avoid the culture of *interveillance*.

## Keywords

[Centralised social media platforms](#)

[Interveillance](#)

[Online narratives](#)

[Digital bodies](#)

[Subversion](#)

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When we talk about immersiveness within the digital realm we should consider the fact that, nowadays, there is no longer a clear distinction between our real and virtual existence, since these two realities are heavily interconnected and they coexist interdependently.

In this paper we will focus on digital environments made available to users by centralised social media platforms, where we witness a radical shift in terms of control, power and representation of the body and the self.

Over the past few years I developed my artistic research on the social impact of web interfaces and the subversion of centralised social media platforms by focusing on ways to avoid the culture of *Interveillance*,<sup>1</sup> which is a participatory surveillance enabled by social media's operational structures that leverage the human need of auto-determination, and carry the non-institutional agencies that operate on the Internet – GAFAM –,<sup>2</sup> as well as the users themselves, as new objects of power.

Often unaware, users become an active part of these hidden power dynamics that are no longer based on control and repression of bodies,<sup>3</sup> but on prevention through the promotion of beliefs and habits that take advantage of processes of identification, and that manifest themselves in the form of viral trends.

## **The evolution of the web and the self**

In the early web (web 1.0), users started experimenting with HTML – Hypertext Markup Language – to build their own “virtual homes.” They used to see the *WWW* as a parallel world in which they could build and develop

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1 A. Jansson, M. Christensen, *Media, Surveillance and Identity: Social Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013).

2 GAFAM is an acronym for a group of American technology companies: Google, Apple, Facebook (Meta), Amazon, and Microsoft.

3 M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (1975) (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1977).

their personal space. This gave users the feeling they had control on the construction of a unique space, by using a new universal language, that offered them a chance to present and spread their thoughts worldwide.

Despite this fresh feeling of freedom, the early web was neither a democratic nor a completely free space, but the lack of user-friendly tools for web development put users in the position of working on an “empty canvas,” which offered more possibilities with less limitation.

For the Web 1.0 user, the web space was an extension of the physical one: “Welcome to My Website,” “Welcome to Sofia’s homepage,” a space which only exists in the moment the computer is on and the browser window open. Moreover, the distinction between the two spaces was still very clear because of the medium. Firstly, because of the impossibility of connecting anywhere due to the technical limitations of the Personal Computer and access to the Internet. Secondly, because the user tended to spend more time building their digital space rather than constructing their online persona due to the act of programming.

The introduction of web development systems in most web hosting services gave space to everyone to build websites through user-friendly tools which restrict the creativity of the user, together with the characteristic uniqueness of the 1.0 era web pages. With the structural change of the web also its final purpose shifted: with the advent of the web 2.0, we witnessed the beginning of the Social Media era, in which the focus shifted towards the creation of content for the platform and on the user’s online image. This indicates the transition between *My* and *Me*,<sup>4</sup> where the online space becomes an extension of the user’s identity based on real data, reshaping new dynamics of

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4 O. Lialina, *Turing Complete User. Resisting Alienation in Human-Computer-Interaction* (Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net, 2021).

control and proving that modifying the structure of the web interface changes the experience of the medium radically.

## The Digital Panopticon

Nowadays we find ourselves in an economic system focused on the collection and commodification of personal data for profit, where Big Tech companies are gaining exponential power and control over our decisions and behaviour through sentiment analysis. Surveillance Capitalism pushes people to become prosumers – producers, consumers and products – by using them as resources of free labour. This results in what can be considered a total collapse of the private space through the use of intimate human experiences as free raw material that is later translated into behavioural data.<sup>5</sup>

In this context the fields of artificial intelligence and machine learning find themselves in a very critical position: on the one hand AI holds the potential to be utilised on the way to human self-realisation by enhancing human agency and increasing societal capabilities, while on the other hand, the misuse of these algorithms by Big Tech corporations as data scrapers are already gaining more control over people, consequently undermining human self-determination.<sup>6</sup>

Today's misconceptions surrounding *the algorithm* and its tendency to become even more of a black box as it advances, consequently leads to an animist, almost magic-like, perception towards it. The fact that these

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5 S. Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

6 J. Cowl, L. Floridi, M. Taddeo, "The Challenges and Opportunities of Ethical AI," in J. Rogers, I. Papadimitriou, A. Prescott, eds., *Artificially Intelligent: V&A Digital Design Weekend 2018* (Dundee: University of Dundee, 2018).

technologies are developed by the human mind is being overlooked in the face of the worldwide crises we are facing.

