

Platform Strategy in a Technopolitical War

The Failure (and Success) of Facebook Watch

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Abstract

In recent years, as more corporations have decided to launch their own streaming platforms, it has become of greater importance for each to differentiate themselves through a suite of strategies intended to mark their place within the market. Facebook Watch, a video-on-demand service, is this paper's case study, a unique example of a streaming effort undertaken by a technology company with an approach based in data collection and infrastructural might. Watch has not premiered a new scripted series since August 2020, reflecting Facebook's abandonment of narrative seriality through series like *SKAM Austin* and a more pointed investment in the streaming space as an instance of what I am calling *experiential seriality*, meant to lead users along certain trajectories rather than building a reputation on its content. I argue that this is instead a move to compete with Alphabet Inc. (which owns YouTube) to dominate the world of online video, drawing Facebook users through links, recommendations, and other breadcrumbs to maintain continuous use.

Keywords: streaming, seriality, infrastructure, platform capitalism

Introduction

As more companies have launched their own streaming platforms, it has become clear that each has a particular approach or a suite of strategies intended to carve out a big enough chunk in the market to sustain them and appease shareholders. This has naturally resulted in a growing interest in platform strategization as an analytical concept. In other words, people like myself are interested in how each service sets itself apart and how they position themselves within an ever-expanding ecosystem, whether in terms of content, marketing, budgets, interface, or any number of other aspects or techniques intended to ensure growth.

Disney+, for example, entered the market rather late, at the end of 2019, but did so strongly with a robust library and lineup of anticipated originals, largely thanks to its exclusive ownership over Marvel, Lucasfilm, and 20th Century Fox. HBO Max similarly attempted to harness the brand awareness of both HBO and Warner Bros., alongside its own slate of originals, and after the COVID-19 pandemic forced theaters to close, a unique same-day premiere move put its entire 2021 release schedule on the platform and in theaters at the same time. Quibi infamously imagined a bite-size future of content consumption with short ten-minute video segments, but it fizzled out only months after launching, seemingly misunderstanding market demands.

For its part, Facebook launched Facebook Watch in 2017 as a video-on-demand service within its platform (rather than opting to launch a separate platform). It struggled to catch on. A summer 2018 survey by the Diffusion Group revealed that half of US Facebook users were unaware of Facebook Watch, and half of those aware of it had never used it.¹ We can look to an Instagram post from November 2019 by Jessica Biel for further confirmation, as she starred in Facebook Watch's now-cancelled series

1. Todd Spangler, "‘Facebook What?’ Half of Users Have Never Heard of Facebook’s Watch Video Service." *Variety*, August 22, 2018. <https://variety.com/2018/digital/news/facebook-watch-half-users-never-heard-of-1202913756/>.

Limetown, and she wrote, “My face when people are STILL asking how to watch @limetownstories on @facebookwatch. JK it’s real confusing.”² Facebook subsequently altered its strategy by focusing less on scripted and serialized narrative content; they even cancelled their highest-profile series such as *Sorry for Your Loss* and have moved to focusing on cheaper talk shows, various reboots of reality TV properties, and licensed clips and full-length videos from other networks.

The trouble with studying platform strategy is that it’s always changing, and our challenge is to understand why these choices are made and what their implications are for consumers. In the case of Facebook Watch, a clear message has been sent: narrative seriality was a short-term experiment that was abandoned. The question is, What does this strategic move signify? Amid growing awareness of the extent of data collection undertaken by platforms like Facebook, an answer emerges: Facebook Watch pivoted, or was perhaps planned all along to shift (the result is the same), toward being a direct line of competition against YouTube, which is owned by Alphabet. YouTube has long dominated online video, with nary a serious rival to approach its global reach and ubiquity. YouTube touts over two billion active monthly users while Facebook claims 2.8 billion active monthly users. These aren’t comparable numbers since they aren’t comparable entities, as though one tried comparing Instagram (owned by Facebook) to Gmail (owned by Alphabet). The point is that in the so-called platform economy, each massive firm must ensure constant growth, which can be marketed as “innovation” when in fact most of these innovations are purposeful entries into areas dominated by other firms. In other words, Facebook grows increasingly uncomfortable with YouTube’s monopolistic control over online video and its apparent appeal to young people and decides it must introduce an alternative that boosts their data collection, improves user engagement, and builds greater dependency within a hyper-competitive digital economy. Growth is

2. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B4ilwSZgTIE/?hl=en>

the only thing that matters, and keeping users on your platform for longer means they are spending less time elsewhere, or so the thinking goes.

