# Between Entities and Identities: The Internet of Egregores

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Is a fandom a botnet? In 2020, "stans" of the Korean boy-band BTS broke mainstream headlines when they waged a Twitter war against Donald Trump's supporters, first by flooding the #WhiteLivesMatter hashtag with BTS pictures, then by booking all the tickets at a Trump rally and treating the president to a half-empty stadium. A traditional botnet is a swarm of automated agents, typically a compromised computer network, which can be controlled without its owners' knowledge. With the approval of their idols, the famously zealous BTS ARMY's raid on an enemy fanbase was reminiscent of a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack, where a swarm of bots overwhelm a target site with requests, effectively shutting the service down. Such cyberattacks were the bread and butter of online hacktivist movements like the 4chan-based movement, Anonymous, particularly over the early 2010s. Over the last few years, discussions of online subterfuge have shifted from attacks on services towards social dynamics taking place inside major platforms themselves, such as fake news, political polarization, or "epistemic security".[1] Particularly after 2016, global populisms have swelled across the "networked public sphere", while Twitter bots hailing from across the world have been blamed for endangering democratic participation and poisoning the well of public discourse, often under the alleged command of enemy governments. It is easy to forget that barely a decade ago, much faith was placed in monopoly platforms like Twitter and Facebook as catalysts for democratic politics during the Arab spring. Meanwhile, digital platforms have increasingly become the de facto source of global news, opinion, entertainment and personal communications, all rolled into one – integrating

1. Elizabeth Seger, Shahar Avin, Gavin Pearson, Mark Briers, Sean Ó Heigeartaigh, and Helena Bacon (2020). *Tackling Threats to Informed Decision-making in Democratic Societies: Promoting epistemic security in a technologically-advanced world.* https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.64183

the tempestuous climate of platforms ever more deeply into everyday social and psychological experience.

As the famous *New Yorker* cartoon goes, 'on the internet, no one knows if you're a dog', but in many ways, this punchline has lost its meaning since 1993. *Who* online entities *are* matters less than how agency manifests. Even the word 'identity', which derives from the Latin word "*idem* – same", alludes to this indexical oneness, whereas an 'entity' (which may still exert agency) loses the sameness and while retaining the word "*esse* – being". After all, the internet is not made up of people, dogs, or bots: it is made up of cables, servers, protocols, bits. In the algorithmic social sphere, platforms enable and constrain the networked activity of more or less pseudonymous 'users', blurring indexical links to IRL persons beyond their apparent ethical utility.[2] As such, attention needs to be paid to the ways in which online entities are called into *being*, often by social processes of identification and desire (such as a fandom), but inevitably acquire forms of agency beyond the limited remit of their 'calling'.

Like a network of bots, the 'organic' activity of online fandoms – disparaging their nemeses and glorifying their idols – is already a relatively automatic phenomena, which is capable of generating vast swells of social participation. Members of hashtags like #bts_twt are constantly commentating, posting memes, and producing lore to maintain their online presence as one of the world's largest fanbases. When they choose to mobilize beyond the membrane of their own subcultures, whether in jubilation (such as on band members' birthdays) or in wrath, they breach the surface of mainstream feeds as a collective force to be reckoned with. Rather than conceiving of social media platforms as online social spaces made up of identities, perhaps they are better understood as ecologies of anthropomorphic entities conjured in the image of human beliefs: an internet of egregores.

The original egregores were occult entities, psychic "thoughtforms" summoned by collective belief. Rooted in ancient religious lore,[3] the concept has long held a place in mystical traditions such as Enochian magic. As Gaetan Delaforge, author of *The Templar Tradition in the Age of Aquarius*, puts it, "an egregore is a kind of group mind which

2. Moreover, a person online already assumes a plethora of pseudonymous identities, just as their behaviors are surveilled and algorithmically profiled by the services they use.

3. 'Egregore' derives etymologically from the ancient Greek word for "awaken – *egeírō*", while more popular recent usages (such as by Victor Hugo in *La Légende des Siècles* (1859)) derive from the French, *égrégore*, meaning "the spirit of the group".

