Introduction

WHAT IS NICHE?

This book fulminates a straightforward, albeit provocative claim: The study of online learning “in general” must be superseded by the analysis of what we have herein dubbed *niche online communities*. Like all claims, this reorientation of online studies first requires explanation and ultimately, a critical reevaluation of what an online niche *might* entail. The question of why the study of online learning “in general” must be rethought extends, in part, from Buchanan’s (2007) analytic insights on the function of the Internet. For its diversity of content and presupposed freedom of form, Buchanan argues, the Internet nevertheless acts as an apparatus of both homogenization and standardization. From the adaptation and simplification of preexisting media according to the demands of the Internet environment, the capture of surplus ‘online labor’ within circuits of cognitive capitalism and corporate marketing, to the increasing surveillance and censorship of the Internet by State and corporate powers, Buchanan argues that the presupposition of the Internet as an ostensibly free or benign space is but a prevailing fallacy. It is, in Deleuze and Guattarian (1987) terms, less the rhizome to which it is often blithely associated than an ‘abstract machine’ of social organization coextensive of ‘societies of control’ whereby life has become increasingly regulated and managed as a digital object (Deleuze, 2001). Proponents of online learning have often withdrawn from such problematics in lieu of embracing the rhetoric of freedom and accessibility propagated by such corporations as Google. As Buchanan (2007) develops however, the notions of freedom and accessibility often linked to the Internet might constitute an alibi. As Google’s extension into China demonstrates, what is key to online enterprise is not freedom of access, but rather, the establishment of new media markets irrespective of State control over, and censorship of information flows.

In North America, new modes of homogenization and standardization have emerged through the celebration of the MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) as the next great educational experiment poised to solve the problem of diminishing resources coupled with the demand for increased student enrollment and the identification of new University revenue streams (Weissman, 2012). As Bogost (2012, 2013) argues, however, MOOCs have become less the harbingers of radical educational revolution that was their germinal intent than a new type of marketing signaling an ostensibly progressive transformation of teaching and learning commensurate with the “contemporary technological climate.” Marking the collapse of education with systems of speculative market analysis and what Bogost dubs “Silicon Valley values,” the MOOC revolution figures in the transformation of University education coextensive of such quasi-educational “media entertainment” formats as the TED X series and the inter-passive (where the game *plays you*) “edu-gamement” industry (Jagodzinski, 2007). The homogenization of online learning according to market drives and established technological environments not only produces a ‘sim-
plification’ of education as edu-tainment, but more insidiously, ushers into systems of online learning the characteristics of control society, from the seemingly benign market-inflected rhetoric of *life-long learning* to its interminable realization as permanent retraining, ongoing performance evaluation, and the interminable mobilization of new “educational services” and their expansion of educational markets.

**PROPOSITION ONE: THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS ONLINE LEARNING “IN GENERAL”**

To counteract the standardizing impulse under which online learning is being mobilized necessitates a reorientation of our analytic endeavors. Such a reorientation might be articulated by way of three propositions. The first and perhaps most crucial pertains to the issue of homogenization. While there is little doubt that the Internet functions to presuppose the desire of the user or otherwise shape the online behaviors of the subject (as in the case of edu-gaming *inter-passivity*), such standardizing impulses do not yet account for the ways in which the unique desire of users connect and modulate online environments. Where the analysis of online learning attends only to *pre-established* online environments and/or to the presupposition that subjects conform to the conditions presented therein, the study of online learning falls short of attending to the manner in which the desire of the subject “plugs-into” and hence potentially affects online space, from the enunciation of critical concerns in online forums—the transgression of conventional behavioral and ideological expectation—to practices of hacktivism (ethical and otherwise), spambexing, page hi-jacking, and Google bombing that demonstrate the connective tensions that defray the notion of “online learning” in general.

