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MARK GRAHAM

Platform Socialism

Platforms will soon mediate almost every human interaction. This story follows three ravers, and the paths they take, as platform governance is transformed from platform capitalism to platform socialism and back again.

INTRODUCTION

Platforms now mediate almost all conceivable economic, social, and political interactions. The essay “Platform Socialism” follows the lives of three characters who live through three distinct moments in the evolution of the platform economy. First, an age of hypercapitalism, in which the network effects that platforms rely on mean that two, and then only one, platforms remain. Second, an age of platform socialism, in which citizens decide that the power

that platforms wield can, and should, be democratically governed. Third, the breakdown of platform socialism after its founders forget to abide by its core founding principles. By following the lives of three friends and their love of “hypnoraves,” the story explores how a desire for freedom can both serve as the beginning of a fightback against corporate power, but can also prove to be a challenge in any more democratically-run economy.

Munir strapped himself into the augmented system. Lydia and Gus were already in. Both of them stood upright in separate corners of their shared, musty apartment in a run-down part of Hackney.

Their Ideograph headsets covered their faces and were wrapped around their heads. Lydia was wearing the Ideoshoes and Ideogloves designed to be used with Ideograph's AR module; Des, however, had some cheap knockoffs that she swore worked just as well.

Users were free to adopt any bodily form in the hypnorave, and the channel they were entering was especially known for its debauchery. Avatars of flesh, sweat, and writhing bodies sparsely adorned with slivers of neon and glitter here and there.

Just as Munir lowered his own headset, he could see both Lydia and Gus start to move.

It was always the deep, nurturing bass that hit you first, deep in a part of your core that you didn't quite know existed. The bass then transported you into the synaesthetic canvas that awaited. It throbbed, and an orange pulse gave shape to the others, dancing in synch to the music. A warm, aquatic rhythm appeared and then reverberated and repeated. Soft synth tones swirled around the virtual canvas they now existed within. The bass eased away, leaving the assembled bodies focused on the melody and the orange lights slowly evaporating in a swirling echo. As the shared space went dark, someone in the deep, dubby soundscape whistled in excitement.

The sub-bass kicked back in.

A red pulse and then a white one every second beat; more whistles, and someone shouted in celebration. Munir felt a rush and started to move his body in synch with the drums. It looked almost like he was skiing: fixed to the spot, but legs, hips, shoulders, and arms gyrating. He glanced over at Lydia and could see her floating in ecstasy to the sounds, arms moving up and down almost embracing the colors twirling around them. And then back to face the light.

Sixteen hours later, three sweaty bodies removed their headsets, gloves, and shoes and crumpled down on the couch. Lydia's head was in Gus's lap; her legs rolled up with Munir's. No matter how many times you experienced a hypnorave, nothing at all could prepare you for the otherworldly, blissful, transcendent experience it provided. Hypnoravers had found a way of moving beyond their material realities, their bodily constraints and tapping into a deep meditative state.

"That ending. Holy hell!" said Gus. "I've never seen anything like that."

"So beautiful!" agreed Lydia. Munir nodded and grinned.

They had been doing this every other weekend for the last six or so months. It was really their only escape from the everyday intensity of their platform jobs.

Munir and Gus both had less than perfect ratings in the Ideograph job module—a result of trying to work whilst coming down from one of the hypnoraves a few months previously. Once you have those strikes against you—some picky customer giving you a three or four out of five—there’s no way to undo the damage beyond working a crazy number of hours at five-star quality to bring up your average. Lydia had somehow kept her perfect five.

Between them, Alphabet and Ideograph mediated almost every economic transaction in the modern economy. Alphabet had started as a search engine but quickly expanded into transport, housing, and healthcare modules. Ideograph meanwhile grew out of what used to be called e-commerce, but—like Alphabet—had now become a platform for almost every possible transactional need a person could have in the city. Nowadays, people tended to pick one of the two platform ecosystems and spend most of their work, shopping, and leisure time within it. It was just too inefficient otherwise.

“Do we have any Ideohuel left?” said Gus. “I literally haven’t eaten in days. You forget about food in there.”

Ideohuel was a powder supposedly containing a balance of carbs, fats, and proteins, and packed with all the minerals and nutrients a person needed. You mixed it with water and it could replace any meal. Most importantly, it was way cheaper than proper food.

“How about pizza?” Lydia opened up the Ideograph app by croaking “Pizza. Gastro two” at it.