4. Gaetan Delaforge, "The Templar Traditions Yesterday and Today" in *Gnosis #6*, MasonicWorld. com. https://www. masonicworld.com/ education/files/artjun02/ TEMPTRAD.htm

5. Benedict Anderson (2016). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism.* Revised edition. London New York: Verso. Pg 3.

6. Sarah Perry, "A Pseudoethnography of Egregores." *Ribbonfarm.* Accessed 26 August 2022. https://www.ribbonfarm. com/2016/12/01/a-pseudoethnography-of-egregores/

7. Somewhere, the graveyard of egregores is a catalog of obsolete desires.

is created when people consciously come together for a common purpose."[4] It is a fundamentally blurry concept, perhaps in part because Western thought leaves somewhat limited ways of discussing the reality – or efficacy – of imaginary, socially constituted entities. It is to this problem that historian of nationalism Hugh Seton-Watson concludes that "no 'scientific' definition of the nation can be devised, yet the phenomenon has existed and exists," leading Benedict Anderson to his famous description of the nation as an "imagined community" in order to resolve its conceptual 'emptiness'.[5] It was probably the blog *Ribbonfarm* that popularized the egregore as a way to think about the agency of avatars formed by the collective rituals of capitalism and mass-media culture.[6] Just as abstractions like corporations are able to be 'people', people also *incorporate,* assuming collective, intersubjective identities with incorporeal modes of mediated being. Influencers, brands, conspiracies, political movements, memes, nations: egregores are entities that grow, die, and move through the world by means of group identification, offering their human hosts a representational, narrative vessel to manifest their desires and beliefs.[7]

In the intertidal zones between IRL and URL, egregores describe forms of agency which need not be reduced to their constituent partialities. Instead, an egregore is known by the name (be that an animé character, a political ideology, or a public scandal) by which it was summoned, and with which it acts in the world. When an egregore speaks, it speaks both as the individual user and with the sovereignty of the crowd, but if the former logs off, the latter persists, so long as there are believers to sustain its reality. In many ways, the digital attention economy has blurred many of our names for conventional social processes. Communication becomes synonymous with presence; visibility with (financial, affective) investment; virality with political agency; identification with ownership; occupying time and attention with controlling space. After all, web 2.0 was built by e-commerce. The defining technical affordances of its maturity – page-load performance, SEO, cookies and analytics, A/B testing, cross-platform responsiveness, targeted ads – are overwhelmingly focused on transforming clicks

8. Amongst the largest social platforms, Twitter has long been scorned by investors for its relative failure to turn market share into shareholder value – hence the Elon Musk takeover drama.

9. In Lacanian psycho-analysis, the "big Other" denotes the symbolic order, the unspoken "public" sphere to whom one speaks.

10. Gilles Deleuze (1992). "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* vol 59 (Winter). Pgs 3–7.

into sales, eyeballs into wallets, engagement into market capitalization.[8] As symbiotes of this economy, platform egregores are well-aligned with their host infrastructures in the pursuit of growth and attention.

Within this digital political economy, processes of identification and representation proliferate in highly accelerated, differentiated, and dissociated ways. To update the old cypherpunk mantra, *information wants to be different*, because it is only through the differential play of signs that new opportunities for identification and capitalization arise. In a game of operationalized affect, each new drip of assent, virtue, horniness, outrage, or cringe is an offering to the ocean of the Other, with a potential for neuro-economic reward.[9] Philosopher Gilles Deleuze wrote presciently about the transition from (industrial, institutional) "disciplinary societies" to (flexible, post-fordist) "control societies", corresponding to a transition from individuals (e.g. the worker as an industrial unit, or the nuclear family as a reproductive unit), to 'dividuals': amorphous, recombinant, self-identifying, and endlessly divisible subjects. "The disciplinary man was a discontinuous producer of energy, but the man of control is undulatory, in orbit, a continuous network."[10] We are arguably still in the adolescence of a transition that Deleuze identified back in 1990. With the ubiquitous mediation of contemporary platforms, sociality is a read–write process in which narratives come to exist and persist through amorphous pools of dividual agency. Identities, after all, contain multitudes. The dividual flips the script on the conventional abodes of subjectification (as an employee, a student, a spouse) and engages entrepreneurially in the growing nodes of identification.

