Towards Building an Equitable Internet: Surveying Digital Personhood within Patriarchy

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Abstract
The internet has had profound effects on our culture, including by enabling the creation of digital personhood. Taking personhood in both the colloquial sense and with sovereignty and property in Imani Perry's trio of patriarchy, digital personhood can improve upon real-life cultures yet largely mirrors the power dynamics of real-life patriarchy. In exploring how internet users relate to digital technology and how corporate control over the digital realm has solidified, the necessity and possibility of building a more communally-focused, power-aware internet becomes clear. This paper is part of Volume 2 of the *Queered Science & Technology Center* at UCLA [1].

Introduction
The internet comes with a promise of worldwide information accessibility and interconnectivity. In the United States, nearly everyone (younger people especially) has a cell phone [2], and the global population isn't too far behind [3]. Theoretically, everyone has access to information and is better connected, enabling quicker and better informed technological and social development. Further, people have the power to communicate around the world near instantaneously, collapsing space and time and removing physical barriers to interaction. Of course, many of these benefits have been realized and are indeed useful improvements in livelihood. But no new development ever has its benefits distributed fully equitably, and no new technology is without a potential for misuse and harmful effects.

Great fiction writers of the past are no stranger to this: we now live with elements of constant surveillance predicted in George Orwell's *1984* and elements of endless technology-based pleasure at the expense of social engagement predicted in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Tishan Hsu's installation *Liquid Circuit* at the Hammer Museum conveys this new mode of existence in relation to technology. Hsu says "I consider myself a cyborg. […] My dependence on my phone *is* a cyborgian experience" (edited for clarity) [4]. The initial oddity of this statement fades upon realizing its truth: for many, the day-to-day is impossible without technological help. We use and depend on technology in our work as it improves, yet we must be wary of its psychic impacts as it permeates into social and cultural spheres. This paper provides a more nuanced understanding of how we relate to our everyday technology, culturally and politically, and how we can use this understanding to build a more equitable and socially just internet.

Blending worlds: the simultaneous rise of the internet and the digital person
Books were perhaps the first technology that could transport their users into another world. Some centuries after the printing press, radio, then television and movies, followed in this ability. The next big step was the advent of digital technology and the internet, only a couple decades ago. Not only can people learn of other worlds online, they can take part in them. An entirely new mode of existence and interaction outside the real world has emerged. Users of digital technology are no longer entirely represented by their physical bodies. Instead, a digital personhood takes form, existing virtually yet resembling the real person. I will define two types of digital personhood, cultural and power-based. The cultural definition mirrors the colloquial understanding: it reflects how a personhood can form entirely online and even exist within a digital culture, disconnected or only partially connected to real life cultures. The power definition is more nuanced and builds off the theory of Imani Perry's *Vexy Thing*, which defines the patriarchy in terms of the interrelated trio of personhood, sovereignty, and property [5]. Perry's personhood here does not reveal the extent to which someone is literally a person — everyone is a person — but rather the extent to which someone is legally and socially considered a person in the society they exist within, often with personhood distributed along lines of race, class, or other characteristics. Likewise, digital personhood in this sense will help us explore the power relations of the virtual realm, tied closely to the patriarchy the internet was created in, yet not existing as a perfect mirror of the real world. One's real life personhood informs, but does not confine, their digital personhood.

In some sense these two definitions of personhood don't align. The culture definition is concerned with the level of participation in online culture. The power definition is more concerned with the level of recognition an individual gets digitally, regardless of how much they may participate in the digital realm they are accessing. For example, the power definition would be more useful for understanding why Google search algorithms returned racist and unrepresentative results on simple searches in their earlier years, as explored by Safiya Noble in *Algorithms of Oppression* [6]. The digital person here is not someone necessarily engaging in a digital culture, but rather someone finding a different level of accessibility for relevant information in a digital realm shaped by a digital patriarchy. I will use both these culture and power definitions throughout this paper to delineate the extent to which digital personhood is beneficial and harmful, as compared to real-life culture and personhood.

The culture definition: how does digital culture emerge and compare to real life culture?

We begin by exploring the extent to which digital cultures are beneficial relative to real life cultures, scenarios where digital personhood is advantageous. For example, a queer person in an oppressive culture may find greater representation and diversity of perspectives in online cultures than in person. Their digital personhood may benefit from greater support, openness, discourse, and diversity than their real personhood has access to. We can also appreciate the information-building potentialities of forums like Reddit and Stack Exchange, where a wide community gathers knowledge and builds a somewhat professional culture online that offers a greater breadth of information than a local community may be able to offer. More informal cultures can also be created from spontaneous and unstructured interactions through voice and video calls, online multiplayer games, or even YouTube comments sections. These cultures could be likened to friends hanging out or people socializing at bars, offering free-form social interaction. I am no stranger to chatting in online forums and playing Minecraft with online friends; there is certainly potential for positive socialization on the internet.