Highly sophisticated AI deployed by the Big Two knew exactly how to nudge the behavior of their users. Food was probably the way that this was experienced most vividly by citizens. Food scientists had made huge advances in molecular gastronomy, which were patented into the Ideogastro and Alphagastro modules. Within those modules, there were oven-warm fresh crispy breads, succulent, ripe, and fragrant tomatoes, no-hangover malty beer, and hundreds of thousands of other products to be quickly delivered to paying customers or Prime and Alpha subscribers. Dynamic production lines meant that those items would be individually tailored to your allergies, sensitivities, health needs, and tastebuds, providing an unrivalled culinary experience. Nobody could ever forget what a bespoke Alphagastro chocolate milkshake tastes like.

Both platforms operated four tiers of options within their gastro modules. The top—and most expensive—tier gave access to the full gastro line. Lower

tiers had similar products with ever cheaper ingredients: margarine instead of butter, beer made from rice instead of wheat, high-fructose corn syrup instead of honey, and so on. And even lower still—mostly for people with less than perfect job ratings—it was Ideohuel and Alphafuel that sustained them through the day.

“Mate. Not through them,” complained Munir.

“The gastro twos are overpriced and taste like fucking cold rubber.”

“Yeah, true—but what’s the alternative? Alpha twos are almost identical now. I swear they must be using the same factory,” said Lydia.

“I’ll make one from scratch,” said Munir.

Gus and Lydia gave him the kind of look—half eye roll, half grin—reserved for someone trying a little bit too hard to be heroic.

“I’ll pass on the ketchup bread. Don’t worry. I’ll get it. I had a good week of work. It’s on me,” said Lydia

Neither Munir or Gus could argue with that. Lydia was covering more and more of their expenses these days. They hardly knew anyone who had well-paid gigs any more. But people like Lydia, who did interface design gigs, tended to be pretty well compensated, even if, like all jobs now, it was precarious and she never knew what next week’s workload would look like.

Munir and Gus also knew that ordering delivery was the only option these days. Since the Big Two had taken on most of the core functions of the state, things had really gone to hell. The streets were dangerous. Besides, with climate change being what it was, you wouldn’t want to be out there most of the time. The platforms had promised a more efficient, automated, and rational form of governance. Data was now collected about just about everything, and the platforms wanted to optimize processes that ranged from the allocation of doctors to the composition of pizzas. And some jobs had been done away with in their entirety. Autonomous vehicles and drones alone had put millions of people out of work almost overnight.

The world they eventually brought into being, though, was without a doubt one of efficiency. But only for the select few people who could pay for those efficiencies. If you didn’t make enough money to sign up to Ideograph Prime or Alphabet Alpha, good luck trying to get anything done. The freemium models they both offered for services like messaging and job search were borderline unusable amongst the ads.

Economic inequalities had gone through the roof. It was a vicious cycle; you had no money, so you couldn’t afford all of the productivity enhancements you needed to make more money: fast bandwidth, up to date hardware, ad-free subscriptions and on-demand appointments for just about anything—were all out of reach for most people.

Some even fell through the cracks and ended up on the streets, somehow existing outside of the digitally mediated world offered by the Big Two.

Most people had gigs that they earned money from. But the automation of much of society, combined with the collapse of the social safety net, meant there was huge competition for the jobs that remained. Funny how we had a robot colony on Mars but still hadn't found an automated way of taking old folks to the toilet and cleaning up after them. Employment contracts were now a thing of the past, and efficient workplace surveillance systems made sure that people were only paid down to the nearest second that they spent on the clock.

Despite that, almost everyone was putting in fifty to sixty hours a week on the work module. Most of that time wasn't paid work, though. Workers had to be online. Ready to work when a job flashed up on the platform interface. If you weren't, who knew when the next one would come in. And because work and entertainment now happened on the same platform, you couldn't be using Ideogames or Alphaflix at the same time. Most people spent most of their day just sitting, bored, refreshing a page of jobs because of the relative lack of jobs. At least the platforms themselves were able to extract some value out of this situation: they ran hyper-customized ads on the job markets for exactly what you were about to need over the course of the day.

Since people had started using Ideocoins and Alphabuckz for on-platform transactions—which was just about everything—the ads had an uncanny ability to promote services and products that were just about affordable. Affordable if you worked just a bit more that week to earn a few more coins or buckz.

With Lydia's five average rating, she was one of the few people who could afford little luxuries any more: even if it was second-tier pizza that tasted like rubber.

THE TAKEOVER

"Guys, guys. Look at this! Holy shit!"

Munir and Gus woke up to Lydia shouting at them. They had both been up late working and were exhausted.

"Check your news module! Look!"

Gus was the first up and swiped into newsfeed mode.

"Fuck."

"I know, right?" responded Lydia.

"Munir wake up. Look. Ideograph has been taken over by Alphabet."