Why start with the stans? To understand the social ecology of platforms is to acknowledge visibility as a vector of affective and economic investment. Stans have arguably emerged as potent forces because they coalesce around idols (bands, e-sports teams, fictional characters), hotly contested intellectual properties in a crowded market. Moreover, stans and their idols exist, moment to moment, in tight feedback loops, according the former a powerful sense of ownership over favorite characters and narratives. Stans implicitly

understand their idols as financialized assets to be kept afloat and defended from depreciation. At the same time, capricious fandoms can also turn from lucrative supporters into baying cancellation mobs in a fickle heartbeat.[11] Mostly though, adoring them and maintaining their commercial success are united in the same activity. For many fandoms, platforms not only break down the fourth wall but open up the backstage too, taking users upstream in the supply chain of fantasy production. In this transparent narrative hierarchy, audiences often take to the feed to protest PR mishaps, scold franchising decisions, and pore over the writers' room employees as though they were meta-arcs running through a plot. Like Brechtians on steroids, stans take it upon themselves to surmount the dialectics of alienation, embracing enjoyment and investment as two sides of the same coin.

### DO NOT INTERACT IF YOU ARE RELATED TO ME BY BLOOD

As collective bodies of participatory narrative, these egregores don't only exist in and for themselves: they also offer participants a way to construct their online selves. Just like in other domains of association, becoming a fan, a supporter, or even a 'main character' on the timeline means partaking in a conscious performance and leaning into a particular version of a public character. Fans also take on roles within fan communities themselves. As Mimi Jiang observes of Chinese fandom cultures, "'Mom fans' are usually middle-aged women with money to spend, who buy every product the idol promotes. Young women are more likely to be 'girlfriend/wife fans': they have limited cash but will spend their time doing digital labour for free—boosting the hashtag count, for instance."[12] The difference between legacy fandoms and platform-mediated spaces inevitably lies with the algorithmic incentive system of the feed, which rewards the most resonant performative qualities on display: being relatable, spicy, even a cringeworthy figure of hate and ridicule are all fertile avenues for value creation. Cultural critic Toby Shorin suggests that some time after the peak of hipster culture, the pursuit of 'authenticity' in mass-media culture has taken a more assimilatory

11. Also known as "milkshake ducking", an adorable milkshake-drinking duck who turns out to be racist. See: "Milkshake Duck | Know Your Meme." Accessed 28 August 2022. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/milkshake-duck

12. Mimi Jiang. "Diary: Fan Power." *London Review of Books*. 20 May 2021. https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n10/mimi-jiang/diary.

turn, which unironically accepts ostensibly 'inauthentic' consumerist phenomena as legitimate life partners on the journey of identification. As Shorin writes, "People co-create their identities with brands just as they do with religions, communities, and other systems of meaning."[13] Similarly, online egregorical processes allow users to forge their identities not as 'authentic' or unique individuals, but as entities in the forest of forking memes, characters, remixes, and overdubs.

Many egregores inherit directly from fan-fiction cultures, and coalesce parasocially around existing character arcs—whether drawn from fiction or real world celebrity culture—proliferating new plot lines and creating deep networks of communal lore. For example, in 'shipping' cultures, a mainstay of fan-fiction communities since X-Files discussion groups on Usenet, desires center around (typically) romantic relationships between two or more characters. Participants might stan a particular ship, role-play their narratives with compatible shippers, and list preferred ships as part of their online profiles. These communities also have a prominent overlap with online queer and mental health subcultures, many of which converged after migrating from Tumblr to Twitter in the 2010s. Whether indexing real world or fictional figures, parasocial explorations of gender and psychology can be powerful multiplayer narrative vehicles, enabling complex character developments and role-play opportunities. Today, these cultural trajectories feature prominently on the microsite platform Carrd, which has become particularly popular with gen-Z stans in the past two years for creating personal, online profiles. Carrds typically display criteria like DNI (do not interact) and BYF (before you follow) lists flagging pronouns, genders, high-granularity personal quirks and preferred interaction styles, participating fandoms, Myers-Briggs personality type, and acceptable age range for mutuals ("DNI under 13 and above 25 pls remember I am a minor"). To the uninitiated, they resemble not so much a personal introduction as a technical rider, enumerating the psycho-social-cultural parameters of interaction.