This article conducts a material-discursive reading as its primary method, following the model used by Taina Bucher in her book on Facebook.³ Like Bucher, this article uses a range of secondary sources, including public statements and releases by the company, media reports, internal corporate memos, and scholarly writing on the company, all of which contributes to a reading of rhetoric and strategy. The creation of Facebook Watch, and its subsequent reorganization, reflects the company's anxiety of staying ahead of the competition, particularly amid growing legal and social scrutiny facing the company's various practices. As we now know for sure thanks to the release of the "Facebook papers" in fall 2021, which this article engages with and builds on in part, the company's internal research showed that the platform was increasingly, well, old: by 2021, teenage users had dropped by 13 percent since 2019 and were projected to drop a further *45 percent* by 2023.⁴ This reflects an ongoing existential threat for the company, as an internal memo said that the "aging up issue is real" and that if "increasingly fewer teens are choosing Facebook as they grow older," a more "severe" decline in young users would be inevitable.⁵ Like the recent priority shift in rebranding as Meta to focus on the metaverse, Facebook (which is how this article will continue to refer to the company) is invested in bringing young people back into their fold, and the initial launch of Watch, seen as a failure at least in terms of the short-lived serial narrative approach, can and should instead be understood as a strategic investment less in actual eyeballs and more in a wider sense of user engagement, a framework for capturing users, especially teenagers, in thrall to the platform.

3. Taina Bucher, *Facebook* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021).

4. Cristiano Lima, "A Whistleblower's Power: Key Takeaways from the Facebook Papers," *Washington Post*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/25/what-are-the-facebook-papers/>.

5. Alex Heath, "Facebook's Lost Generation," *Verge*, October 25, 2021, <https://www.theverge.com/22743744/facebook-teen-usage-decline-frances-haugen-leaks>.

An Experiment in Serial Narrative

Television has transformed in recent years, not only with a shift from broadcast to streaming but a more general and even perceptual move toward what Catherine Johnson calls simply “online TV,” “services that facilitate the viewing of editorially selected audiovisual content through internet-enabled devices.”⁶ Johnson argues that viewers of television are now in an age of blurred boundaries and categories, as we watch CBS dramas on our smartphones and Apple TV+ originals on our Internet-connected smart TVs. Moreover, she argues, these changes are (thus far) additive rather than substitutive, meaning that all these experiences, portals, and components are used variously by each consumer. There are shared characteristics across them all but also significant distinctions. One distinction of services rendered by platforms like Facebook Watch, for instance, is a far greater interest in data collection for its users than, say, a more traditional interest from a broadcast network looking at broad audience demographics.

While Netflix’s investment in dramas like *House of Cards* and *Orange Is the New Black* vastly and rapidly expanded its influence within the television industry, Facebook Watch’s limited programming slate struggled to show a return on an initial \$1 billion investment, with memes and jokes proliferating about what it even is and how to access it. While this could be seen as a failure in branding, Facebook and Mark Zuckerberg have argued that it was always intended as an added value and never as a stand-alone service, which, while a bit disingenuous, makes sense in part since it exists only as a tab on the website, without its own app or channel. As Zuckerberg explained in an earnings call in January 2020: “Things like Watch . . . that we had started rolling out are not things that we expect everyone to use. But even if tens or hundreds of millions of people use them, then we’re adding unique value that other folks might not be able to build, and we’re making the app more

6. Catherine Johnson, *Online TV* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 1.

valuable.”⁷ In terms of their strategy when it comes to content, Zuckerberg explained, “You can think about the content acquisition that we do there as more along the lines of either marketing or bringing new people into the experience. We’re not building out a subscription service or anything like that around this.” There is a surprising truth to this, it turns out, as Watch came to abandon original serial narrative content—perhaps these series had already brought in the new people it was intended to, or perhaps it became clear that it was less costly to shift strategy elsewhere. At first, Watch almost felt like a desperate attempt to have Facebook’s own version of a new content pipeline, like Instagram’s introduction of Reels as an answer to TikTok’s success. Certainly the many hours users have been spending on newer video platforms like TikTok and Twitch played a role in Facebook’s awareness of online video as a space needing more of their attention. That said, more time spent on Facebook’s platforms, regardless of how it’s accomplished, is a success in their books, and Facebook Watch likewise provides yet another avenue for data accumulation, advertising, and platform dependency.