Munir was finally out of bed, and the three of them had gathered around a single interface, scrolling through all the updates:

*ONE CLIMATE SHOCK TOO MANY. IDEOGRAPH GOES BUST.
IDEOGRAPH DROWNS IN A FLOOD OF BAD INVESTMENTS
ALPHABET TAKES OVER IDEOGRAPH
END OF THE ROAD FOR IDEOGRAPH
2035. YEAR OF THE ALPHA.
ONE PLATFORM TO RULE THEM ALL
ALPHABET CEO PROMISES TO RETAIN AND STREAMLINE ALL IDEOGRAPH
SERVICES*

On the last headline, they all collectively let out a sigh of relief.

“At least our Ideoratings are preserved,” said Lydia.

“Alright for some.” Munir was wondering if he had the energy and sleepless nights in him to try to build a new profile from scratch on Alphabet.

Then it dawned on them.

“What about the hypnochannel? Can you still access it,” asked Gus throwing on her headset as she asked.

Channel #hypnorave is unavailable at this time. Alphabet apologizes for any inconvenience.

Channel #hypnorave is unavailable at this time. Alphabet apologizes for any inconvenience.

Channel #hypnorave is unavailable at this time. Alphabet apologizes for any inconvenience.

Channel #hypnorave is unavailable at this time. Alphabet apologizes for any inconvenience.

“Check the ‘more info’ link!”

In order to maximize our customer experience, Alphabet is proud to offer all former Ideograph users one free month of top-tier access to the entire Alphabet music library. Terms and conditions may apply.

Unauthorized streaming of any other music is in violation of the terms of service that you agreed to on <#varerror> and will result in a penalty of 0.25 Alphascorers. Have questions? Find answers from our worldwide community of expert fans!

“The shitheads turned it off!”

“What is everyone going to do?”

Gus tuned her headset into the Alphachannel that the recommendation engine suggested. She didn't yet have a channel profile set up with Alphabet, but quickly noticed that only five bodyforms could be selected without an Alpha account. She selected the blue-bearded man, as she couldn't stomach being one of the two blonde women on offer.

On entering the channel, she was confronted with a huge room coated in bright and sparkly neon pink and fluorescent yellow lights. A slowly turning giant mirror ball fractured the lights into a thousand revolving points all over the room.

This is promising, thought Gus.

But then the music started.

High-pitched vocoded lyrics quickly filled the space. The synthesized teenage female voice crooned amongst the bright spotlights and many of the audience were selfé-shooting themselves, presumably to post on the social module later.

It had been a while since she had heard algopop—sounds entirely created by an interactive evolutionary algorithm. But, despite all the advancements in neuroacoustics, algopop still had such an unmistakable sound.

“Tell me if you love me or not.”

“Oooh ooh ooh let's do what lovers do.”

Choruses calculatingly auto-composed for memorability for the maximum number of listeners. Each one punctuated by another wave of selfé-shots by users of the Alphachannel who wished, for some reason, to preserve the moment.

Gus quickly pulled off the headset.

THE INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL ELEGANCE

“The Institute for Social Elegance – Established 2038”

...read the sign in the virtual staging room. The décor: part lush rainforest, part hotel lobby, part spa—gave a room an air of elegance but also transience. You had to pass through the staging room on your way in or out of any of the many channels that could be joined. Since the creation

of The Institute for Social Elegance module over two years ago, a wealth of hypnochannels had been created: deeptrance, qawwali trap, slowfi, dubfi, minimal dub, acid dub, cyberdub, deep wave, space jungle, dragoncore, dreamcore, cloudstep, and hundreds of others.

Avatars had been democratized. No more basic profiles and advanced profiles. People could simply be who they wanted to be. Sure, some of the older folks complained. “What do you mean you’re going to a dragonrave?!” But once you actually saw the creativity and care put into the outfits, you could only really be impressed.

“Stop staring Munir,” Gus said sternly.

Munir was gawking at a crowd of scantily dressed bodies gathered around a climbing frame near the dreamcore channel.

Despite the wealth of channels, the staging room itself was a sight to behold. At peak times, there were seas of bodies here. People from all walks of life lounging, chatting, resting, catching up under the warm orange glow that illuminated the seemingly infinite room. The people in the cloud couches had usually had enough. Depleted from a long hypno session but not quite ready to call it a day. Some had just arrived and were milling about near one of the pools or excitedly swinging on one of the communal hammocks before the intensity of one of the channel sessions. Some were catching up with old friends, some meeting new ones. In all cases, there was a sense of community. After sharing the raw, otherworldly sensation of a hypno, people embraced each other’s humanity when returning to the staging room, eager to share experiences and chat about the world beyond. You’d never not meet new people if you lingered there for a while.