13. Toby Shorin (2018). "After Authenticity." Subpixel.space. Accessed 28 August 2022. https://subpixel.space/entries/after-authenticity/

*Screenshot of a randomly selected Carrd. Usernames redacted for privacy.*

The proliferation of niche identity politics on social platforms is allied with something akin to 'identity economics' in the marketplace of online individuation. To claim an identity is also a means to platform visibility – of becoming 'seen' and represented. Clout, after all, is a game of diminishing returns: new characters are needed all the time. With their pseudonymous usernames, instrumentalized vulnerabilities, and hand-crafted aesthetics, in some ways Carrds recall earlier forms of social media, where meeting strangers online was more like trying on different identities for size and less like professional communication. At the same time, in their focus of character attributes and dispositions, they also resemble a peculiar form of personal branding, or rather, the sculpting of one's personal egregore, just as a fan-fiction writer might craft a character. Unlike commercial influencers, for instance, Carrds don't implicitly seek out a public: they take for granted that their designated characters will exist in relation to an ocean of others, each with their own preferences and prohibitions. Their specificity emerges from protocol.

At the same time, such intensities of identification are symptomatic of the basic asymmetry of power in platform monopolies. When the platform owns your data and the algorithm runs your feed, at least you can take ownership of the characters and narratives you participate in. Typical Carrd properties like DNI/BYF, stan lists and trigger lists ("I make a lot of kms jokes but don't use kys jokes on me", "don't usually need tone tags")[14] resemble assertive safeguards of personal and collective sovereignty in resistance against the feed's normative gravity. While attempts to personally curate one's social media, from 'training your algorithm' to making 'alts', are commonplace, Carrd users often seek to claim the terms of personal interaction in hyper-specific detail, like a cross between a dating profile and a personal security system ("read this carrd first"). As one millennial tweeted in exasperation, "Do teenagers realize their carrds are literally a bullet list of all of their tactical weaknesses?"[15]

As networked bodies of social and psychic agency, identity-oriented egregores further short-circuit legacy dualisms (e.g. IRL and URL, real and fictional, self and other). Viewed optimistically, they partake in an emancipatory queering of digital subjectivity, by offering its (largely adolescent) public a sandbox for the testing of experimental selves. However, even as conventional identity strictures may momentarily dissolve into a flux of fluid and formless dividuality, they are also re-commodified in the unfettered market of the attention economy. The pseudonymous French-Italian anarchist collective Tiqqun wrote in their 1999 pamphlet, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, "The Young-Girl appears as a culminating point of this anthropomorphosis of capital."[16] For Tiqqun, the eponymous

14. kys/kms: kill yourself/myself; tone tags: tone-of-speech indicators originating in autism and neurodivergent communities, e.g. "/s" for sarcasm.

15. gale na (Dec 2021). @poisonjr. https://twitter.com/poisonjr/status/1470231819232727040

16. Tiqqun (2012). Translated by Ariana Reines. *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*. Boston: MIT Press. Pg 18.

feminine is not a gendered concept per se but an archetypal subject of post-fordist consumption because "she has none but a consumptive relation to society,"[17] a heroine of the capitalist unconscious because she is a being "that no longer has any intimacy with herself *except as value*, whose every activity, in every detail, is directed to self-valorization." The Young-Girl offers an image of capitalist social relations revolving around *inchoate desire* as its totemic object in both subjective and objective registers: both what everyone wants and what everyone wants to identify with. The sharp end of egregorical identity-formation is mobilized by a similarly adolescent tension: between formless dividuality and the will to identification and representation, between the free play of signs and the thirst for (informational) liquidity. As effective "character creation" interfaces, Carrds function at once as intense expressions of individuation, as sketches of experimental selves, and as demarcations of the communities and egregores with which their owner identifies.