Facebook’s initial and brief approach to scripted content operated outside of Netflix’s paradigm and was not without novelty. In spring 2018, Facebook Watch debuted *SKAM Austin*, an adaptation of the popular Norwegian teen drama series *SKAM* that captured international attention for its real-time trans-media storytelling approach when it launched in 2015. Facebook knowingly and savvily took advantage of *SKAM*’s existing online fandom and its compatibility with the daily regiments of social media engagement among the show’s target teen audience in order to make their initial mark as a TV producer, usefully revealing the company’s understanding of what serial narrative content offered to their platform. Their version’s narrative very closely followed that of the original series, depicting a group of high school students in Austin, Texas, and their various relationships and friendships and how technology plays mediator in their lives. In format, distribution, narrative, and more, *SKAM Austin* deliberately

7. Facebook Inc., “Fourth Quarter 2019 Results Conference Call,” Facebook, January 29, 2020, <https://investor.fb.com/investor-events/event-details/2020/Facebook-Q4-2019-Earnings/default.aspx>.

sought to mirror the successful formula of the original, with the added resources and platform integration offered by Facebook and Instagram. As Ricky Van Veen, Facebook's head of global creative strategy, said in a statement when the show was renewed for a second season, "*SKAM* is a shining example of what social video can be when there is a seamless integration of technology and content on Facebook," and executive producer Simon Fuller was even clearer: "Facebook Watch has been the perfect partner in developing *SKAM Austin*, it's a platform that connects people, sparks conversation and fosters community. We've started to see significant teen engagement across America."⁸

Norway's *SKAM* has had global success and international remakes in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Much recent scholarship has examined and traced these remakes and the challenges facing them, often depending on how they are distributed, as well as how these various adaptations approach the project as a strategy of "youthification" for their service.⁹ *SKAM* has also helped introduce and popularize a unique approach to storytelling and distribution, which has been written about by scholars such as Gry Rustad and Vilde Schanke Sundet, writing in English, and others writing in Norwegian, in a variety of contexts, but mostly as a key transmedial, transnational object. This unique approach is, of course, directly tied to the show's power in youthification, as some consider how this manages to create a "democratic aesthetic" of making young people into citizens,¹⁰ and Sundet has written about how this is indebted to the original series' youth-focused

8. Natalie Jarvey, "Facebook Renews Simon Fuller's 'SKAM Austin' for Season 2," *Hollywood Reporter*, July 25, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/digital/facebook-renews-simon-fullers-skam-austin-season-2-1129572/>.

9. Stefania Antonioni et al., "'SKAM Italia Did It Again': The Multiple Lives of a Format Adaptation from Production to Audience Experience," *Critical Studies in Television* 16, no. 4 (2021): 433–54; Vilde Schanke Sundet, "'Youthification' of Drama through Real-Time Storytelling: A Production Study of *blank* and the Legacy of *SKAM*," *Critical Studies in Television* 16, no. 4 (2021): 145–62; Florian Krauß and Michael Stock, "Youthification of Television through Online Media: Production Strategies and Narrative Choices in *DRUCKSKAM Germany*," *Critical Studies in Television* 16, no. 4 (2021): 412–32.

10. Synnøve Skarsbø Lindtner and John Magnus Dahl, "Aligning Adolescents to the Public Sphere: The Teen Serial *Skam* and Democratic Aesthetic," *Javnost: The Public* 26, no. 1 (2019): 54–69.

public service mission.¹¹ Moreover, this has created a multitude of transnational fan communities around these various versions of the show, as many scholars highlight the intimate level of participation that viewers are invited to take in. Tore Rye Andersen and Sara Tanderup Linkis describe their concept of *concurrent participation*: “Because of the temporal overlap between the story being told, the telling of the story, and its distribution, digitally distributed serialized narratives are able to produce a special aesthetic effect, a sense of taking part in (the construction of) the ongoing story.”¹² Particularly in light of Facebook’s version, I intend to evaluate what the show can tell us about their programming methodology and how we can make sense of platform strategization more generally and the relationship between seriality, data, and platform television. Jill Walker Rettberg describes the circular logic provided by *SKAM*’s model, which would certainly appeal to a platform like Facebook looking for their own way into youthification through a video-based service: “Many of the awaited fictional events occurred in social media, so the audience’s waiting to find out about a fictional event in social media mirrored the fictional characters’ experience of waiting for a text or a phone call, which again mirrors the audiences’ own experiences of such waiting.”¹³

The original *SKAM* format developed by Julie Andem—who also served as showrunner on the first season of *SKAM Austin*—encouraged everyday interaction from fans through diegetic social media accounts that fans could follow and comment on and unpredictable distribution patterns, as episodes would be uploaded on the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation’s website at the time of the episode’s events, so if a character was struggling with insomnia in the middle of the night, that episode would

11. Vilde Schanke Sundet, “From ‘Secret’ Online Teen Drama to International Cult Phenomenon: The Global Expansion of *SKAM* and Its Public Service Mission,” *Critical Studies in Television* 15, no. 1 (2020): 69–90.