However, many people spend much of their time online watching TV shows or scrolling through Instagram or TikTok. The accompanying terms to describe these actions, "binge watching" and "doom scrolling," reveal enough of the harms of this primarily consumption-based culture where hardly any digital personhood is created at all. Arguably social media has some potential for housing digital culture in the creation, sharing, and discussion of text and multimedia, and it can offer some benefits in providing some representation for historically underrepresented groups. Yet "social" media like Instagram often encourages brief, attention-grabbing media over more nuanced conversations and long-form interactions, stinting critical thought and not always prioritizing truth. In so doing, it also creates weak digital cultures that hardly enable a full realization of digital personhood. Furthermore, social media apps depend upon the real world and its cultures: people post about (part of) their real lives and others view and hear about them through this digital proxy. Social media emphasizes the lived, real experiences of people and capitalizes primarily on this real-life culture, offering less space for a digital culture to develop.

The importance of a fundamental basis in reality holds true for many of the digital cultures we just explored. For the queer person in an oppressive culture, an online digital culture provides a temporary outlet, but is ideally the motivator for real-life change by the individual. The queer person may want to escape into a more open and accepting community once they can, or they may wish to seek out other queer people in their area and advocate for community reform. Fundamentally, though, a digital experience of acceptance does not suffice to improve their everyday life as long as they face discrimination or aggression in real life. In the case of knowledge-building communities, usually the knowledge itself stems from the real world and is applicable in reality, not just for digital persons to experience. Often times, digital personhood is a useful tool to supplement a real, lived personhood yet cannot exist without it.

For cultures that truly are created digitally and exist digitally, like video game communities, digital chats, and social media trends (e.g., TikTok dances), some level of authenticity and genuine human interaction is present, but it still cannot compare to real-life interaction. These cultures offer an accessible respite for many from the world they're in, but wouldn't likely be chosen over the opportunity to physically interact with like-minded people, perhaps still with technology involved (e.g., playing video games together in person). The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates this, as people found ways to exist and support each other online but largely yearned for a return to the "normal" of seeing one another in person.

Culturally, digital personhood is useful to complement a real personhood, but is largely insufficient on its own. Technology may provide some digital respite from less-than-ideal societies, but more emphasis should be put on improving those societies than enabling digital personhoods to escape them. After all, we cannot leave our human

bodies and the human mode of interaction; no digital appendage can fully take their place. For instance, youth life satisfaction decreases with use of social technology and depends crucially on real life friendships [7]. We cannot rely on technology to meet our social needs. As our culture shifts towards the digital realm, especially with recent developments in augmented and virtual reality, real cultures begin to falter with less engagement while digital cultures fail to replicate the vivid intensity of reality.

The power definition: exploring digital personhood within patriarchy

An important and complementary analysis hinges on the power definition of digital personhood. Here we acknowledge that, as in the real world [5], people online enjoy various levels of personhood and so have different levels of access to the benefits of digital culture previously mentioned. These unequal distributions of information access generally mirror the unequal distributions of real-life personhood.

A straightforward introductory example is accessibility to online culture. The most vulnerable groups, whose access to online resources could potentially have the most benefit to their livelihoods, are often the least able to access these resources. For example, we can consider the homeless population. To access the digital realm at all, even in the less-engaged manner of simply getting online information, one needs a device, internet access, and power, each of which can be challenging for homeless people to maintain. Yet many benefits for homeless people, such as information about community support centers, news updates, communication with others, and potential resources for upward mobility, are most accessible and well curated digitally [8]. This presents an inherent systemic issue. Digital technology is well suited to the distribution of resources for a marginalized population. But because that group has so little personhood in real life, and thus has trouble accessing the resources of the dominant society, their digital personhood is also limited. Even the well-meaning curator of online resources for homeless people is constricted within the patriarchy they find themselves in: the new technology they have access to offers better ways to complete their work, yet the group they're advocating for does not have enough personhood, sovereignty, or property to access those resources. A compromise then has to be reached between providing digital resources and advocating for better homeless access to technology, and simply avoiding the use of technology at the expense of the service quality. Neither is ideal because both are stuck within the bounds of patriarchy.