The Subreddit r/fakedisordercringe, which documents the phenomenon of social media users faking disorders for clout, has 242k members. Of the daily entries submitted to the site, the majority relate to exhibitions of dissociative identity disorder (DID).[18] Dissociative conditions have long been observed in relation to online role-play cultures,[19] and their persistence, whether in valid or more doubtful forms, should probably be read as a feature and not a bug of the platform condition. After all, life on the web heightens the tension between the ostensibly stable, singular selves and the kaleidoscopic array of characters and personae for inhabitation online. Traits commonly associated with DID and autism, another popular identification – such as social anxiety, difficulty communicating emotions, loss of self – are also commonly experienced symptoms of being chronically online. In the posts collected on r/fakedisordercringe, DID sufferers on TikTok often describe an assembly of 'headmates' and 'alters', exploring them in ways strongly reminiscent of original character (OC) creators on fan culture hubs like DeviantArt, except that the latter rarely identified 'medically' with their fictional personalities. Indeed, many online DID community members also list

17. Ibid., Tiqqun, quoting cultural theorist Stuart Ewen.

18. Including a rule for 'DID Free Fridays' to stem the oversupply of dissociative identity disorder 'fakers'. https://www.reddit.com/r/fakedisordercringe/comments/wh3slm/a_guide_to_rfdc_read_before_posting/

19. B T Te Wildt, E Kowalewski, F Meibeyer, T Huber (2006). "Identity and Dissociation in Cyberspace: A case of dissociative identity disorder associated with internet role playing." *Nervenarzt* vol 77 issue 1. Pgs 81–84. (Original article in German.) https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15864517/

'fictives' – alternate personalities based on existing fictional characters – as part of multipersonality 'systems', further blurring the line between 'personal' psychological states and 'external' parasocial identifications.

Whether these identifications should be considered 'fake' in the cynically premeditated sense is debatable, as it implies that the users in question – many of whom are young teenagers – have a meaningful normative horizon for identity formation and individuation. On the other side of the diagnostic spectrum, in 2022, the neuroscience journal *Brain* reported the "first outbreak of a new kind of mass sociogenic illness", a Tourette-like condition that spread purely through social media. Its originator, breakout German YouTuber Jan Zimmermann, makes videos in which he exhibits various Tourette-like physical tics described as "stereotyped and mimic[king] those symptoms that lay-people typically associate with Tourette's syndrome". Over time, symptoms identical to Zimmermann's "virtual index case" appeared to spread via social media to other young people, even spreading to secondary index cases in Canada. Perhaps at a loss for an explanation, the authors offer that this may be due to the general hellishness of our contemporary condition:

> [This current outbreak] can also be viewed as the 21st century expression of a 'culture-bound stress reaction' of our post-modern society emphasizing the uniqueness of individuals and valuing their alleged exceptionality, thus promoting attention-seeking behaviors, and aggravating the permanent identity crisis of modern man. It can be assumed this is triggered by eco-anxiety, the COVID-19 pandemic and further challenges in post-modern society.[20]

As thoughtforms surviving through human hosts, egregores subsist in the wirings and feedback between collective entities and their constituent identities as they each move through the world. While they are reifications of collectivity, they are also upheld by individuals' desired processes of identification. At the same time, the perverse neurological, attentional, and economic incentive structures of platforms exist in both an enabling and extractive relation to this

20. Kirsten R Müller-Vahl, Anna Pisarenko, Ewgeni Jakubovski, and Carolin Fremer (2022). "Stop That! It's Not Tourette's but a New Type of Mass Sociogenic Illness." *Brain* vol 145 issue 2. Pgs 476–80. DOI: 10.1093/brain/awab316.

process, fueling the circuit of desire between identification, representation, and the production of difference.