People in power at tech monopolies build their narratives around technology in a way that give responsibility and agency to it, whereas the ethical responsibility relies on the ones that are developing, monitoring, using, and taking advantage of said technologies. Therefore, it is misguided to fear the machine based on the dystopic dispositions it has been displaying, while the focus on the people behind those machines, taking decisions that introduce biases and lead their direction, is lacking.

Within the next pages, by analysing a selection of my works, I will outline two possible methods I developed within my artistic practice as ways to subvert centralised social media platform dynamics and problematics to bring awareness to users about their role and power within these structures.

## **1. Data overload: appropriation and manipulation of users' personal content to make data unreadable.**

### *I Stalk Myself More Than I Should*

There is a narcissistic aspect in surveillance which empowers internet users to monitor their behaviour daily, overcoming the fear of being observed. Sharing structured, rationalised, and complex private content with intimate details online places users in a digital panopticon. This content is not easily read and is subject to interpretation, hence it is possible to find various starting points for speculative stories.

*I Stalk Myself More Than I Should* is an archive of expired memories that were meant to die within 24 hours. The work displays a selection of Instagram Stories preserved through the use of screen recordings. Going against the

nature of this feature, the project investigates appropriation, interpretation, and representation, as well as qualities and hierarchies of humans memories shared and stored online.

*I Stalk Myself More Than I Should* shows chaotic collages of short footage where users' narrations and promotional ads coexist: selfies, morning routines, semi-nudes, ads, parties, concerts, complaints, ads, quotes, memes, self-promotion, ads, exhibitions, and so on are combined as sounds and images that hypnotise and capture us in front of the screen wondering what will come next. By making rather straightforward connections between videos, the audience can easily read users' stories in various ways, nevertheless we progressively discover that the artist is actually the exposed one: through her interaction with these short stories we are able to unveil information via her personal preferences just by paying attention to the viewing time of each video, or to the ads recommended for instance. This process highlights how the act of appropriation is still a way to express the self.