We can also consider the case where access to the internet is less of an issue yet there is still a barrier to participation within digital cultures. For example, a full time, minimum wage worker at a fast food chain may be too exhausted in the evenings to do anything but watch Netflix or scroll through Instagram. Despite having the technical means to access digital cultures, the worker has little time to fully engage in them. Their real personhood is reduced because they work a minimum wage job and aren't seen as worthy of full personhood, so they cannot enjoy as much leisure time to develop digital personhood. Not only is the worker potentially missing out on a source of community and solidarity, but more broadly the community of workers in similar situations is not as well represented in the digital space. The reverse can also be true: workers could find time and energy to engage within a digital culture even after a draining day of work, and find and contribute to a greater community than they may be able to find locally. Yet by and large, their level of accessibility is still far less than the privileged child or teenager with no responsibilities after school, or the white collar worker who has less demanding work and more free time in their job. Here we see a distribution of digital personhood along class-based lines; those with more economic power are in jobs that enable more digital personhood and so greater access to digital culture.

This class-based distribution of digital personhood arises out of neoliberal capitalistic tendencies, developed within the patriarchy to uphold the patriarchy, a continuation of robbed personhood for the lower class and the fuller personhood and owned property of the higher classes. Digital personhood is once again largely mirroring the distribution of real-life personhood, even if it offers a marginal improvement. Yet accessibility to a digital culture is imperative for all people potentially affected by that culture (that is, nearly all of humanity). This is not only because marginalized people might enjoy interacting with a greater, more widespread, or more diverse community online. It is principally because their active participation in that culture helps shape its priorities, its outputs, and its useful contributions. Digital technology is unique in its ability to house entire cultures, yet an unequal distribution of digital personhood and simple accessibility to technology means the development of culture without input from large swaths of the population. Then, if advocating for greater technology access down the road, that accessibility eventually comes at a point when a dominant digital culture has already been established, requiring a slow process of hegemonic negotiation to make it representative of its latest members. This builds on top of the already present biases and power dynamics in the dominant real culture informing the creation of the dominant digital culture.

A prime example of this process of negotiation is provided in part of the mission statement for Black Lunch Table's Wikipedia Edit-a-Thons: "The Wikimedia Foundation estimates that 77% of Wikieditors are white and 91% are men. Our work shifts this demographic and empowers people to write their own history" [9]. The systemic racism born of the logics of power and control within patriarchy in the United States permeates into the digital realm and affords Black Americans less digital personhood. The Black Lunch Table group actively fights against this underrepresentation in the dominant digital culture, a process enabled by the collaborative features of knowledge building Wikipedia offers. Wikipedia in particular offers a high level of digital sovereignty, but this example offers another case of reduced digital personhood and its roots in the real world. But to fully place digital personhood within Imani Perry's patriarchy, we must also analyze digital property relations and the distribution of digital sovereignty.

The patriarchal internet: digital property and sovereignty

The early internet was created on public military funding as a collaboration between many universities and was first extensively used by networks of researchers. After it had grown to a significant size, the US government no longer wanted to maintain it and the backbone of the internet was given to a handful of private companies for control [10]. The radically connected internet was created and made useful by the collaborative contributions by thousands of people up to this point in the 1980s. The beginnings of the World Wide Web (the inception of webpages and links, not just the interconnection of computers) were likewise initially decentralized: many people had their own websites and even mail servers, each page with its own personality, connected together with haphazard chains of hyperlinks. Today, websites from individuals make up a small fraction of internet traffic. The vast majority is channeled through tech giants and other major outlets.

When the US government handed over the physical property of the internet backbone to private corporations, the internet was no longer restricted to research activities [10]. Commercial activities could commence: all the powers of corporations dead set on turning the next dollar could be used to create websites that everyone wants to use. In this process, the diversity of individual websites is subsumed by the more addicting tech giants' websites and the wealth of humanity's information available online is locked behind paywalls or made hard to find. Many platforms today also collect user data; in the digital realm, the low price of data storage means personal property is commodified and churned into ad revenue, gathering intimate details of people's lives to sell more products.