### BETWEEN THE DARK FOREST AND THE METACHURCH

The medievalist Tom Pettitt and media scholar Lars Ole Sauerberg speak of the "Gutenberg parenthesis", in which the 500-year reign of the printing book has given way to flowing networks of orality akin to pre-modern modes of cultural transmission. In their words, "the future is medieval": [21] "gossip" networks overflow the stable, mechanical containment of the printed volume; in the passage of information through the digital ether, every reader is also a writer — every attentional engagement with content informs the algorithmic flow — shaping how narratives travel, transform, or dissolve into noise.

What makes a trend trend? What makes the weather change? With platforms as their primary substrate, one could think of egregores as the point where processes of identification meet collective agency, becoming relational entities capable of mobilizing collective network behaviors. Only through identification and representation can a networked thoughtform build attentional resources, the prerequisite for co-ordinated action. In recent years, we have seen a wide variety of egregorical activities, from the persistent rise of QAnon, the myriad organizational forms of zealous cryptocurrency communities, to sudden upswells of co-ordinated financial 'activism' such as the "Gamestop Saga" of early 2021. In the latter example, retail investors in the Reddit community r/WallStreetBets engaged in a 'short squeeze' on the flailing but beloved computer game retailer Gamestop, creating significant losses for the hedge funds who had bet on its failure, by collectively boosting stock prices. Gamestop drew particular attention to the porosity of a platform-mediated world as it targeted the rarefied world of institutional finance, an ivory tower seemingly removed from the whims of ordinary people. By playing into a David vs Goliath narrative which enabled populist identification, the Gamestop Saga staged a kind of peasant revolt, at times carried by emotional currents of righteous vengeance in response to the financial crisis of 2008–09. [22]

The 'uprising' quickly grew viral, and anonymous online participants transformed from 'noise traders' (as they are known in the industry) [23] into an unexpectedly powerful signal, a meaningful presence. There is little conventional financial reasoning behind Gamestop and other 'meme stocks', but like fandoms, participating retail traders realize that on the internet of egregores, viral visibility, market forces, and collective desire exist in coextensive unity.

In order to survive the erratic temporality of the feed, egregores need to embody architectures of collective memory. Podcasters Caroline Busta and Li'l Internet popularized the terms 'clearnet', 'darknet' and 'dark forest' to describe the varying degrees of opacity with which online communities organize themselves. If the clearnet is the most mainstream strata of the web and the darknet is hidden from search engine indexes, the dark forest describes the semi-hidden spaces on platforms where much of online discourse takes place: Reddit, 4chan, discord servers. [24] For fandoms, subcultures, and other communal entities, persistence often derives from the cultivation of lore and social protocol — narratives arcs and communal norms which undergird the imagined community. These collectives thrive in the perma-dusk of the dark forest [25] because its conditions of pseudo-visibility enable egregores to incubate rich internal cultures away from public scrutiny, while allowing new members to join the swarm. In the dark forest, egregores might also plot their escape. Within this medial condition, emerging projects like *Moving Castles*, an experiment which "combines collective agency and public participation in modular and portable multiplayer miniverses", is effectively an infrastructure for constructing and governing egregores. As its pseudonymous creators, ARB and GVN908 write, "We think of these private platforms as arid wastelands that still need to be ventured into for loot, the rescue of new members and the building of our new vehicles, until we can replace them with decentralized alternatives." [26]

Perhaps as the youthful egregores of the contemporary web mature, new species of egregore will grow in the dark forest with richer interior lives than the capricious bodies of wrath and desire which regularly populate the feed. What

21. Dean Starkman (2013). "'The Future Is Medieval'." *Columbia Journalism Review.* Accessed 10 October 2021. https://archives.cjr.org/the_audit/the_future_is_medieval.php

22. Matthew Taibbi (2021). "'This Is for You, Dad': Interview with an Anonymous GameStop Investor.' Substack newsletter. *TK News by Matt Taibbi* (blog). https://taibbi.substack.com/p/this-is-for-you-dad-interview-with.