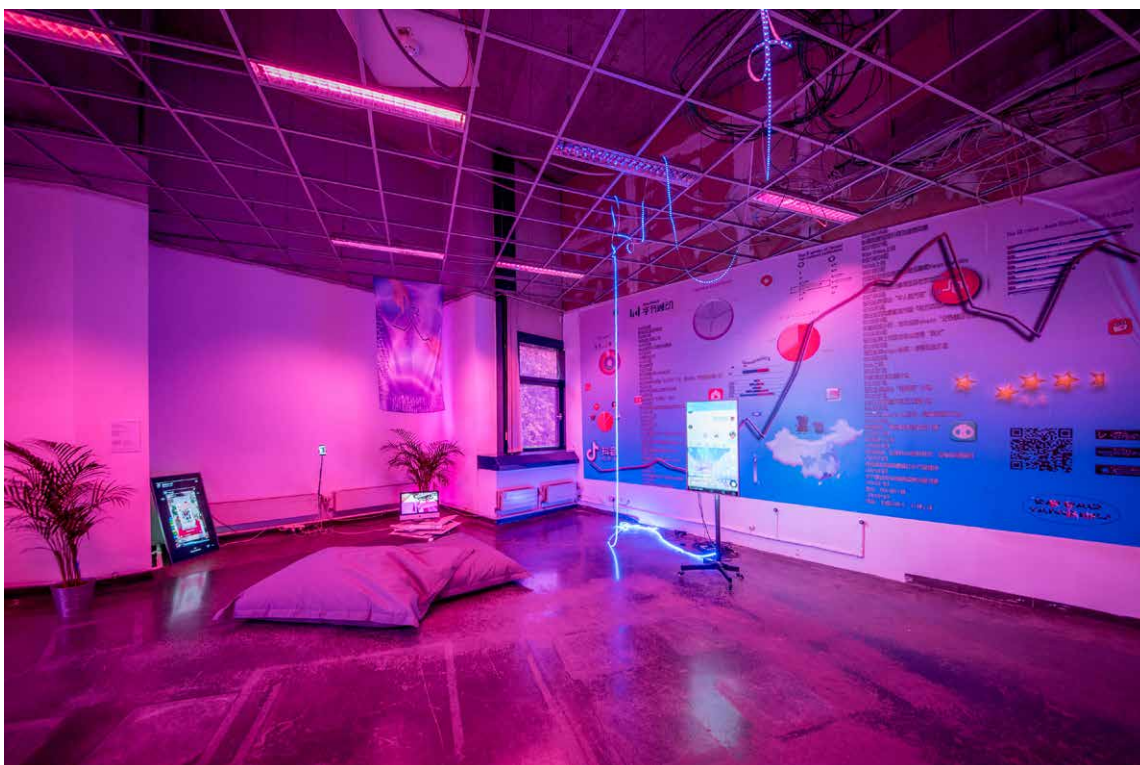


Fig. 1. Sofia Braga, *I Stalk Myself more than I should and Meanwhile in China*, view of the exhibition at Ars Electronica Festival, Linz, 2019.

Users have made this project possible by sharing and giving permission to anyone to get a glimpse into their daily life, which is constructed on the foundation of impressions they want to convey about themselves. What might represent itself as a moral problem – the appropriation of other people’s “private” content – is actually an insolent take on how to deal with issue of data storage by centralised online platforms. The general misconception of being in control of the data we give up, because of the interface’s presented possibility of deletion, or because they will automatically disappear thanks to a feature of the platform, leads users to readily share an abundance of content, increasing profits of the platform itself which stores all data within databases, making use of them as prediction products to be sold into future behavioural markets.

