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IMAGINING SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH THE INTERNET AND BEYOND

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From scholarly discussions to mainstream publications, there is a growing understanding that theoretical, largely academic conceptions of social justice are in many ways disconnected from the people, practices, and projects actively pursuing justice today. At the same time, concepts with rich theoretical histories have emerged as key terms and battleground ideas for discussions of social justice online—including, for example, renewed discussions of feminism, social and economic class, intersectionality, and familiar liberal ideals of liberty and equality. In an effort to overcome the distance between social justice as a target of scholarly inquiry and the real concerns of social justice movements, contributions to this panel critically engage issues of social justice both within and across different applied online contexts and practices. They articulate various possibilities and limits for imagining a more just world through the communicative and political affordances of the Internet and other advanced information and communication technologies (ICTs).

In the first paper, the experiences of women bloggers are marshaled to challenge established theories of the public sphere that might otherwise fail to account for the voices of those writing about the politics of women, family and maternity. In doing so, we are encouraged to imagine more broadly inclusive democratic debates. In the second paper, the idea of the “social justice warrior”—a term that has emerged online as a way to marginalize individuals deemed excessive in their pursuit of inclusion and representation—and its implications for social justice discourse broadly are discussed. In this case, we are presented with an example of hegemonic resistance to expressions and imaginaries of justice enabled by the affordances of certain online platforms for political and progressive expression.

In the remaining papers, established political frames for addressing injustice are critiqued and countered. In the third paper, the appeal by both activists and academics to discourses familiar to the liberal democratic state—including rights and liberties—is challenged and shown to limit our collective imaginaries of social justice online. In the

final paper, neoliberal policies of privatization, gentrification, and data-driven “smart urbanism” and their failure to improve or respond to local injustices faced by marginalized citizens (specifically black and brown youth) are laid bare. The author—drawing on the successes and failures of four different “smart” initiatives in the New York City area—responds by developing an alternative framework grounded not in quantitative analyses but, rather, in empathy and qualitative study.

Combined, these papers explore some of the ways in which theoretical and empirical scholarly investigations can open up new paths for thinking about social justice with regard to platforms, communities, or practices—online and beyond. They attend to the ways in which broader conversations or movements—for example, those oriented around the efforts of Western women bloggers, rights-based liberatory language, or resistance to “smart” urban policies—challenge or force us to reconsider the ways in which we conceive of and discuss values relevant to social justice, like inclusion, fairness, and equality.

Finally, the panel members all share an awareness of the fact that this panel is articulated in a way familiar to those embedded in an academic or research-intensive context. We recognize that any conversation about social justice issues online is incomplete without the inclusion of a wider range of voices, from activists to organizers to advocates. To that end, we intend this panel as one part of a larger series of proposed sessions engaging social justice issues and the Internet, some of which go beyond traditional academic frameworks. Here, however, we use the standard “panel of papers” frame in an effort to show how even conventional formats can generate productive or liberatory discussions. Ultimately, it is our position that more conversations—within and across various contexts—are better than fewer when confronting pressing issues of discrimination, bias, fairness, and equality today.

THE HAPHAZARD DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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This paper examined the experiences of 109 women with varying backgrounds who blog or write online about the politics of women, family and maternity in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland. Based on the concepts of minimal politics (Macgilchrist & Böhmig, 2012; Marchart, 2011), it argues that a broader definition of what counts as political needs to be applied to the voices of women online to capture their political expressions in Western democracies. An analysis of in-depth interviews found that 84 percent of interviewees considered their blogging to be political. A statistically significant relationship was found to exist between women bloggers/writers online who identified as feminist and who considered their blogging to be political. Rather than categorizing the personal styles of women who blog/write online (in and outside my sample) as “just” “personal journaling,” the fluidity of topics they address needs to be recognized as a feature of fluid public clusters online, which are tied to their lives offline.

Hence, this paper argues that it is necessary to amend the critical theories of public spheres (Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1990; Gitlin, 1998; Squires, 2002) to capture the political expressions and experiences of women who use social media to write about their concerns publicly. This study suggests a new theory of fluid public clusters. This new theory expands on the idea of a multitude of publics rather than the often-criticized singularity of the original Habermasian public sphere. It emphasizes that publics are messy, overlapping and changing over time. It also highlights that offline social hierarchies of power and identities migrate online.