23. Gordon Scott (2021 updated). "Noise Trader Definition." *Investopedia.* Accessed 27 August 2022. https://www.investopedia.com/terms/n/noisetrader.asp

24. In any case, in the labyrinth of algorithmically governed feeds, the refuge of the dark forest is increasingly the rule rather than the exception to finding a meaningful online home. Other than blue checks and well-known figures who firmly bind IRL and URL identities, varying degrees of pseudonymous performativity characterize the digital subject's default state of being. True 'identity' on platforms — the aggregated, correlated 'sameness' of a particular online entity — is arguably accessible only to the surveillant gaze of the platform, states, and doxxers.

25. Caroline Busta (2021). "Clearnet vs. Dark Forest: Notes on the new psychogeography of art." Lecture, UCLA Design Media Arts Salon Series. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1iZiu9tZ290

26. GVN908 & ARB (2021). "Moving Castles: Modular and portable multiplayer miniverses." Trust. Accessed 27 August 2022. https://trust.support/feed/moving-castles

LAWFUL GOOD
*Infrastructural commons*

*Examples:* Wikis and references (AestheticsWiki, Fanlore, Urban Dictionary)

*What holds them together:* Own their web infrastructure, longstanding community committed to preserving collective memory

LAWFUL NEUTRAL
*Infrastructural self-reliance*

*Examples:* Reddit, blogosphere, 4chan, Tumblr.

*What holds them together:* Relatively more self-organized and self-curated communities.

LAWFUL EVIL
*Infrastructural extractive*

*Examples:* Meta, YouTube, Tiktok, platform algorithms, rentiers.

*What holds them together:* Corporate monopoly

NEUTRAL GOOD
*Stable commons*

*Examples:* Discords, DAOs, creator networks, Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) communities.

*What holds them together:* Shared labor, hierarchy, bureaucracy; small-to-medium scale

NEUTRAL NEUTRAL
*Stable self-reliance*

*Examples:* Main narrative arc, Twitter 'main characters', mainstream love/hate figures, news trends, and meme pages.

*What holds the together:* They are the everyday protagonists of the feed

NEUTRAL EVIL
*Stable extractive*

*Examples:* Majority of crypto communities, Fyre Festival, machine learning models and systems using platforms as training sets (Dall-E, GPT-3), Venture Capitalists Twitter (some of the biggest gainers from hype), Elon Musk (simultaneously a 'main character', a botnet of trolls, and an infrastructure-scale financial/platform actor)

*What holds them together:* Profit interests, legitimate brands, public interest

CHAOTIC GOOD
*Unstable commons*

*Examples:* Stan cultures, political subcultures, diffuse social justice and identity movements. They seek out others.

*What holds them together:* Subcultural affinities, affect, desire; large scale and too big to fail.

CHAOTIC NEUTRAL
*Unstable self-reliance*

*Examples:* Roleplay/fan-fiction communities, aesthetics, Carrds, conspiracy theories, Twitter pile-ons.

*What holds them together:* Niche interests, communal lore, parasocial bonds with niche characters and narratives.

CHAOTIC EVIL
*Unstable extractive*

*Examples:* 8chan, doxxing, botnets, DDoS attacks, revenge porn, pump and dump communities.

*What holds them together:* (Typically) malicious intent to attack or sabotage other groups.

*The alignment chart sketched above gathers a non-comprehensive collection of egregorical entities, organized along the lines of their relative stability and their relationship to themselves and other online entities. Horizontal axis (Left-Right): Stability and persistence of the entity, from* infrastructural *(highly stable) to* stable *to unstable. Vertical axis (Top-Bottom): Social orientation of the entity, from an orientation towards the* commons*, to self-sufficient* neutrality, to an *extractive* orientation to others.

27. For an extreme example, see: Cryptoland. Accessed 28 August 2022. https://cryptoland.is/

28. For example, see the work of Other Internet. "Tracking the Rise of Interest Representation in Uniswap Governance." Accessed 28 August 2022. https://otherinternet. substack.com/p/uniswap-governance-interest-groups