Munir and Gus, kitted up in Platform-issue headsets, waded through the crowds over to the cyberdub channel. Lydia hadn’t been with them in almost a year. She was busy working on core governance infrastructure for The Platform and didn’t get out much now. Instead of the old corporate logos that used to be on all hardware, the machines were all emblazoned with The Platform’s central motto:

“From each according to ability, to each according to need”

Tech had improved since 2035. Gloves and custom shoes were no longer needed for the full experience. Or, as many people joked, maybe it wasn’t that tech had improved, but rather that since Alphabet had been nationalized, they didn’t have a private company trying to sell them ever more gadgets.

Some people were spending weeks in the hypnos now. Only popping out briefly for nutroshakes and then diving back into their journeys into

the immersive worlds. The drugs helped of course. Cheap, bioengineered synthetics were about as safe as coffee and really amplified the synaesthetic experiences available in the hypnos. But it was really the combination of the immersive experience, the advanced neuroacoustic tech now used to compose music, human-sensory-adaptive headsets that tailored their outputs to each individual's unique bio-design, the collective nature of the experience, and, of course, the drugs that—together—allowed otherworldly transcendent states of being to be realized.

Gus and Munir looked over at one another. Surrounding them was a deep blue fog. They could just about see each other and the occasional shapes of some of the other bodies in the room. The blue fog looped around, accompanied by an almost cozy, deep, ambient pad of sound. The fog settled, and the blue became black; the fog became a swirling tunnel, and soothing sub-bass textures began to drive the tunnel forwards. From there, new layers slowly emerged and dissolved in hypnotic loops: neon vibro-acoustics, deep synths, and finally a booming cinematic pulse of bass. The loops ceaselessly making and remaking new constellations of sound, shape, and color. They were floating through the sonic landscapes now: seemingly driving them forwards—wading through them; breathing them; being them. It was propulsive, dreamy, ecstatic. A shared psychoacoustic world made up of collective digitally mediated soundscapes.

After the Ideograph takeover in 2035, Alphabet had tried to replace the hypnoraves with thousands of algopop channels. The hypnos were one of the last domains of digital life where people were spending huge amounts of time without consuming anything, without looking at advertising, without working. The hypnos were too out of synch; too alien, to the world Alphabet was trying to create, and they were therefore never going to comfortably co-exist.

But Alphabet overplayed their hand. They didn't realize that the hypnos were more than just music to people; they were a way of connecting; a way of co-existing with other people that offered something fundamentally different from the drudgery of everyday life. It was a celebratory protest. A way of claiming space. Expressing freedom. People had caught sight of a more utopic world, and they weren't going to give it up.

With her experience in crypto- and darkneuralnets, it wasn't that hard for Lydia to hack together a system that piggybacked on existing channels and allowed anyone who installed her patch to tap into the darknet hypno channels she had set up.

The hypnos spread like wildfire amongst young people, who had been saturated in vapid algopop since they were born.

“It is everything you haven’t yet imagined”—or so the now-famous saying went.

Lydia never expected her tinkering and hacking would work. All she ever wanted to do was get the hypnos back. What she truly never expected was a revolution.

The so-called tipping point that climate scientists had long predicted had clearly been reached. Floods, droughts, heatwaves, fires, ice snaps within weeks of each other. Unpredictable climate systems led to an unpredictable economic system. Enough adaptive technology existed to manage primary and secondary sectors of production in the economy, but Alphabet’s algorithms couldn’t keep up in the short-term. Supply chains broke down. Entire modules failed. People were finally getting frustrated. But nobody expected the hypnos to be at the center of the change to come.

It started with Alphabet infiltrating one of the hypnos, gathering twenty identities and kicking each uncovered person off the platform; this rendered them effectively homeless and without access to core urban services. News spread fast, and almost fifty thousand people took part in a day-long general strike to get the twenty reinstated. Alphabet banned more profiles, which led to more strikes. Events then started to move quickly, and there was no way back. Alphabet had to shut down its messaging system to prevent the strikes from going viral. This pushed ever more people onto the darknet. Lydia found herself at the center of all of this: constantly adding new nodes, new switch points, new darklayers. Gus learned quickly from Lydia and before long was able to do a lot of the patching and hacking herself. Munir, meanwhile, was trying to manage the over-swelling darknet communities. It’s there that the idea emerged that was to be the beginning of the end for Alphabet.

Platform socialism, they called it.

It was an idea that took form in a six-point manifesto shared widely on the darknet.

The Platform Socialism Manifesto

The Platform will become a tool in our hands rather than the master of our fate. Platform governance will follow six core principles:

Automation to serve people and not profit. Labor is a means to an end. Our goal is a fully automated society. Until then, we strive to minimize labor, and maximize self-determination.

Provision of basic needs. All citizens will have access to food, shelter, education, a basic income, and healthcare.

Democracy. All citizens will have a say in decision-making. All citizens will collectively own the means of digital distribution as a shared commons.