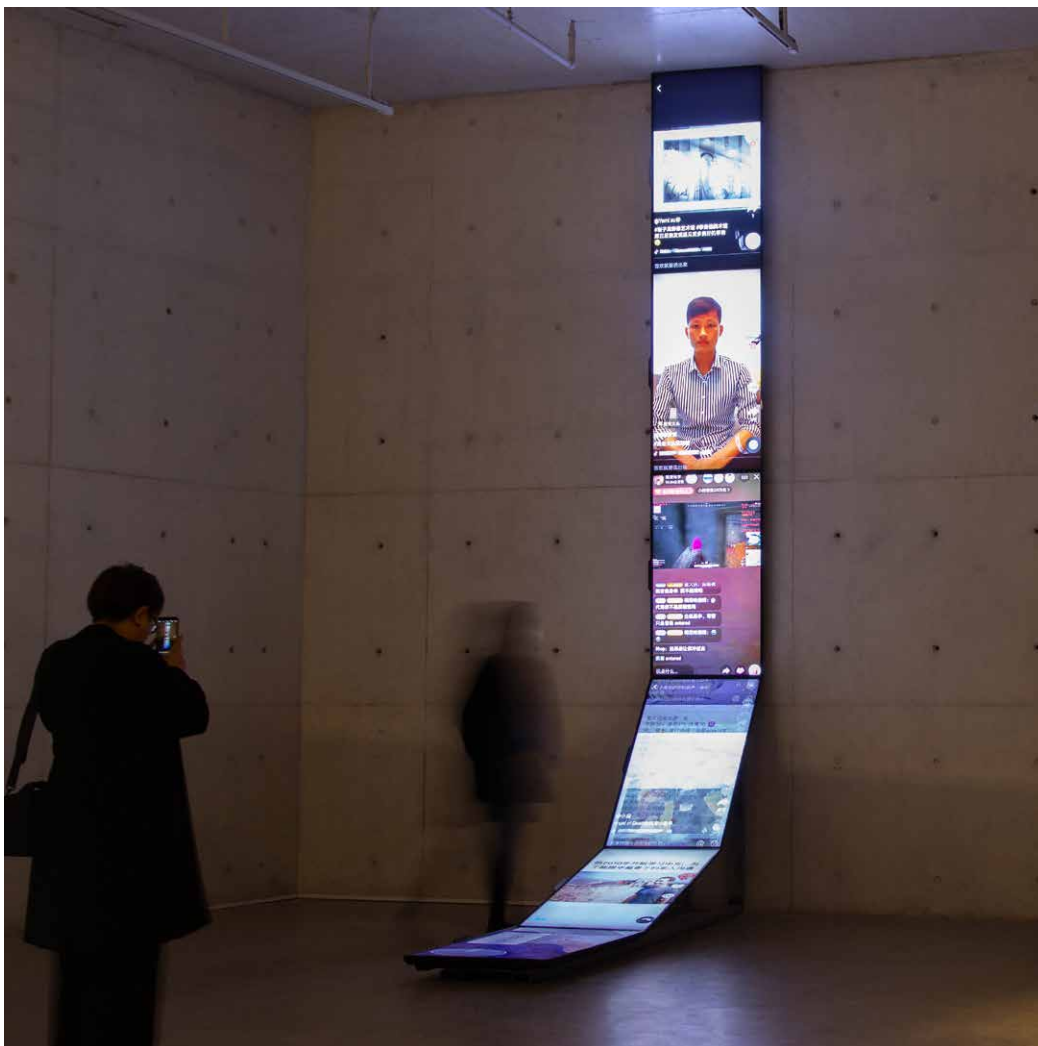


Fig. 2. S()fia Braga and Matthias Pitscher, *A Study on the characteristics of Douyin*, Xie Zilong Photography Museum, Changsha, 2019.



The research that was initiated with *I Stalk Myself More Than I Should* was then developed further with the realisation of *A Study on the characteristics of Douyin* and *Meanwhile in China*, two video installations created in collaboration with artist Matthias Pitscher, which analyse the app *Douyin*, the original version of *TikTok* created in China. Within this platform users attempt to copy specific patterns that go viral to achieve success: the same dances or memes are continuously repeated using the same music, while the individual seeks acceptance within the platform by conforming to the standards set by the community. It is not a coincidence that the majority of users on Douyin and TikTok are young people, who are still developing their self image by being part of a peer group to begin with. In fact TikTok promotes different internet aesthetics and *vibes* in which young users tend to find a sense of belonging within.