Further, this paper concludes that national contexts shape the expressions of women bloggers/writers online and that these were particularly apparent in the fluid public clusters that were salient in each country. One key finding was that Switzerland differed significantly from the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany. In the latter three countries women – across a wide variety of backgrounds – women have (or at least are not denied) ample opportunities to make their voices heard. In Switzerland, women’s voices online have been constrained in number and range of perspectives to center around traditional understandings of motherhood while feminist/progressive views remain rare.

While 73 percent of interviewees said they had negative experiences due to blogging/writing online, all 109 interviewees said they had at least one positive experience due to blogging/writing online. These included personal, professional and, in some cases, also commercial benefits. Interviewees cherished having a digital room of their own to write what they want in a space for which they set the rules. Interviewees dealt with negative experiences mostly on a personal level, as police, state and lawmakers have been slow in recognizing and prosecuting online discrimination and abuse leveled against women. Positive experiences are nearly guaranteed but negative interactions remain and are more likely to happen to women who identify as feminists and/or say that their writing is political. Seventy-two percent of interviewees remained

skeptical about the democratic potential of social media. Most interviewees had concerns about internet access, internet literacy, online harassment and which voices get heard or amplified. Yet, interviewees also shared examples of starting or contributing to (national) public debates over issues of their concern. The democratic potential of social remains haphazard.

Finally, this paper argues that women – who have been under-represented and misrepresented in (news) media content and production in Switzerland (Pfenniger, 2011; Zaslowski, 2013), in Germany (ProQuote, 2014), in the United Kingdom (Cochrane, 2011) and in the United States (Everbach, 2014; Women's Media Center, 2014) – need to keep blogging, tweeting and writing online. By doing so, women will tap into the haphazard democratic potential of social media. This will make Western democracies more democratic. Given the current lack of legal and societal support to properly and comprehensively address and penalize online harassment (Citron, 2014), this paper also offers recommendations to women on managing blogs/sites (safely) to encourage women to start and keep on blogging and addressing their concerns via social media.

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IMAGINING THE SOCIAL JUSTICE WARRIOR

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The term Social Justice Warrior, or SJW, is one that has become common in internet parlance over the past few years. This pejorative term is used to criticise those deemed as 'excessive' in seeking digital inclusion and representation of a range of identities and interests, usually by portraying them as histrionic, unreasonable and hypocritical.

In this paper, I look the construction of the SJW as a figure of derision across a number of sites and memes and explore how the imaginary SJW is presented as someone obsessed with shutting down free speech, and how the term is paradoxically used to silence the voices of minorities, activists or those advocating social change.

The SJW is characterised as an armchair activist who moans about perceived inequalities without 'doing' anything, seeks attention and popularity, and is usually hypocritical. The meme Social Justice Sally epitomises this stereotype - an attractive blonde white woman, shaking her fist and pulling a face, whilst espousing a hypocritical statement. The College Liberal or 'bad argument hippie' meme (a white woman with dreadlocks captioned with a similarly hypocritical line) (see Shifman 2013: 113) could be viewed as another iteration of this stereotype.

The term is often applied in conjunction with other pejoratives, such as 'special snowflake', 'hipster', 'armchair activist' or 'keyboard warrior'. Whilst SJW is a cross-platform insult, it is also often aligned with platform-specific terms such as 'Twitchfork mob', 'Twitter lynch mob' (Twitter) or 'Tumblrina', 'Tumblrista' (Tumblr). Reddit, whilst hosting a number of sincere social justice subreddits (e.g. SocialJustice, SocialJustice101), also has its share of those mocking SJWs (e.g. TumblrInAction, KotakuInAction).

The problems caused by the imaginary SJW are legion – they have been accused of becoming an anonymous, yet legion, force against freedom of speech, enforcing their opinions through trolling, doxing and demanding trigger warnings be applied to sensitive content. The use of SJW can be found in criticisms of everything from #gamergate and #everydaysexism to #blacklivesmatter.