12. Tore Rye Andersen and Sara Tanderup Linkis, “As We Speak: Concurrent Narration and Participation in the Serial Narratives ‘@I_Bombadil’ and *Skam*,” *Narrative* 27, no. 1 (2019): 102.

13. Jill Walker Rettberg, “‘Nobody Is Ever Alone’: The Use of Social Media Narrative to Include the Viewer in *SKAM*,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 54, no. 2 (2021): 244.

likewise be posted at 2 a.m.. This distribution method trained fans to constantly be aware of the ongoing narrative and to visit the website throughout each day to monitor for updates. Facebook's adaptation follows suit but further leverages the integrative potential of both Facebook and the Facebook-owned Instagram, creating a narrative space that invests viewers in both the story and, crucially, Facebook's platforms. It is important to keep in mind that, in 2017 and 2018, Twitch was drawing young users for hours on end to various streams, and TikTok's rise was just around the corner, to say nothing of YouTube's continued dominance, so user retention was, and remains, the priority. As the *Washington Post* found in its analysis of the Facebook papers, "Facebook chooses maximum engagement over user safety."¹⁴ Extracting the *SKAM* format was part of a larger effort to appeal to a teen audience being aggressively and successfully courted by these other social platforms-turned-content providers.

As Gry Rustad explains:

The fact that the teen users are able to experience the situations as 'they happen' and have to wait with the characters for the exciting date, the cool party or for a boyfriend to answer a text facilitates an engagement where the story seamlessly becomes part of the teens' online life. The unpredictable schedule seems to facilitate an even stronger loyalty to the programme and several of the viewers check the page for updates several times per hour, waiting for updates. . . . The programme's distributional practice caters to teen users' daily rhythms and media habits, situating them in a viewing mode in which viewers frequently refresh and update the web page to follow the unfolding lives of the characters just as they would do with friends' social media feeds. *Skam* thus works itself into the fabric of the teen users' everyday media consumption, blending perfectly with their social media practice.¹⁵

14. Lima, "A Whistleblower's Power."

15. Gry Rustad, "*Skam* (NRK, 2015–17) and the Rhythms of Reception of Digital Television," *Critical Studies in Television* 13, no. 4 (2018): 507, 508.

Of course, that sounds too good to be true to Facebook. In a way, the serialized narrative of the series is intended to blur with the user's real-life dramas and voyeuristic interest in the lives of their friends, acquaintances, crushes, and beloved celebrities. This isn't to say that reality and fiction become interchangeable, but instead that the aesthetic experience of the social platform is being structured around continuous use that begets more attentive engagement as users are drawn into a steady mixture of serial narratives, both fictional and real. In other words, by aligning these narratives with existing social media practices, Facebook Watch aimed to construct a self-fulfilling growth machine wherein further interest in the story necessitates further usage of their platforms, which results in further exposure to advertising and other "narratives" within their news feed and so on in a circle of reliance on Facebook platforms. It only makes sense, then, to recall the long history of soap opera analysis within television studies, including work by C. Lee Harrington and others on the mode's move into the "new media" era,¹⁶ and we can see Facebook's deployment of *SKAM Austin*'s innovative model as indicating a savvy awareness of soap viewing practices and what they can offer a platform like theirs within a competitive market (in this case, it really can feel like the soap opera is a part of your life as you consume it alongside the content provided by your actual friends and family).

While Facebook Watch may lack name recognition for the average user, *SKAM Austin* exhibits a strategic deployment of narrative and programming strategies, with an emphasis on daily engagement and letting the characters bleed into time lines along with real friends and family. Keeping pace with the storytelling likewise means spending more time on Facebook, taking in all the other content and ads within the same newsfeed that gives you narrative updates. This enables Facebook to differentiate itself not through prestige, like Netflix, or even necessarily

16. C. Lee Harrington, Sam Ford, and Abigail de Kosnik, eds., *The Survival of Soap Opera: Transformations for a New Media Era* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011).

through unique production and distribution models like Quibi but through the articulation of aesthetic experiences rooted in the remaking of consumption and user practices that could lead to a transformation of content strategy on social platforms seeking ever-greater growth for user engagement.