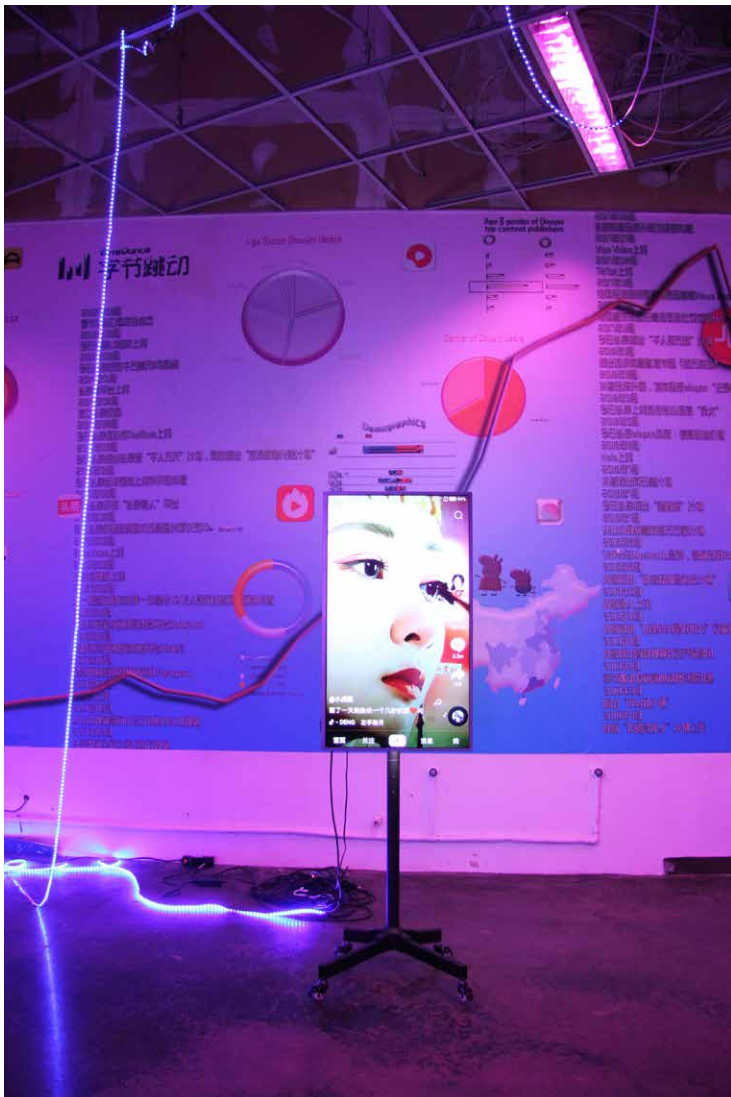


Fig. 3. S)ofia Braga and Matthias Pitscher, *Meanwhile in China*, view of the exhibition at Ars Electronica Festival, Linz, 2019.

Nevertheless *Meanwhile in China* also focuses on problematics related to freedom of speech within Chinese social media platforms due to restrictions caused by the *Great Firewall*, a series of legislation that enforce censorship by regulating internet domestically. The project shows different tricks and symbols users utilise within the platform to find ways to talk about censored topics.

Even if it manifests itself in different ways, we should not forget that censorship is not foreign to western social platforms either, which consistently update their content restrictions for users.

### *Welcome to My Channel*

*Welcome to My Channel* delves into the vast world of video sharing, in which intimate storytelling has become a tool to achieve visibility and gather views as part of a process of self-determination. Within this context, mental distress itself becomes a dangerous narrative tool, as it becomes more and more difficult to delineate the boundaries between reality and fiction.

Through the appropriation of *Vlogs* downloaded from one of the most famous video sharing platforms on the Internet, the video reflects on the contemporary condition of confiding online.



Fig. 4. S)fia Braga, *Welcome to my channel*, 2020, still from video.

In this mash-up of appropriated videos, suicidal thoughts are alternated with promotion of online counselling apps, creating a disturbing combination that questions the reality of the narration and highlights the latest neo-liberal marketing trends on mental health and self-care, with the ultimate goal of controlling people's behaviours by covertly imposing a series of habits. Thus Social Media becomes the most accessible tool to control bodies in a subtle way, leveraging the human need of belonging, and therefore conforming.

## **2. Online fictional narratives and transmedia storytelling.**

### *Die Verwandlung*

The project, commissioned by TBD Ultramagazine on the topic of metamorphosis, the human/non-human relation, and immersivity, is a short movie for Instagram Stories in which a disturbing everyday life is narrated through an atmospheric mix typical of the psychological horror genre, found footage sub-genre, and vernacular online aesthetics such as *cursed images* and *backrooms*.

The short movie is permeated with a continuous feeling of alienation towards the domestic environment and the body, that is victim to a slow process of mutation, and becomes undesirable and alien. The body in *Die Verwandlung* is passive, and is tired of behaving conformingly, while trapped in the house and within a screen that manipulates its own reality. The body we witness is a body that is looking for its own identity within several realities: the physical one, the mediated one of the Instagram story interpreted by the audience, that – as in a video game – will be asked to choose a finale, and gameplay moments that become a meta-narrative tool in which the body, wandering

within the walls of a virtual castle as an avatar, is desperately searching for the identity of a video game character affected by amnesia.