Underlying each of these historical trends is an implicit acceptance of property, and a slow, power-building process of property consolidation. We started with something closer to a digital commons, where the government maintained backbone could be usable by any researcher for free to build knowledge in communication with others, each university owning its section of the internet but largely making it accessible to others. Likewise, the early prominence of many small websites meant a diverse online marketplace of ideas and perspectives, sprawling and accessible yet without clear organization or control; that is, without a strong logic of property. Of course, websites were still property, owned and maintained by an individual or organization, requiring access to a physical property to place servers or computers on, and requiring ownership of the servers or computers themselves. Yet the early internet had no conception of security; websites were freely accessible by all, information was readily available, everyone online had sovereignty.

We've touched on personhood and property; the trio of patriarchy is not complete without also considering sovereignty within the digital realm. In the preceding discussion of digital property consolidation in the "hands" of corporations, their power and ability to own property are obvious. In this sense, then, they have a level of digital personhood; they, even more than the people who use their services, are seen as legitimate entities. Corporations have full digital sovereignty, are practically recognized as persons, and own much of the important internet property. (Yet they can evade taxes — $1 trillion by multinational corporations in 2022 [11] — better than a real person can, being a perfect tool for the patriarch.) Corporations and the powerful people that operate them are the digital patriarchs of our day.

The Transnational Institute offers a powerful example of this phenomenon in their emphasis on the power content intermediaries, like Google, Meta, and X/Twitter, hold over market trends and, most importantly, the dissemination of information. In using certain quantitative metrics to choose which news to popularize, these websites prioritize mainstream media over alternative news sources; in focusing on "trends," these websites discourage long-term movements or long, nuanced conversations [12]. These corporations determine which information is prioritized with user retention and engagement a primary metric. Their careful manipulation of psychology leaves the digital person

with reduced sovereignty, despite the technical truth that internet users can visit any webpage they want. They perform the spying and surveillance Orwell predicted and the endless, brain-numbing entertainment Huxley predicted. They are two dystopian future governments, merged together, with inner-workings made private even in a democracy. The governmental link isn't far-fetched, either: tech companies are no strangers to working with intelligence and defense agencies [12]. Corporations are the digital patriarchs. The US government's continuous attempts to ban TikTok are only further testimony to corporate power. The average person struggles to maintain impactful digital property, has digital personhood to the extent they are recognized as a useful data point, and has sovereignty only within the predefined bounds of the platforms they use. The once thriving variety of internet forums and personal websites have been rendered no longer interesting enough in the face of more precisely-crafted, entertaining media. The information-building potential of the internet is monetized or it ceases to exist, digital cultures are formed on platforms built by patriarchs, digital personhood largely mirrors real-life personhood, and the underlying logics of patriarchal power are even less obvious in a virtual realm built to appear accessible and usable.

Conclusion: building an equitable digital future

The broader trends and movements of the most powerful aren't obvious to the everyday person. Avenues of resistance to corporate control and power-consolidation trends still exist. The internet is still fundamentally open, despite corporate efforts to amass internet traffic. Website creation is easier than ever, and large-scale, cooperative and open spaces still exist, including the likes of Wikipedia for information accessibility, GitHub for open-source code development, and even underground networks of torrents for peer-to-peer file sharing. Anyone can create a website, can connect a new device to the internet and write code on it to support whichever function they desire. The internet we know today is mostly dominated by corporations that write code to extract money, built on the property relations we take for granted in our economic system. Yet the previous examples show that the internet does not as strictly define property. Code can be written to make the web more open; people can protest to encourage legislation supporting, for example, publicly-funded development of a digital commons; even simply enough, people can choose to use alternative modes of communication away from the hands of data-gathering monopolies. As with any social movement, it's easier said than done, but it is certainly possible to redefine the internet. We need only redefine it before our power to do so is taken away.

Most people would agree that social media isn't healthy, that all-day computer usage isn't great, and that information online isn't always trustworthy. Solutions come not in the form of these complaints, though, they come in the form of experimentation, of questioning why we got here and attempting to live differently. We need to queer our usage of the internet. We must investigate the norms and work to live outside them, focusing on community-building and considering that technology is a tool and will never be enough on its own to build a culture. A population never progresses by following only a handful of dominant ideas; we need diversity to be embraced and new ways of digital existence explored. As we "innovate" into the realm of augmented and virtual reality, we must be wary of the inability of technology to fully encapsulate a culture and the development of a new form of digital patriarchy being quietly developed. We must also be wary of the normalizing tendency of AI to take the average of all views and present it as the truth. The digital realm need not be patriarchal because it is a separate realm; we need only work towards building a dynamic we wish to see. We must collaborate to build a new internet that is truly diverse and inclusive, that gives everyone full personhood, and whose direction and future is communally built, not narrowly conceived by patriarchs.

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