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IMAGINING DARKNETS: PRIVACY AS COMMODITY AESTHETICS

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As a field of distributed subjectivity, consumption is one mode through which we co-construct ourselves and our relation to things. Darknets and their users are clearly participating in reconstituting field of consumption, as is the internet in which darknets exist. Within consumption we labor to represent ourselves in relation to our material relations (Baudrillard, 1981) (Baudrillard, 1998). This paper argues that darknet users examples of both the de-massification of internet audiences and the re-constitution of a mass consumer identity centered on the commodity aesthetics of darknets (Haug, 1986). Specifically, I demonstrate that privacy on darknets is not so much a matter of reality but is a matter of a perceived commodity aesthetic by their subjective audience.

Our consumption and our co-construction of the relations of our subjective approaches to commodity aesthetics is both the identification and alienation of the reflexive awareness of the subject's desires/needs. Within darknets these desires/needs extend through our simplest curiosities, to political organizing, to representations of illicit activities, to the activities themselves. The alienation and identification of desires functions much like the creation of the identity qua the quasi-object that is produced is always partly the user's alienated identity (Gehl, 2014; Herman, 2013; Latour, 1993). This process produces the capacity to realize the values in the darknets as capital itself, including the values found in the relationship to the materiality of capital presented therein. Given the proclivities of the representations of constituted on darknets, this proposal examines how users create and recreate the darknet, both as a capital materiality and as an capital idea.

Fundamentally, my argument resists the idea of criminality and exceptionalism found in popular press understandings of darknets, in favor of the argument that although the criminal element does exist, the broader nature of capital in darknets is about knowledge, information provision, and economic value creation. In short, I argue that the representation of material and non-material capital on darknets creates a wild zone of consumption allowing the subject to be reconstituted with the awareness of an extended horizon (Luke, 1995); (O'Tuathail, 1994)

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Darknets, darkwebs, and the related conceptual entities described in this paper are internet-based information systems that limit and redirect access into intentionally hidden or very difficult to enter areas. I present them primarily as constituted capital because they are contiguous with our everyday lives with other forms of capital. Darknets have a referent set of things, practices, and ideas of capital than the consumer internet in some respects, but those things are fluid and changing in a broad ecology of information services. The boundaries between darknets and the consumer internet are similarly fluid, and some of the arguments I make here can apply to both, because darknets are a subset of the internet. A more technical understanding of the type of darknet that I am investigating is that darknets are securitized internet networks operating over existing networks through encrypted traffic on those networks. Another central idea of a darknet is that it is either technologically or socially designed to be private or at least it is trusted to be private. That is, users should be able to trust the securitized, private nature of the darknet with their activities, although sometimes that security will fail and thus the privacy does too. Various modalities of darknets predated the internet; they existed on Bulletin Board Systems, and in all likelihood they will exist on almost any securable network where its producers can create trusted and apparently private connections.

Examples of darknets include the hiddenwiki and other services in Tor .onion services, I2P services, various secured ftp and encrypted p2p services, and Freenet services. Darknets arise for any number of reasons, but generally they are motivated by issues of surveillance, privacy, security, and economic value, which are rooted in the capitalized of their producers. The constitution of perceived commoditized value is a significant motivator in a capitalist society, but beyond that it is complicated because the tension between possible exposure vs privacy deters many users. For instance, if you increase your perceived trust in your network by relaying more and valuable information about you might gain social capital, which could generate economic gain. Or you could download a series of costly digital objects from trusted friends, which might also increase your economic value. Those two actions are likely the most common modes of economic value creation on darknets; they happen on all darknets because trust and sharing are central to their social operation. However exposure of illicit gains is always a risk in a securitized environment, and as such the creators/users of darknets need to construct a commodity aesthetic of privacy that is 'trustable'.

The representation of privacy as commodity aesthetics as noted in the larger paper relates to knowledge and resistance to surveillance, among other laborious endeavors. Darknets are part of a global system of information provision. They are a vital part of that system because they provide avenues for populations to choose to be the same as certain kinds of people and to be different from other kinds of people. In making that choice, these populations have come to choose to consume 'privacy'. This act of choosing will certainly expose them to many kinds of information to which they might not want to be exposed and obversely they might have information exposed to others that they do not want exposed. This process of consumption of privacy will also give them a particular sense of their subjectivity, their knowledges, and their own expertise. Those transformations of subjectivity are co-constructed in relation to darknets. The modes of

being of these darknet subjectivities will hinge upon their co-constructed commodity aesthetics. These aesthetics may be portrayed as natural or true choices for privacy, but again are also co-constructing the darknet consumers. Even if they are acting politically or criminally in those environments they are still producing the consummativities of that politicality or criminality.

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