29. While this is beyond the remit of this essay, it is worth noting that many recent Western collective platform phenomena inherit from apps and mass cultural patterns already visible in East Asian media culture. For further explorations of Chinese network culture, see: Gary Zhexi Zhang (2016). "Chaos & Control." *Frieze.* https://www.frieze. com/article/chaos-control. (Paywalled)

would it take for egregores and the transversal identities they comprise to develop solidarities across their varied efficacies? The frenzied development of cryptocurrencies and blockchain technologies, for instance, has left many a young technologist with a fuzzily ahistorical understanding of the distinction between a DAO, a co-operative investment fund, and a sovereign state.[27] At the same time, however, it has catalyzed an engagement of the governance structures and socio-cultural protocols necessary to overcome the messy and fragmented interests inherent to building distributed organizations.[28]

As these concepts mature, platform egregores may start to look less like bait balls swarming a carcass and more like distributed political organizations or labor unions, capable of exercising sustained forms of leverage in other societal domains. While the BTS vs MAGA skirmish represented only a fleeting flurry of activity, right-wing derivative platforms such as Gab, Parler, and Trump's own Truth Social app are akin to formalized egregorical entities, upstart nations in the fringe peninsulas of the platform world. For better or worse, one could imagine the emergence of crossover events in the egregorical cinematic universe: stans joining forces to sway elections, discords turned co-operative research institutions, conspiracy groups turned rogue states. It may be that today's platform monopolies will undergo a process of Balkanization into fragmented cultic entities, transitioning from the ideal of a 'networked public sphere' to something more like a decentralized, polytheistic society. This is already the case globally, where the Chinese internet comprises a distinct platform ecology, different from the rest of the planet. Partly as a result of this 'incubation', Chinese fandoms are considerably more prominent and vociferously active than their Western counterparts.[29]

Platform-native egregores emerge as a kind of unwitting scam, an asymmetrical exchange that arbitrages between individual identity and the hybrid, transpersonal forms of networked collectivity. In the platform economy, fandoms, activists, and conspirators alike acquire peculiar and chaotic forms of agency which often exceed the relatively narrow interests around which they gather. No one knows what

platforms do, least of all platforms themselves (but they'll keep doing it as long as the economic incentives exist). For many online communities, participatory narratives also function as an escape from the alienation of the wider web into meaningful social connection. This dynamic persists in the current phase of our post-internet, post-parenthetic culture until a resolution can be settled between the ontological character of conventional social *identities* and networked *entities*. While network culture discourse has moved on from digital–physical dualisms, powerful tensions exist between entities and identities, with expansive socio-political, psychological, and philosophical implications.

I call these collective phenomena "egregores" because I'm not sure what else to call them – the legacy language of organization, movements, ideology, and collectivity falters in the face of these transient, composite agencies. Contemporary discourses around platform politics often revolve around the safeguarding of identity data, or the inequities of platform monopolies in the governance of global information flows. But even if digital infrastructures were more collectively owned and democratically governed, a 'post-platform' network culture still consists in a basic intersubjectivity, pseudonymity, and dividuality which inaugurates novel and potentially emancipatory conditions for organization, identity, and collectivity. (That is, unless digital spaces are to become "soulbound"[30] to legal and physical identities, which would require even more dystopian forms of surveillance than those we have.) From the perspective of platforms, I wonder what infrastructure could accommodate these pluralist forms of community-building, intersubjective identification, and myth-making without perverse monetization incentives or otherwise forcing communities into the platform's fringes and depths. Instead of a dark forest, perhaps it would be something like a 'metachurch', capable of holding together an expansive pantheon of cultic, egregorical forms under a basic model of governance. If we are truly entering into a post-parenthetic oral culture, we will also need to develop new languages, organizations and philosophical frameworks for acknowledging egregorical ways of being, in which our collective

30. I am borrowing this World of Warcraft term from Vitalik Buterin's usage in the context of "soulbound NFTs", tokens which mitigate the pseudonymity of blockchain identities by being non-transferable.

31. Tobias Rees and Nils Gilman (2018). Berggruen Institute Interview with Manuel Castells. University of Southern California. 25 January 2018. (unpublished).

thoughtforms roam our networks and rewire our brains. As pre-eminent sociologist of information technology Manuel Castells recently reflected, "the communications networks that connect the neural networks are full not only of information, but are also transmitting feelings, and human feelings taint everything."[31]