Criticisms of SJWs echo the criticisms of 'political correctness' as a policing force seeking to restrict freedom of speech and dampen fun. As *Encyclopedia Dramatica* puts it:

a bunch of "activists" who sit around all day and bitch and moan about how everyone and everything is racist/sexist/homophobic/transphobic/whorephobic/fatphobic/ arachnophobic/bigoted/oppressive." Ironically, as people who claim to want "progress" in society, Social Justice Warriors are currently the biggest hindrance to the arts, and are overall a cancer to society that needs to be put down. They consider everyone who disagrees even in the slightest to be a "white

hetero-cis scum", even if the ones disagreeing with them are ethnic minorities, gays, bisexuals, etc. (https://encycopediadramatica.se/Social_Justice)

As for *Urban Dictionary*'s top rated definition:

A social justice warrior, or SJW, does not necessarily strongly believe all that they say, or even care about the groups they are fighting on behalf of... They are very sure to adopt stances that are "correct" in their social circle. The SJW's favorite activity of all is to dogpile. Their favorite websites to frequent are Livejournal and Tumblr. They do not have relevant favorite real-world places, because SJWs are primarily civil rights activists only online.

(<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=SJW>)

However, condemnation of SJWs is not confined to the spikier edges of the internet, but crosses into mainstream media. West writes about them 'losing' in their attempts to police the internet through 'ideologically-justified bullying' in *The Spectator* (2014) and in the normally pro-social justice *Guardian*, Filipovic argues that campaigners have 'gone too far with trigger warnings' (2014). They do find an advocate in MTV's Marusic (2015) although the majority of comments on her article contain anti-SJW sentiments:

'manipulative crazy liars who focus only on their crazy agenda'; 'harangued by shrill harpies'; 'No young person is remotely interested in having their culture overtaken and dumbed down by weirdo marxist SJW's. It's like you want to police our very thoughts'.

The *Daily Dot*'s Orsini specifically connects the term to Tumblr claiming 'Social Justice is a movement on Tumblr without any self-identifying movers—a cause that no activist wants to be associated with' (2012). Tumblr's status as a community comprised of SJWs is further reiterated by Reddits like TumblrInAction, or Encyclopedia Dramatica's claim that 'Pretty much 99% of the time, social justice warriors on Tumblr never get the fuck off their ass and actually do something'.

Despite this perception of Tumblr being a haven for the imagined SJW, when using Tumblr's search facility for 'social justice', the vast majority of results are critical of SJWs - although a search for 'socialjustice' returns a small majority of results highlighting social justice issues rather than criticising SJWs. 'Tumblrina', 'Tumblrista', 'SJW', 'socialjusticewarrior' and 'social justice warrior' return almost universally negative content as do more explicitly antagonistic tags such as 'anti-sjw' and 'sjw bullshit' and catchphrases associated with the imagined SJW such as 'die cis scum', 'diecisscum', 'truscum' and 'checkyourprivilege' (although, in a reversal of 'social justice' vs 'socialjustice', 'check your privilege' returns several results using the tag seriously). Indeed, it is easier for the casual user to find criticisms of this so-called pervasive presence on Tumblr than it is to find posts echoing the sentiments of the SJW stereotype.

Recuber's analysis of the Tumblr-hosted We Are the 99% and response blog We Are the 53% notes that both campaigns spoke of users' personal struggles and that those criticising online social justice and activist campaigns have more in common with the 'SJWs' they are seeking to silence than they might realise.

Whilst the conflating of a range of social justice concerns and critiques as being the preserve of fun-leeching SJWs seeks to silence many dissenting and diverse voices, this should perhaps come as no surprise. As Kate Miltner notes:

Conflicts over control and legitimacy are taking place in communities all over the Internet, and at their cores are entrenched disparities of power and voice... When women and people of color start participating on platforms that are the province of white, technically literate early adopters, they are often met with hostility

Although human beings are excessive and dramatic and laughing at our excess is a part of human nature, and especially internet culture, many of the jokes and criticisms of the SJWs are not from the minority groups themselves. The conflation of a range of concerns and debates into one, sweeping, pejorative term becomes an attempt to silence the arguments of many LGBTQ+ people, women, people of color, young people and those with disabilities and challenging their legitimacy as agents for change.