Freedom and liberty. We will not be alienated from our potential. We will live lives of meaning; experiencing and realizing our humanity; actualizing our personal and collective freedoms.

Environmental stewardship. If we are to have a future on this planet, it will need to be a green future.

Equity. All citizens are created equal. Our governance will promote equity in all domains of life and strive to reduce inequities.

It had been a long time since there had been anything resembling an effective government. After the prisons, education, and the police had been taken over by the Big Two, most “regulation” had been happening on platforms. Government persisted in the form of a few, mostly toothless and underfunded, courts.

But here was a vision that imagined a radically different future. What if government ran The Platform? Instead of Alphabet using their data about almost every facet of the human experience to maximize the value they could extract, the role of The Platform in everyday life could be rethought.

MULTI-AGENT GOVERNANCE

“But we’ll end up violating the third principle. Democracy,” said Gus.

Lydia disagreed. “There is no practical difference. The outcomes are almost identical.”

In her sixteen hours of work per week, Gus had been assigned to work with Lydia to redevelop some of the central governance modules for The Platform.

Right before the revolution, there had been many doubters about how governance in platform socialism would work. Two core concerns emerged. “Only the market can solve the problem of economic calculation” was the most common response. Doubters pointed to the experiences of the Soviet Union, arguing that only the market could efficiently allocate resources. But those sorts of critiques mainly came from people who weren’t really paying attention. There was no inherent reason why a publicly run platform would be any less efficient than Alphabet. Neither relied solely on the market but also on huge distributed networks of computing infrastructures in order to mediate between supply and demand.

The problem of economic calculation would now be solved by machines designed to be calculators. Distributed quantum grid computing infrastructures, ubiquitous sensors, and the availability of unfathomable amounts of transaction data about almost all imaginable people, places, processes, and practices meant that The Platform knew how to distribute and assign resources and labor with more accuracy and efficiency than could even have been dreamed about in earlier attempts at socialism.

It was the second core concern that there was no apparent easy answer to: “This is a path to despotism and authoritarianism,” exclaimed many of the doubters. Here again, the usually well-heeled critics seemed to forget that in the days of Alphabet, and before that in the days of the Big Two, everyday citizens had little say in how society was run. The few who thrived in the system naturally saw the unlimited choices available to them. But, to the masses, choice in how they lived their lives was more of a theoretical rather than actual proposition. What can you really do with your freedom when you’re working almost every day of the month?

By prioritizing the need to reduce working hours, The Platform had quickly implemented a five-day weekend. All able-bodied citizens were assigned to work two ten-hour shifts a week, and automated systems did the rest. Initially, the five-day weekend was, however, not entirely devoted to leisure time.

The Platform recognized that, in a world of scarcity and ecological crisis, the six founding principles of platform socialism would have to be

balanced. Not all principles could be maximized at the same time. Some might be realized faster than others. Some might directly compete with one another.

The solution was to create the world's largest ever experiment in direct democracy. Each citizen would be asked to devote ten hours a week to informed collective planning on the platform's participation module. Smart algorithms would model the impacts of particular resource and labor re-allocations. An overlapping set of multiple small workers' councils, community councils, consumer councils, and environmental councils would consider options, revise them, and resubmit them to be considered by larger assemblies. Those assemblies would reconcile divergent propositions with each other and with the founding principles, and send back their proposals to the councils. Feedback on details would be sought and sent back to the assemblies. After successive rounds of feedback, assemblies would then propose changes to governance algorithms to be considered by the democratically elected councilors in the governance module.

This sounds like a slow process, but the fact that most citizens could be counted on to devote ten hours a week to deliberative democracy meant that even the most contentious issues passed back and forth between council, assembly and councilor relatively rapidly. But despite decisions moving through committees and councils relatively quickly, there was no escaping the fact that this was time-consuming work by design. There was an understanding baked into the participation module that consensus was impossible. But through a ceaseless circulation of ideas, proposals, revisions, amendments, the process of governance was opened up.

It was all very complicated, but it worked.

"This is still democracy at work. It is just more delegated," said an increasingly exacerbated Lydia.

"Delegated democracy isn't democracy ..." countered Gus. "I always said that using the platform structures of the Big Two as our starting-point would be anti-democratic. For the commons to work, we need to root it in democratic self-activity."

Lydia took a deep breath. This was now a well-rehearsed argument. One that had quickly won over councilors. "The multi-agent governance system can predict with astonishing accuracy what proposals each of the workers' councils, community councils, consumer councils, and environmental councils will put forward. We are, at the end of the day, inherently predictable beings. We've tested our models over the course of the last twelve months, and have a 98.3% accuracy rate. In other words, in only less than two percent of instances did they predict the wrong outcome."

Gus interrupted, "But those two percent matter!"