A Shift in Strategy

Now, in 2021, Facebook Watch has shifted strategy once again, moving away entirely from original scripted content and fashioning itself instead as an infrastructure, as I would put it, that can suit all video needs on the platform or indeed *on the Internet itself*. Put differently, Facebook Watch is no longer positioning itself as a competitor in the streaming platform wars but instead as a very direct counterpoint to YouTube, which is owned by Google's parent company Alphabet and has dominated online video for over a decade. These monopolistic plays for our attention and engagement are, in fact, an entirely different beast than the comparably low-level competition playing out among Netflix, HBO Max, and all the rest, and to conflate them is a mistake. Simply, Alphabet and Facebook are not dealing with millions of people but with billions. Facebook and Alphabet would, in all likelihood, never overcome the content pipeline established by Netflix, and they do not seek to do so. Instead, on-demand video is one of many avenues for these companies to grapple for control, for ownership, for a more powerful claim to being a user's one-stop answer to every online need. Occasionally, this is done through acquisition, as when Facebook has purchased Instagram, WhatsApp, Giphy, Oculus (virtual reality and gaming), Chainspace (blockchain), Atlas Solutions (advertising), and many others to either forestall a potential competitor or, more often, assimilate their technology and expertise into Facebook's platform. Other times, though, as with Facebook Watch, it is more strategic to delegate resources to strengthening the platform to capture engagement and growth according to the practices and data already garnered. We could call this a process of infrastructuralization or, as Anne Helmond has

theorized,¹⁷ a *platformization* whereby Facebook may not always be able to catch up to or anticipate changing user practices or emerging technologies and competitors but it can create new services, integrate plug-ins, or otherwise rework and reconfigure its platform to better situate itself into the wider Web and pull data back into its own coffers. Elsewhere, Helmond, David B. Nieborg, and Fernando N. van der Vlist have articulated Facebook's evolution as the development of a *platform-as-infrastructure*, meaning that Facebook is "a constantly changing platform that derives power from its ability to create institutional dependencies among its vast network of partners."¹⁸ The point here is that Facebook has operated through a strategy of "expansion and subsequent entrenchment," a constant loosening of platform boundaries "while simultaneously embedding themselves into other markets by strategically orienting their programmability toward developers and businesses."¹⁹ It is into this context that we must place the launch and shifting strategizing for Facebook Watch as one crucial if easily misunderstood instance of Facebook's growth into a platform-as-infrastructure.

In the landmark book *Platform Capitalism*, Nick Srnicek memorably places this within an economic model to very plainly describe how a company like Facebook has come to understand itself within the market. Srnicek says that platforms embody four characteristics: they are intermediary digital infrastructures (which allow different groups, from advertisers to customers to producers, to interact on the terms set by the platform); they produce and rely on network effects (users beget more users, and the value of a platform increases as the number of users increases, so platforms can grow extremely quickly); they operate via cross-subsidization (balancing free and paid services to attract and accumulate more users and more data); and they employ a politics with a core architecture that is always tweaked and

17. Anne Helmond, "The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (2015): 1–11.

18. Anne Helmond, David B. Nieborg, and Fernando N. van der Vlist, "Facebook's Evolution: Development of a Platform-as-Infrastructure," *Internet Histories* 3, no. 2 (2019): 124.

19. Helmond, Nieborg, and van der Vlist, "Facebook's Evolution," 125.

revised to sustain constant user engagement: “Platforms, in sum, are a new type of firm. . . . They are an extractive apparatus for data.”²⁰ Facebook is the perfect example of this model. Firstly, as Srnicek points out, if you want to socialize online, it has become the default option purely by virtue of how many users it has (which is even truer since their purchase of Instagram). Facebook offers anyone the ability to reach the groups they wish to reach, and it has taken advantage of network effects to build a social (and inevitably, inextricably economic) monopoly. Moreover, obviously using Facebook is free, and most of its services and activities are too. Yet not only does it charge for advertising or games or other activities but it gains value through data—as we are familiar with by now, we “pay” for Facebook and other platforms with the data we provide them with. Finally, Facebook is always revising their approach and their strategies for maintaining growth, whether by purchasing other apps and firms or by outlining their rules of governance so that users, companies, and developers can use their platform in ways that benefit Facebook, thereby setting up a politics of use.

In a roundabout but revealing way, these infrastructural power plays bring us back to *SKAM*. In its original version, produced for the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK, it was intended to serve a public service function in the model of PBS Kids, for example. Some criticism was lobbed at *SKAM Austin* as a result, as it served a tech overlord rather than matching the public service mission of the original. Put differently, there was some discomfort with the extent to which the series operated as an advertisement for Facebook. As critic Inkoo Kang wrote, “What was once a depiction of how teenagers use the internet now feels more like an illustration of how teenagers *should* use the internet (on products owned by Facebook, obviously). Content has seldom felt so indistinguishable from marketing.”²¹ Of course,

20. Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 55–56.