Here, we might go one step further to suggest that the notion of “online learning” (in general) exists only insofar as it is divorced from those forms of desiring-production continually “plugged into” it and whereby it is always on its way to becoming singularized as unique “territories of use” that might otherwise be dubbed *niche*. To apprehend the question of what “online learning” *is* necessitates attending first to the ways in which online environments are always already drawn away from their homogeneity and into heterogeneous relation with the complex desires of the subject-user. To understand what the Internet *is* is to grapple with the question of how it is created in the first place. Such a question is inadequately answered through the analysis of *preexisting* digital environments or their historicization *prior* to modulation. This book contends that online learning occurs through the complex interchange of user desire and the online environment’s presupposition of how users *ought* to desire—a scenario that necessitates attenuation to the production of unique online spaces and their capacities for operationalizing new conditions for group association, the enunciation of original subject concerns, and for the serious consideration of underanalysed socio-pedagogical assemblages.

**PROPOSITION TWO: ONLINE RELATIONS ARE EXTERNAL TO THEIR TERMS**

This first proposition lends itself a second, interrelated point: The reorientation of online studies must take seriously the idea that *relations are external to their terms*. This is to say, quite simply, that we cannot know solely by the organization of online environments the manner in which they might be used. Social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have been utilized to mobilize desperate and geographically segregated peoples into public activism and further, have been plied to operationalize
new forms of critical social consciousness. While such applications are inherent to the potential function of such platforms, what is unanticipated are the ways in which such online environments might forge social connections that alter their inherent function. Thought in this way, Facebook can be as much an instrument of banal and feckless narcissism as it can be a device for raising social awareness on imminent global events censored by mainstream news agencies, as it is in the case of Turkey’s ongoing socio-political revolution against State tyranny.

This is to fulminate a straightforward point: while online learning environments might very well come ready-made, the terms of their established connections cannot anticipate the relations into which they may enter. This is significant insofar as to understand the pedagogical significance of online environments requires an orientation of analysis towards the relations they produce. This is to avoid the blithe question “What is an online environment?” in lieu of asking “What kinds of relations (both intensive and extensive) are online environments capable of producing?” It is in consideration of the latter question that this book attends to the heterogeneous pedagogical potential of online environments and the ways in which their “general” functionality is modulated to both create and sustain niche social formations, from the distinct mytho-ethics of otherkin (see Shane, this volume), the gender-bending aesthetic tastes of bronies, to the virulent nihilism of black metal (see Venkatesh, Podoshen, Perri, and Urbaniak, this volume). This is to understand the pedagogical import of online learning as less inherent to the pre-established online environment than to the unique material relations, patterns, and desires grafted upon it. It is in this vein that the pedagogy of online learning environments need to be rethought in terms of their transversal potential, that is to say their potential to dilate the pre-established function of online space in a manner capable of supporting unique social formations distinct for their differences in desire and modes of production.

**PROPOSITION THREE: NICHE ONLINE FORMATIONS CONSTITUTE ‘PUBLICS’**

This leads to a final proposition for the study of online learning. Where online studies might be reoriented in a manner attendant to the material relationship of technology and such diverse social formations as niche motorcycle enthusiasts, comic scanners, and metalheads, it might be considered a form of public pedagogy, or rather, a mode of pedagogy peripheral to online learning from the perspective of its ‘conventional’ educational use-value (see Sandlin, Schultz, Burdick, 2009). Here, the notion of online learning as a form of public pedagogy pertains not only to its material relationship to social formations as articulated in proposition two, but further, its active influence in the production of niche spaces with their attendant forms of interaction, exchange, and duration. To reorient online studies in this way might hence entail dilating our understanding of what online spaces might do, or rather, how their immanent modulation by heterogeneous social actants enable new conditions for group identification, social knowledge, and discreet territories of social reference.

By attending to the potential function of online environments to support heterogeneous social formations, we might more adequately produce for “conventional” online environments new tools for thinking and theorizing online space. However, rather than an appeal to the “adaptation” of heterogeneous online spaces to the standardizing impulse of online learning systems, such an orientation might more affirmatively function as a fulcrum against the standardization of online space, or rather, the presupposed correspondence of online conventions and behaviours of users. By analyzing the ways in which various “publics” (since there is, online, no public “in general”) are produced, educators and researchers...
might be better positioned to contest the “standardizing” impulse of conventional online environments while concomitantly grappling with the question of how online learning has already been immanently mobilized as a vehicle of active experimentation, therapy, and personal investment peripheral to, yet entwined with contemporary education (Savage, 2010). It is in this vein that the study of online learning requires dilation in its consideration of how discreet niche “publics” have evolved original online practices, informational archives, and bodies of often contested knowledge constituting an informal curriculum as significant to many of its participants as any “formal education.”