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SOCIAL JUSTICE ONLINE: LOOKING BEYOND LIBERALISM

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Discussions of social justice online cross a range of academic literature, including work on Internet governance, censorship and surveillance, online community, online harassment, and content creation. This paper does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the work on social justice online, but rather to point to a common trend in this broad and cross-disciplinary body of writing: the tendency to ground discussions either explicitly or implicitly within a Western, liberal, political framework. This is most visibly manifested in the frequent appeal to discourses around free speech and/or human rights when addressing moral and ethical questions about the Internet. Karanasiou (2012: 249) notes that broad concepts of universal human rights (including free speech) have important differences from the specific incarnation of free speech discourse in the US. However, both are firmly grounded in Western liberal tradition, with its attendant assumptions about the primacy of the individual, the role of the state, and the relationship between the state and capital. While these discourses are powerful, particularly given their hegemonic political and social position, there are important reasons to look beyond their boundaries when considering social justice online.

Frequently, we see debates about the transfer of pre-existing political concepts online framed by considerations of the degree to which the Internet shares similarity with, or overlaps with, the offline spaces in which these concepts were first developed. We see Karanasiou (2012: 254), for example, arguing that regulation of free speech online needs to be reconsidered because of “the widening chasm between the classic theoretical framework for free speech and the current reality enfolding speech online”; Casacuberta and Senges (2008: 102) calling for a recognition of the shared similarities between the Internet and other collective goods and the resultant need to “prudently respect and embrace the experience the traditional negotiators of international agreements contribute to the process” by creating an Internet Bill of Rights; and researchers calling for action on online harassment based on its impacts on “broad ideals such as civil discourse, social inclusivity, and democratic engagement” both online and offline (Jane 2014: 542). What these discussions have in common is the assumption that the liberal democratic model has been successful, and need only be modified to the extent that online and offline spaces differ.

This assumption leads to a number of recurring themes in the kinds of solutions which are proposed within academia to social injustice online. Perhaps the most common class of solutions are those which attempt to extend the model of the liberal democratic state, or related instruments of government, to the Internet. Frequently, these efforts are positioned as an attempt to bring governments’ regulation of the Internet within the framework of human rights instruments as a way to protect users. For example, there have been multiple calls by academics, activists, and regular Internet users for some form of online ‘Bill of Rights’ (O’Byrne 2014; Casacuberta & Senges, 2008; Reddit users 2012). Similarly, the liberal democratic model of citizenship is often invoked as a way to hold national governments or other bodies with power over the Internet accountable; the ‘netizen’ will, many hope, “be able to serve as a critical concept in the politics of

democratization” (Poster 2006) both online and in countries which do not currently fit the liberal democratic model (see also MacKinnon 2012). The Internet is positioned in these discussions as both a vehicle for the expansion of a particular model of democracy, and as a site requiring further incorporation into that model.

The tendency to adopt a liberal democratic model is also visible in the tendency to frame discussions of online harassment with reference to debates around free speech. Authors who highlight the problems associated with leaving online spaces unmoderated in the name of avoiding censorship tend to return to competing interpretations of classical free speech theory: the argument that free speech is necessary to reveal the truth (Williams 2009). Thus Wotanis and Mcmillan frame concerns about the effects of online harassment in terms of the possibility that it is, “silencing voices that could benefit others” (2014: 915). Citron (2008), similarly, calls for action against online harassment by appealing to deeper underlying civil rights, and by talking about the ways in which harassment impinges on the free speech of women and minorities online.

What is frequently missing is a critique of whether the liberal democratic model has, in fact, been successful enough that we should be focusing on how to transfer and extend it online, making small modifications as necessary. We tend to see human rights and democracy as frameworks separate from, or offering alternatives to, the neoliberal system; however, the spread of these ideas has been tightly interlinked with colonialism and neoliberalism’s environmental, social, and political crises. Tsing (2011) argues that while concepts like human rights and free speech may have power, they also come packaged with their own histories and, “These packages carry the inequalities of global geopolitics even as they promote rhetorics of equality. Those who adopt and adapt them do not escape the colonial heritage, even as they explore its possibilities”. We should therefore be extending our collective imaginary, drawing on histories of political thought and praxis that work beyond the limitations of liberal Western theory.