21. Inkoo Kang, “Is Skam Austin an Innovative Teen Drama or an Advertisement for Facebook?” *Slate*, May 22, 2018, <https://slate.com/technology/2018/05/skam-austin-is-an-innovative-teen-drama-and-an-ad-for-facebook.html>.

streaming platforms typically undertake similar actions, such as when one of the *Queer Eye* hosts is a guest on *The Circle* on Netflix, for example, on a season that also features someone from another Netflix series, *Too Hot to Handle*. But, as Kang points out, there's something different and "vaguely alarming" about a show aimed at young kids and teens ostensibly depicting how they actually live but entirely framed by the use of Facebook apps (Snapchat, YouTube, and others are mentioned but rarely, if ever, seen): "Even if *Austin* were only representing how teens are addicted to Facebook's products, it doesn't feel quite right that the show's realistic aesthetic contributes to the normalization of the company's grip on high-schoolers' social lives." Put another way, Facebook is able to have its cake and eat it, drawing on the dramatic impact of this technology on the lives of young people while ensuring their continued use of their platforms in order to keep watching.

Facebook, though, has moved on from *SKAM Austin*, and Facebook Watch is instead functioning as another facet of what I am calling *experiential seriality*. The abandonment of narrative seriality and the adoption of experiential seriality captures Facebook's strategy to online video. Experiential seriality is not unrelated to traditional and familiar theories of televisual flow and how streaming platforms like Netflix have updated and transformed Raymond Williams's concept with analysis of auto-play features or other tools that platforms use to keep people logged in and watching for as long as possible. With nonstreaming platforms with a stake in online video, though, companies like Facebook or Alphabet have parallel but distinct concerns and tools to address them. Experiential seriality, then, defines a *platformized aesthetic of enforced continuity in the infrastructural pursuit of total user dependency*. It is a form of technopolitics. This likewise follows the concept of data infrastructure put forward by Jonathan Gray and others, meaning "socio-technical systems implicated in the creation, processing, and distribution of data,"²² but also broader infrastructural meanings related to enshrining Facebook as the core social infrastructure of the Internet. As

22. Jonathan Gray, Carolin Gerlitz, and Liliana Bounegru, "Data Infrastructure Literacy," *Big Data & Society* (July 2018): 234.

Helmond and Nieborg argue, Zuckerberg himself has used this language, particularly in statements to Congress, because he “aims to appropriate the historical connotations of utilities and infrastructure as non-commercial services for the common good, thereby normalizing the commodification of connectivity and user data.”²³

Wendy Chun and many others have pointed out how this can take the form of addiction, or habitual action, and that social platforms generally seek to capture attention and engagement through the unpredictability and affective jolts of user news feeds and time lines. As Ludmila Lupinacci has argued, though, we should remember that “the proposition of social media’s constant unrest is not to disrupt per se, but rather to generate active engagement and, finally, predictability—or the capacity to anticipate users’ preferences and behavior for targeted advertising purposes.”²⁴ Moreover, this predictability “can only work if users accept and subscribe to the widespread claim of unsettledness, and if they feel like checking, scrolling, and engaging constantly, continuously,”²⁵ and one ideal way to do that, Lupinacci argues, is through the liveness of media. Controlling video architectures is of great importance for Facebook (or most major social platforms) as a result. Infamously, many news publications initiated a “pivot to video” based on Facebook metrics that turned out to be highly inflated.²⁶ That’s a story of deception, and of many jobs lost based on that deception, but it’s also a story about Facebook’s control and its interest in serving all needs in a way that works for them, which naturally means in a way that increases their growth.

23. Anne Helmond and David B. Nieborg, “The Political Economy of Facebook’s Platformization in the Mobile Ecosystem: Facebook Messenger as a Platform Instance,” *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 2 (2019): 211.

24. Ludmila Lupinacci, “‘Absentmindedly Scrolling through Nothing’: Liveness and Compulsory Continuous Connectedness in Social Media,” *Media, Culture & Society* 43, no. 2 (2020): 277.

25. Lupinacci, “Absentmindedly Scrolling,” 287.

26. Megan Graham, “Facebook Knew Ad Metrics Were Inflated, but Ignored the Problem to Make More Money, Lawsuit Claims,” CNBC, February 18, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/18/facebook-knew-ad-metrics-were-inflated-but-ignored-the-problem-lawsuit-claims.html>.