WHAT THEN, IS NICHE?

The preceding propositions for the reorientation of online studies necessitate rethinking the concept of “niche communities” that are the focus of this book. As it is derived from ecology, where niche has commonly (in its Grinnellian conceptualization) come to mean the milieu inhabited by an organism, the concept falls short of apprehending our proposition that the environment never precedes in any unequivocal way the forces with which it assembles. It is in this manner that the notion of niche, while signifying the production of a unique territory of thought and practice, never entirely precedes or anticipates the manner in which subjects organize, utilize, exchange, or break away from such spaces. In part, this is the concern of niche online studies in which it is the singular or unique emergence of interests, patterns, modes of connection, and intensities of organization that are of interest in the analysis of what the Internet is and how it has become pedagogical for specific group-subjects.

A niche online community might be thought as a territory in the Deleuzeguattarian (1987) sense, born as it is from the emission of specific signs, unique syntax, and styles of enunciation. Yet, by the very fact of the Internet’s organization, such territories must always be thought as traversed by the nomadic movements of hybrid users belonging, albeit informally, to numerous online spaces. This said, a niche online community nevertheless constitutes an intensified “territory of use” marked by the circulation of specific knowledge, signs of association, habits, and patterns of relation. In this way, a niche online community maintains consistency and distinction from other online spaces, demonstrating in this way the character of a singular assemblage requiring careful and tactical analytic approaches. Here, a specifically ecological application of niche applies, for fundamentally, the study of niche online communities implicates a way of life or rather, life-practices and forms of performativity that inform subjectivity and group identification.

Despite the propositions levied above, the potential powers and influence of niche formations are continually under threat. This threat might be articulated along two fronts, not the least of which is the standardizing force articulated in the opening of this section. While we have claimed that the role of group-subject desire is significant to the modulation of online territories, such original formations must continually be thought astride the standardizing powers of online space and the ways in which they both passively and overtly work to shape our habits and desires. Such powers of overdetermination intimate to the very structure of the Internet to continually wage a war of delimitation against online formations, obstructing in this way their potential for truly original forms of enunciation and organization. Of course, there are always escapes, from the modulation of social media as a vehicle for revolutionary mobilization to the pseudo-clandestine cells of the so-called dark Internet. A second threat extends from the very existence of niche communities insofar as they have been increasingly appropriated as speculative market probes in service of neoliberal capitalism. Here, we are faced with a potential reduction and co-
optation of group enunciations divorced from their liberatory material powers and circuited back into market drives. Of course, these scenarios might appear concomitantly, where online niche markets are both commercially parasited and, yet, function in potentially affirmative and positive ways for their users.

The study of online niche formations must not lose sight of its radical import as an antidote to both the passive incorporation of technology as a presumption of educational progressivism or otherwise, the flattening of online learning systems into aggrandized blackboards, televisions, or surrogate lecturers. It is with the analysis of niche online formations that we might eclipse a contemporary preoccupation with systems of content delivery in order that we might fulminate a more fundamental question of how online spaces are already being utilized pedagogically and further, how such “territories of use” have material implications for both subjective production and social organization. This is to begin our analysis with the expectation that heterogeneity is the “norm” (albeit always under threat), and in extension, to rethink online learning as less the object of formal online education than an informal curriculum organized not from above (that is, by dint of an “external” curriculum), but immanent to the concerns and interests of a group-subject who eke out, amidst the complexity of the Internet, more “simplified” yet intensified territories of association. In this way, we might continue to seek ways to affirm the experimental and positive potential of online spaces amidst the threat of their increasing corporate enclosure and delimitation.

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REFERENCES