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EMPATHY AND EFFICIENCY ON THE 'SMART' URBAN FRONTIER

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This paper situates smart urbanism within an historical geography of privatization and gentrification so as to critically analyze the cultural values embedded in the platforms and practices of data-driven efficiency. Building from this analysis, empathy is theorized as a counter ontology for drawing together a more just and even mode of urban development with and through digital media. 'Smart urbanism,' or 'smart cities,' represent the rapid integration of digital platforms and communication infrastructures into all modes of urban living and development as well as the reorienting of urban economies toward creative and digital industries (Kitchin 2013). While smart urbanism broadly represents multiple and often contradictory movements (Hollands 2008), it is loosely organized by an ontology of efficiency or an articulated desire to harness big data and technological innovation for the purposes of orienting the urban everyday towards maximum economic and social production.

Data-driven governance, the privatization of communication infrastructures, and the privileging of new media districts are regularly framed as 'smart' and 'efficient' ways for cities to compete with each other for global capital. Within these databases, infrastructures, and planning policies, who and where are considered waste lay at the center of concerns over increased surveillance (Wood & Ball 2013), digital discrimination (Gangadharan and Woolley 2014), software-sorting (Graham 2005), and uneven development in urban environments (Indergaard 2009). Further, the imaginary of a 'new frontier' embraced by corporations such as IBM, Cisco, and Siemens, serves to elide the creative destruction and social injustice often entailed in the classification of certain people and places as waste, risk, or simply other.

Cases are drawn from ongoing ethnographic work in New York City to compare and contrast the LinkNYC WiFi initiative with the community-based Red Hook WiFi, as well as the NYPD's data-driven justifications for Stop and Frisk with the participatory media work of Researchers for Fair Policing (RFP). Whereas a smart urban ontology calls for the quantification, modularization, and layering of urban people and place, a hybrid ontology oriented toward empathy calls for a more qualitative, situated, and shared form of urban development. Collectively, Red Hook WiFi and RFP represent a challenge to contemporary modes of urban privatization and gentrification within NYC by socially and materially reducing the experiential distance between the self and the other and thus fostering what Fine (2006) has called theoretical and provocative generalizability.

Efficient Urbanism as the New Frontier

The informationalization of everyday life in most U.S. cities has become so pronounced that it is now difficult to disentangle the production of urban media from that of place. The reciprocal production of geography and technology entailed in globalization has led to a re-theorization of the urban form over the past two decades. Hybrid constructions of the "Informational City" (Castells 1992), "Cybercity" (Boyer 1992), and more recently the

“Real-Time City” (Hollands 2008, Kitchin 2014) suggest a growing interest and inquiry into the political ecology of an urbanism often phased as ‘newer’ and ‘smarter.’ This paper’s primary concern with smart urbanism, particularly regarding marginalized and poor communities, is that data-driven development comes at the expense of empathy and often obscures injustice as statistically necessary or irrelevant. Additionally, as NYCs economy becomes oriented toward high-tech and creative industries, public investments are made to recruit a highly educated workforce. Existing processes of urban gentrification are thus ramped up to make room for an incoming young, largely white, and supposedly more creative class of workers (Indergaard 2009). Marginalized and poor communities are meanwhile segregated and largely sorted out of this high-tech and creative urban economy.

The frontier mythology surrounding the smart city—of data seamlessly generated thru technosocial interactions, circulated in immaterial cloud-like form, and objectively analyzed to inform actions both slight and profound—obscures the lived realities of contemporary modes of production and reproduction. It conjures an imaginary of real-time knowledge, flexible production, reduced carbon emissions, and privately contracted gig for everyone. This imaginary may hold when evaluated within the narrow context of affluent urban populations and their neighborhoods, but it dances around a persistent historical geography of uneven socioeconomic development. Despite a boom in New York City’s ‘Silicon Alley’ industries and record-breaking real estate acquisitions, 46% of New Yorkers currently make less than 150% of the poverty threshold.

There is, however, nothing particularly new about this mythology, just as there was little new about the “revanchist” underpinnings of the gentrification of Manhattan’s Lower East Side (Smith 1996). This wave of 1980s-90s gentrification was framed as a middle class colonization of a modern day Wild West—an imagined reestablishment of white middle and upper class values into the social material organization of urban life. As this paper discusses, many of these popular and political framings of the Lower East Side’s gentrification can be found in the more lofty corporate rhetoric surrounding the possibilities of smart urban policies and platforms.