But Lydia continued without missing a beat. "The very first principle of platform socialism is about minimizing work."

"And maximizing self-determination." Gus interrupted again.

Lydia was getting frustrated with the interruptions. She rewound just to make the point again. "The very first principle of platform socialism is about minimizing work, and our multi-agent governance system can free up a huge amount of citizen time. It's crazy that we're spending ten hours a week poring through boring decisions about resource allocations, when the multi-agents can do that for us. The critics are being hysterical. We're not ceding control to robots or algorithms. It is us, the people, who train the multi-agents. They are simply acting on our behalf. Our Opinion Modules show us that the public are overwhelmingly in favor. People simply do not want to participate to this degree."

THE TAKEDOWN

Lydia was wearing an expensive suit that looked out of place in the Kings Cross pizza place they were meeting in.

Munir sat across from her in old, cheap Alphabasics jeans and a black t-shirt.

Even though they had been in the restaurant for fifteen minutes, neither of them had broached the topic they were here for. Munir was furious. Not pissed off, not annoyed, not angry. But seething in waves of emotion that felt like they were tides of ice and fire passing over him.

He forgot the last time he had felt this way. It was the kind of wild hurt you remember from childhood before learning how to keep your feelings within your orbit of control; it was the kind of hurt reserved for the few people in the world you build close bonds with, hurt built on a sadness about what could and should have been. So, he sat there finding it hard to maintain eye contact and finding it hard to speak without his voice trembling.

Lydia knew why they were meeting, but felt they had to at least try some small talk before discussing what Munir came here to speak with her about.

"And Gus, how is she? I haven't seen her in over a year now."

"Alright."

"She left the city, right?"

"Yep."

"Where did she go?"

"About thirty minutes away."

“Thank God we have the Radial Line, eh? It’s pretty quick to get out of the city now,” said Lydia to see if Munir would open up about Gus’s whereabouts.

Munir took a sip of his coffee, looking down.

“Does she like it out there?” continued Lydia.

“Yep.”

“She’s in one of those communes, isn’t she?”

“And what if she is?”

Munir could tell Lydia was drifting into her lecturing mode. “You know the only way we can get platform socialism to work is if we—the people—run The Platform. The Platform is a public utility, and it only works because of the immense amount of data that we collect about everything. We allocate resources extremely efficiently based on need. There have been so many attempts in the past at fairly allocating resources: but they all failed. And they all failed because they had imperfect data. They could never manage the true complexity of the economy. But we can. And we are. You’ve seen what we’ve achieved. People could only dream about what we’ve achieved in the past. But ...” She paused; realizing she had slipped into lecture mode.

“But ... that means that The Platform needs to be the key informational gatekeeper in the economy. If we start creating little alternatives here and there, then The Platform stops working. Resources are no longer allocated according to need. Things start going back to how they were.”

Munir couldn’t hold it inside any more. “Why the fuck did you switch it off,” he shouted. “We changed the fucking world!”

Lydia knew this was coming, and she knew how to respond. “Yes, we changed it. But keep your eyes on the prize, Mun. We have five-day weekends. We have full employment; we pay every citizen a basic living income. People no longer have to sit in front of their interfaces all day waiting for the next gig. Look at the world we’ve built. Remember how it used to be? Remember the struggle? Remember the insecurity? Remember the inequality?”

Munir said nothing and tried chewing a bite of the shit, rubbery pizza in front of them.

“The hypnos are corrupting people. Some of them are gone for two, three weeks at a time. The load on the public health service is increasing from kids getting dehydrated or falling over. School outcomes are getting worse from the truancy. The multi-agents were consistently suggesting that we nudge people away from the hypnos in order to improve our governance stats. We couldn’t keep ignoring them. Their data ...”

“Fuck the multi-agents!”

“Their data ...”

“And what, you’re replacing it with the same saccharine safe predictable algopop channels that Alphabet tried to feed to us?”

“Look: our neuroacoustic research teams make use of extremely sophisticated machine learning systems to make music we know people want to listen to. But we can do it in a safer environment. The hypnos were just too wild; we needed to rein them in a bit. We’re not killing the experience, we just need to bring it under control. Our data shows us that the replacement system still increases participants’ well-being, all whilst ensuring that aggregate productivity doesn’t drop.”

“Can you not hear yourself,” Munir said as he felt a pang of cold move from his neck to the top of his back. ‘Safe music?’ “Safe music!”

“Listen. We live in a world of finite resources. You know that. And yet look at us. Despite whatever our post-tipping-point planet throws against us, we prosper. We do that because we stick together. We allocate resources based on need. We’ve automated so many previously bullshit jobs. We’ve made sure that the jobs that are left are fairly spread around. We’ve made sure that rewards are fairly spread around. Our media-scape monitoring shows that people have life satisfaction scores higher than at any time since measurements began. What this means though, is that we have to accept that we can’t have everything all the time. We have to keep the system working properly.”