Consider this incident from a slightly different angle, and it becomes clear how these video metrics and the resulting pivots to video in 2017 and 2018 were occurring at roughly the same time as Watch was being launched. This suggests, I would argue, that Facebook implemented a company-wide directive (whether explicit or implicit) to find ways to guide users, publishers, creators, and everyone else on their platform to focus on video in an effort to emphasize what made them the most money and to help along their continuing process of becoming a platform-as-infrastructure. These desires are inextricably linked for Facebook and for many major platforms.

Thinking back again to Williams and televisual flow, we are reminded of the drive to keep viewers glued to the screen for huge chunks of time based on an economic desire to capture people and how streamers like Netflix replicate this model in their own way, moving their platform into being the exclusive provider of televisual content. At this point, Facebook Watch offers livestreaming, sports, news, talk shows, music videos, and user-generated content, and all of it can be monetized through “gifts” to livestreamers, paid live events, subscriptions, and other means, to say nothing of the wider advertising market attached to video. Much of this is directly intended to compete with YouTube and Alphabet, as they both make investments in infrastructural gains based on the platformization of the Web space so that *everything comes back to them*. That way, it doesn’t matter that Facebook Watch has failed as a scripted content provider, because that was merely a way to open the door into a much larger ecosystem of video needs online. The intention of embracing a model of experiential seriality for a company like Facebook is to find ways to codify the continuity of the use they desire through the prism of online video. Netflix CEO Reed Hastings has said more than once that, more than anything else, Netflix is competing with sleep. In truth, experiential seriality can be used as a metric to measure and show how Netflix, Facebook, Alphabet, and the rest are tweaking, acquiring, and marketing in ways that capture users, but that Netflix’s aims are truly smaller than Facebook’s or Alphabet’s—Netflix, thus far, has no interest or benefit in, say, developing a messaging app or developing its own cryptocurrency

(but never say never). The continuity sought by Facebook and Alphabet is all-encompassing, deeply infrastructural, and can *carry across platforms* as long as they are owned by the same parent company.

A useful comparison here would be Amazon, which similarly seeks a kind of infrastructural power but is instead focused on dominating all *transactional operations* online, from its marketplace to its third-party sellers to its cloud computing services to its artificial intelligence assistance. Facebook, on the other hand, can be said to focus on dominating all *social operations* online (which are, often enough, also transactional). In this way, the concept of experiential seriality offers context for how a company like Facebook engages in storytelling, mythmaking, and value creation within a platform economy. The concept may work particularly well in these cases, where entities are invested in and dependent on the growing control over online social operations—messaging, sharing information or images, common-interest groups, multimedia, and so on. It is a deliberate aesthetic experience imposed on users to *encircle their social experience online*, where a continuity is designed and implemented into the system itself to draw them further into their platformed edifice.

Further Applications of Experiential Seriality

The concept of experiential seriality can, I argue, be applied usefully to other instances of platforms intending to maintain constant use and engagement, and there is perhaps no better current example than TikTok. Some further analysis of this example will help articulate why tech companies like Facebook and Alphabet have made only limited attempts to invest in narrative seriality, including YouTube Premium's own abandonment (it has not premiered a scripted drama or comedy series since 2019). TikTok, a video-sharing app owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, is a massively popular platform that is still considered an emerging player in the industry despite amassing over five-hundred-million active monthly users, well above Twitter

or Snapchat. ByteDance launched an app called Douyin in China in 2016 while TikTok was launched in other markets in 2017—they are in essence the exact same platform but they run on separate servers due to Chinese censorship laws. Recalling Srnicek’s characteristics, ByteDance purchased the app musical.ly (which was built around short lip-sync videos) in 2018 and merged it with TikTok, in part to buy their competition and in part to consolidate musical.ly’s data into their own and to create a larger community of young users in Western markets. In 2018, TikTok became the world’s most-downloaded app in the iOS store, rapidly becoming the go-to online social space for Gen Z. As Facebook has tracked how Gen Z has been spending less and less time on Facebook, they even attempted to launch its own competitor in late 2018, called Lasso, which failed to catch on. Facebook Watch functions as a separate feed that is largely identical to the familiar news feed—again, it is not a platform of its own but an integrated category feature that organizes video on the platform. TikTok, on the other hand, lets a user scroll through the main page, called “For You,” and you watch whatever comes your way via the algorithmically determined feed. The specific operations of this feed are obscure and, of course, protected, but generally it is a constant stream of videos, giving the user a feeling of discovery with every swipe in a way that stands apart from other apps, in part because they are pulled from around the world with little relationship to anyone you already follow.