New Media’s Uneven Geography

New York City’s official map of digital industry reveals that little is located in lower-income areas and almost none in the Bronx or East New York (<http://digital.nyc/map>). This unevenness is further accentuated if the interactive map is modified to only show co-working and incubator spaces. The underrepresented areas, where the majority of New Yorkers live, receive little attention in the city’s cultivation of digital industry aside from enhanced policing and surveillance. A map created by Researchers for Fair Policing (RFP) of Stop and Frisk activity, a controversial policing tactic of the NYPD, presents a stark contrast to the digital.nyc map, indicating that not only were 90% of those stopped between 2002 and 2010 of color but those stops were highly concentrated in a few geographical regions (<https://vimeo.com/117420571>).

The city’s rationalization for why this policing policy was not a matter of unconstitutional racial profiling, was predicated on the notion that police officers were simply stopping and frisking those statistically most likely to be carrying an illegal weapon. Data, and not

the passions of cultural politics, supposedly guided the practice despite 88% of those stopped (3.8M people) being found of no wrong doing. To counter the ways black and brown, and mostly male, youth have been represented within public databases, as well as the local and national urban imaginary, the RFP have been developing videos for social media that look critically at the statistics behind Stop and Frisk and also amplify the narratives of young people who've been frisked. Examples from their public media work will be highlighted and discussed as a way of organizing meaningful understandings of injustice in the smart city through the sharing of lived experience.

The more material aspects of smart urbanism's uneven geography will also be explored by comparing and contrasting two different WiFi initiatives in NYC. The first example, LinkNYC, is a city-wide initiative to convert existing payphones into high bandwidth WiFi kiosks. Following the public-private partnership model that governs most NYC parks in affluent areas, this 'public Wifi' is being developed as a profit-driven infrastructure focused on generating ad revenue. In contrast, Red Hook WiFi is a community-based initiative aimed at enhancing digital access within the Red Hook Houses and their surrounding community in Brooklyn. In this example, the community itself builds and maintains a free mesh network that provides people in the area with access to both a local intranet and the broader internet. While LinkNYC is a consortium of corporations represented within the digital.nyc map that aims to generate more revenue for the city by upgrading an existing communication infrastructure, Red Hook WiFi builds a local infrastructure with and within a low-income neighborhood unlikely to generate significant advertising revenue and thus unlikely to attract many (if any) LinkNYC kiosks.

Empathy as Ontological Stance

Quantified measurements of WiFi access in NYC, or of innocent youth frisked by armed officers in their own neighborhoods, are unlikely to produce statistical generalizability and thus warrant broad public concern. These experiences, once quantified and entered into urban dashboards, are visualized at the margins of society. The consequences of efficiency fall largely on the others and happen in the elsewheres of the smart city. Although often commanding public sympathy, quantified experiences alone fall short of fostering public empathy. Numbers frame Stop and Frisk and digital divides as aberrations of injustice, something experienced by a minority of New Yorker's and that should be addressed with myopic focus (if at all). This side-steps a discussion of how such phenomena are intertwined outcomes of structural oppression and inequity—a structure that broadly effects and ironically connects the public in banal, profound, and yet to be imagined ways.

As Fine explains (2006), bearing witness to lived injustice through critical and participatory inquiry offers more than direct generalizable extensions of one's findings. Fine offers us two conceptualizations of generalizability that require more than statistical analysis: *theoretical* and *provocative*. A *theoretical generalizability* represents the "extent to which theoretical notions or dynamics move from one context to another" whereas a *provocative generalizability* demonstrates a shared concern in understanding and addressing injustice across context. Both the RFP and Red Hook WiFi work with/in digital media and communication infrastructures to offer theoretical and provocative

generalizations across context, in ways typically overlooked by the gaze of big data and left unimagined. Each project helps reduce the experiential distance between the self and the other in order to draw together a more just imaginary of the smart city. Such a focus on media *for* empathy, rather than media *for* efficiency, counters ahistorical frontier imaginaries as much as it helps urban communities address who and where is being left out of smart urbanism.

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