“Have you forgotten what we built together? You think because they made you chief fucking engineer of The Platform that you can just take away what we all built? It was a space of freedom. It was a community. This is not just about the music. We found a different way of living with one another. You were there. We shared those experiences. We built another beautiful world.” His voice trailed off, realizing he probably wasn’t going to change her mind.

“Mun. Listen. I hear you. I remember. But we’ve built another world here too. And this is the one that matters. We can’t ruin this.”

“But you are fucking ruining it.”

THE COMMUNE

Munir got the Radial Line out to the last stop so that he could meet Gus. Still fuming; still hurt that Lydia was part of the decision to destroy such an important part of their lives.

“How are you doing, Mun?” Gus said, as she gave him a long hug. “Where have you been, you shithead? I’m half an hour away, and your lazy ass can only visit me every few months.”

As Munir explained how the meeting with Lydia went, he realized that Gus didn't seem concerned at all.

"I'm as mad as you are Mun. But we knew this was coming, right? That's why we've been building these bottom-up tech ecosystems out here."

"Yeah, but – you know – still. I can't believe they've done this."

"Well, I can. We've built everything out here off-platform. From the hardware and network infrastructure—the nodes, the switches, the circuit modules—to the operating systems and interfaces. We're ready for it. They can do what they want on The Platform, but we've created a decentralized network that they have no central access to. We've created our own hypnos, and we can design the system to produce whatever outcomes we want it to."

"What do you mean? Are you using it for more than just the hypnos?"

"Well...yeah...I mean we put a shit load of time into our network, and we figured we may as well make the most of it. Because we're off the central grid, we're helping some of the local community. We've got farmers with bad toothaches tired of waiting for dentist appointments: so, we got some of the dentists to trade produce like local oranges or grapes in return for quicker off-book appointments. We've got old and infirmed folks with stocks of grade A nutro powder stored up who need a bit more homecare than The Platform is allocating to them, and we've got young folks able to help them with tucking them into bed or personal hygiene, or whatever it is they need. And, er, we of course take a small cut of all of that to help us keep doing the work we're doing."

"But then you're directly undermining the primary principle. To each according to need."

"You've seriously come away from your meeting with Lydia thinking they actually are able to figure out what it is we all need?"

"Fair point."

"Anyway, want to see what our decentralized hypno looks like?"

BREAD AND ROSES

Assembled virtually in the Platform's core meeting module was the entire governance board of the platform. The fifty neighborhood councilors, the technical management team, the twelve domain directors, and Lydia, the chief executive.

"This is going to be a disaster," said the director of social partnerships.

"There must be an alternative," said one of the neighborhood councilors.

“There isn’t. There really isn’t,” said Lydia. “If we don’t rebalance our system there are going to be shortages. If there are shortages, people will start questioning the system. I’ve prepared the press release. It’s ready to go out as soon as we need it to.”

Westminster. May 25, 2044. The Platform.

Dear <citizen_ID>,

The climate crises over the last few years have been unprecedented in human history. However, despite the recent extreme weather, and, in particular the loss of much of Essex, Kent, and low-lying areas of Greater London due to sea-level rises, we have been able to sustain economic productivity in 86% of core sectors. Our adaptive production and distribution models have allowed us to quickly recalibrate to any underlying structural changes.

However, it is with regret that we must announce that core governance modules are predicting that current levels of outputs are unsustainable with our resource and labor inputs.

Our engineering and adaptive teams are working hard on new automated technologies that will replace the envisaged increase that we need from human workers. But, until then, we must ask you – as a citizen – to contribute more to society. From June 1 onwards, the five-day weekend will be temporarily shortened to three-days. You may also temporarily experience reductions in availability and allowances on key platform modules.

From each according to ability; to each according to need.

Yours.

The Platform governance module

After reading the release, one of the Northeastern councilors said “That’s bullshit. We know it’s not just the climate that’s breaking the system. It’s the localnets.”

They all knew about the communes and the localnets. The Platform had tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to stamp them out. The decentralized localnets, at first, weren’t much of a threat. After all, they were mostly just used by a bunch of hypnoravers and farmers and maintained in a handful of anonymous off-grid communes. But they spread quickly. They became black markets that quickly became a mechanism for anyone looking for shortcuts: ways of doing, obtaining, and saying things outside of The Platform.

By early 2044, some platform modules had become effectively unusable because of the sheer number of people trading alternatives in the localnets. The problem was that nobody had a plan as to how to stamp them all out.