This does not mean that narrative seriality is itself completely missing on TikTok, for certain ongoing narratives can appear in your feed over time, including users who create stories and role play various characters. The point, though, is that TikTok operates differently than any streaming platform or any social media platform. This sense of discovery and the attendant liveness of each swipe (even if videos are actually days, weeks, or months old) is an algorithmic boon to the platform’s desire for continuous use. The fact that Facebook has tried *twice* to copy this model, first with Lasso and then with Reels on Instagram, suggests an awareness on their part that TikTok is leading in this area and that they had an interest—or perhaps an imperative—to match that growth.

Facebook Watch's initial interest in narrative seriality and content like *SKAM Austin* has, in a way, confused the issue. For the most part, discourse around Watch focused on its position with the streaming wars against existing heavy hitters like Netflix or Hulu. That is not Facebook's fight. This is mirrored in interesting ways through the launch and evolution of YouTube Premium, originally YouTube Red. The subscription service is not free, like Watch, but has otherwise exhibited a similar trajectory in content production with an initial investment in scripted originals, including teen dramedies like *Foursome* and the *Black Mirror*esque series *Bad Internet*, both of which premiered in 2016, followed by a move toward docuseries and reality shows, most of which star famous YouTubers. The subscription model suggests not only that YouTube sought to overcome ad blockers but that, to some degree, Premium (or Red at the time) was imagined as a possible way to compete with streaming platforms like Netflix, with the exclusivity of massively popular YouTubers having new access to inflated budgets. As with Watch's shift away from these narrative series, we cannot know for certain why YouTube changed direction, whether it was the realization that they could not actually compete with other streaming services, or whether it was because that narrative approach had served its intended purpose, or whether it was because these shows were not paying off in terms of data collection or profit boosting. Perhaps it was a combination or none of these. Regardless, YouTube made the same move that Facebook did, and now the two behemoths continue to seek dominance over online video, making sure as many links, recommendations, and digital pathways as possible lead evermore back to their platform, an ever-intensifying whirlwind of experiential seriality.²⁷

27. It's worth mentioning how this has operated within the public discourse, particularly in recent years as research has shown how YouTube in particular has led many users down far-right rabbit holes of recommendations and playlists and how a particular flow formed around how easy it can be to go from seemingly regular videos to conspiracy theories, white nationalism, or other thematic wormholes.

Conclusion

In truth, Facebook and YouTube (or, rather, Alphabet) are closer in lockstep with each other than with any other entity within digital capitalism. When it comes to video, TikTok and Twitch may be better points of comparison than Netflix or Disney+, but the game comes down to Facebook and Alphabet in a tussle of giants for ultimate ownership over user time and energy. Jathan Sadowski, among others, has argued that these efforts amount to a new form of rentier capitalism, wherein firms like Facebook cement themselves as ubiquitous intermediaries, forcing themselves into production, circulation, and consumption processes across all sectors to capture evermore value through data extraction and capital convergence. What this means is that “landlords and platforms both possess similar positions of mediation, powers of access, purposes of extraction—enough so that I argue we should define them as rentiers.”²⁸ One could argue that Facebook’s success to date into becoming a rentier platform does not match Alphabet’s or Amazon’s—for example, if Amazon Web Services crashed, much of the Internet would disappear instantly. Yet the tentacles of platform capitalism spread in countless ways according to each platform, and if anything, this project has revealed the attention that must be paid to things like Facebook Watch as crucial elements within this complex system. To the general public, Facebook Watch is where they might go to watch some gaming livestreams or to see Jada Pinkett-Smith interview her husband on *Red Table Talk*. But as Sadowski explains,

The Internet of Landlords, like the Internet of Things, is simultaneously distributed and centralised. It spreads rentier relations far and wide, at different scales and intensities, while also concentrating control over the system and value captured from the system in a small number of large hands. Thus, the mega-platforms like Amazon have succeeded in following

28. Jathan Sadowski, “Internet of Landlords: Digital Platforms and New Mechanisms of Rentier Capitalism,” *Antipode* 55, no. 2 (2020): 565.

the rentier logic to its most extreme: by gaining a monopolistic position as proprietors of essential services, they have the power to extract absolute rents from the use of its platform.²⁹

I see Facebook Watch, in its deliberate strategic turn over the last couple of years since abandoning original scripted content and embracing a wider push into formats to compete with Alphabet, as yet another outgrowth of this infrastructural mission. Put simply, if all video roads lead back to Facebook, the value to be captured grows exponentially. Facebook may be learning the benefits of positioning itself as a public utility, but its current extractive strategy of essential service instead situates it as the postfeudal capitalist vision of one platform among many intent on defining the conditions of online experience in their image. Whoever wins, we lose, unless we can build resistances or digital public infrastructures entirely outside their orbit.

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29. Sadowski, "Internet of Landlords," 569.