The atypical format of the IG Stories that were used to develop a traditional format such as a short movie, challenges and subverts the user's fruition as well as the concept of fiction and credibility of images within social media platforms.

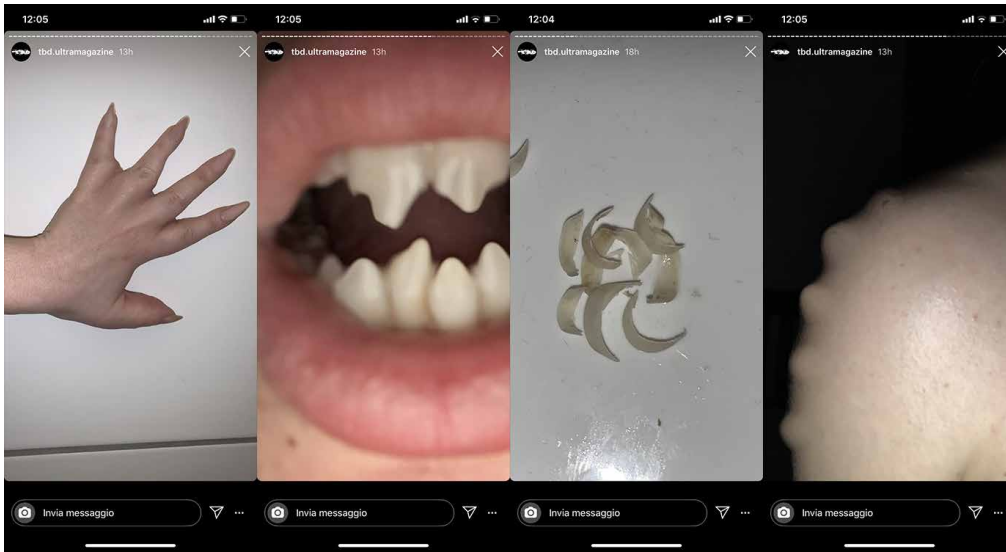


Fig. 5. S()fia Braga, *Die Verwandlung*, 2020, stills from video. Courtesy of the Artist and TBD Ultramagazine.

### *Forehead Vulva Channelling Research*

The *Forehead Vulva Channelling Research* is a speculative *transhumanist* research which focuses on developing advanced studies on the human body's potential to reach lifelong emotional well-being via a re-calibration of pleasure-centers by channeling hidden organs through the use of specialised technologies. The purpose of opening the "Forehead Vulva" is to bring the body to an uninhibited state, and thereby transform it, rediscovering new potentials that humans are still not aware of.

Started as a series of *Forehead Vulva Channelers* – a specific Augmented Reality specialised technology –, The *Forehead Vulva Channelling Research* found rapid support and success within centralised social media platforms, consequently creating a spontaneous worldwide online

performance: just within 24 hours of the first *Forehead Vulva channeller* release, it was already used by 10.000 users and had more than 250.000 impressions.

The project deals with topics such as techno-gender identity and the perception of digital and hybrid bodies, looking for ways to use technology to disrupt identity standards, while at the same time challenging the contemporary capitalistic propaganda of finding ways to reach a “higher” or “better” version of the self through promotion of specific habits and beliefs. Within this context, in a dark and humorous way, *Forehead Vulva Channeling Research* brings the non-compliant body within a capitalistic context, causing a short circuit.



Fig. 6. S)fia Braga, *Forehead Vulva Channeling Research*, 2021, still from video.

These methods have proven that the disruption of the user experience within social media platforms hold the potential to engage with users and bring awareness with a non-manipulative approach, and that a system, in order to be changed, needs to be modified and subverted from within.

In my work, I try to make users aware of their relevance within these structures and invite them to take a critical stance by triggering subversion techniques aimed at disrupting and upsetting the everyday use of the platform.

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