In the '30s, the way that the Big Two eliminated competition was through ruthless market behavior. They threw everything they had at competitors. A local food delivery startup would have its drivers attracted away through wage incentives, its customers poached away through unsustainable price drops, and its core technological infrastructures rendered unsustainable through oppressive license and subscription costs. Nobody back then had ever thought entirely bottom-up localnets would emerge to challenge the platform monopolies.

... FIRST AS TRAGEDY, THEN AS FARCE

The interface buzzed as Gus was brushing her teeth: staring in the mirror at the bags under her eyes. It was Friday night, but she had been working without a day off for a month now. Things in 2047 were a lot like they used to be. Long hours, little work, and lots of hustling to get the gigs that were out there.

“Gus!”

“Yeah. What’s up Munir?”

“How are you doing? I was just thinking, I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“I was thinking the same. I’ve been meaning to buzz. But I’ve been so busy with the usual, you know.”

“For sure. Same here. But why don’t we try to get together tonight?”

“Are your ConnektMetriks alright?”

“Yeah, I’ve been trying to keep them above a 4.9. You?”

“Same. I’ve been working like a dog. I’m too old to try to learn new modules, and I’m terrified of being deactivated if I drop below a four seven”

“So, I was thinking maybe I could come over and we could take some time off for a few hours, and see what’s going on in one of the hypnochannels.”

“Man. I’d love to, but I’m kinda tired. And I haven’t done that in five, six years or so. Last time was out on the commune.”

“Me neither. But why don’t we try to get away this weekend and have a bit of fun?”

“OK. Fuck it. Why not.”

The collapse of The Platform happened quickly after the working week was increased. Nobody could have predicted the rapid cascade that followed when so many key systems migrated to the localnets. Modules failed, and so people turned to the localnets. They moved more activity to the localnets, which caused more modules to fail, until there wasn’t much left.

The Localnets worked fairly well in the immediate aftermath of the collapse. But soon, a once-familiar pattern emerged. A few companies emerged to manage key infrastructures. There were no more weekends—in fact, there was no paid time at all that wasn't an on-the-clock gig—no more living wages, no more guaranteed housing. And there was way too much competition for the jobs that still existed, driving down wages and working conditions.

Connekt was one of the new Big Three, alongside Dgtl and Loginix, and Munir and Gus were now mostly deeply embedded into their ecosystem. Connekt had emerged out of a consortium of Localnets dotted around the Radial Line, and had since expanded by adding core modules from The Platform after they were sold off or abandoned.

“Which channel were you thinking of?” said Gus.

Despite the fact that Connekt had kept a lot of the old infrastructure from the commune days, which, in turn, was modelled on memories of the old Institute for Social Elegance, today's channel list was not what it used to be.

The only ones that had any activity in them any more were gabbstep, nu-terrorcore, and neo-speedcore.

Almost everyone these days was back in the algopop channels, and the new subcultures that made up the alternative rooms had little affinity with what they saw as the softer sounds of the previous generations.

Connekt wasn't especially concerned with the alternative channels. The company was especially adept at using recommendation systems across their platforms, encouraging people not to ask “Do I like this?” but rather “Should I like this?” They knew that all they had to do was get a critical mass of people absorbed into the algopop channels for them to maximize profits there. Behavioral nudges through the platforms social modules, targeted feed filtering, and adaptive neuro-acoustic networks allowed the algopop channels to somehow always adapt enough to keep just enough users enthralled: or at least linger long enough to consider increasing spending on some of the higher levels of the Connektfashion lines for their avatars, or pay for a higher Connektmusic subscription. Besides, it was unprofitable if users stayed too long in the rooms.

“I seriously hate speedcore. Let's try gabbstep?”

They lowered their visors, and entered the hypno. There wasn't much choice in avatars here. Just some of the system defaults used in the algopop channels—which felt oddly out of place to gabbstep.

Around them were fiercely blinking white strobes. The world went from black to white; black to white; black to white in synch with a ceaseless, over-driven, glitching bass drum.

A grainy, sweeping sound rolled in and increased in volume; yellow lasers spread out above their heads. It became higher pitched, and faster; almost shrieking now. The drums started to become a solid drone before breaking down into a torrent of metal blast beats alongside what sounded like air raid sirens. The strobes came back. Black to white. Black to white. Black to white.

“What the fuck is this?” Munir asked Gus through the visor intercoms.

“I dunno. How do they listen to this shit?” Gus responded.

“Look, I’m gonna head out of here, alright? It’s been a hell of a week. And there’s a lot of work I’m going to try to catch up on this weekend.”

On the way out of the channel, they lingered for a while in the staging room. It was mostly empty now: a few groups of seemingly identical avatars huddled around small groups off in the distance. They took a last look at the old “Institute for Social Elegance” sign that had been left up, and then pulled off their headsets.

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