

The Pandemic of “The Other Half”: Patriarchy, Capitalism and Technology during COVID-19.

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Grace (a pseudonym used to protect her privacy) was a British student of 19 when her ex-boyfriend posted nude pictures of her on social media, which she managed to have removed. Two years later, she discovered that her images had been re-shared on Instagram during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown. This time it took her almost 10 days to have the photos deleted. Grace explained to *Insider* magazine that the platform responded to her removal requests stating that not all flagged content could be reviewed due to the ongoing pandemic (Ankel, 2020). This development – she added – caused her to suffer multiple panic attacks.

Nearly at the same time of Grace’s reporting, an Irish worker named Isabella experienced first-hand what it meant to be a woman on the other side of the screen. A content moderator of 27, Isabella was employed by Covalen, a specialised firm to which Meta (Instagram’s parent corporation) entrusted a portion of their moderation operations. During her workday – Isabella explained to an Irish parliamentary committee which summoned her as a witness – she was expected to review about 100 highly triggering online videos, pictures and messages (e.g. non-consensually shared nudes, death and rape threats, clips of tortures, killings and suicides) (Irish National Parliament, 2021). As epitomised by Grace’s story, social media abuse proliferated after COVID struck, further increasing Isabella’s workload. Isabella was also denied permission to work from home. Shortly after, she began to suffer of anxiety, and was forced to take anti-depressants.

The pandemic experience of a third young woman, Célia L., was shaped not by any traumatic interactions with digital technologies, but by her inability to access the Internet. A French girl of 14, Célia only had web access through her phone, and was thus unable to download homework or attend classes during lockdowns. “Attached pages and links did not always work. No one could access the school’s website from a smartphone” – she explained to NGO Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Having collected testimonies from schoolchildren internationally, Human Rights Watch emphasised that girls like Célia

experienced digital exclusion during COVID-19 times in even higher proportions than their male peers.

By starting this essay with vignettes describing the challenges faced by three women during the COVID-19 pandemic, I have a twofold purpose. First, I mean to pay homage to these individual women as well as to the long-standing feminist tradition of building theoretical propositions based on the analysis and juxtaposition of women's stories (Hekman, 1997). Second, I intend to abstract from these stories to offer some considerations on the entangled intersections between patriarchy, capitalism, and technology. As such, the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy has attracted much scholarly attention during the 1970s-1980s (e.g. Eisenstein, 1979), recently inspiring a new wave of Marxist-feminist contributions (Arruzza, 2016). Similarly, a great deal has been written on how gender and technology mutually influence one another (see Wacjman, 2000). Yet rapid and ongoing digital innovation has opened a Pandora's box of connected problems which feminists are still grappling with: from unprecedented manifestations of technology-facilitated violence (Powell and Henry, 2017), to new forms of gendered labour exploitation (Gregg and Andrijasevic, 2019), and entrenched disparities stemming from unequal access to digital resources (Wang and Degol, 2017). In this essay I attempt to link these discrete phenomena by proposing a novel conceptualisation of patriarchy and capitalism as two oppressive, intersecting societal logics, whose embedment into processes of technology use, production and distribution gives rise to overlapping forms of gendered injustice. I illustrate my arguments using examples extracted from various European countries during the COVID-19 pandemic – an “extreme contest” (Hällgren et al, 2018) thus able to afford us especially sharp insights.

Patriarchy and capitalism as logics, technology as “logic carrier”

Societal logics can be regarded as distinct meaning systems that constitute the basis of social order (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). Logics are commonly said to present a symbolic component – series of core beliefs and values – and a material one – sets of practices through which said beliefs and values are brought to life (Thornton et al, 2012). Based on this potent combination, logics exert a strong influence on how people think and act: they provide criteria for legitimacy against which our behaviour is judged, and establish rewards and punishments to incentivise us to abide to such prescriptions (Friedland and Alford, 1991).

My conceptualisation of patriarchy as a societal logic resonates with important work in feminist research (e.g. Acker, 1989). Seminal conceptualisations from the 1980s, in particular, treated patriarchy as an institutionalised system of male dominance, promoting the view that there are ineliminable differences between women and men (e.g. Walby, 1989). This view – researchers from the 1980s proposed – has then been reified through human beings’ socialisation into traditional masculine and feminine roles, ultimately giving rise to unequal gender power relations in all aspects of life: law, the home, and a great variety of organisations (MacKinnon, 1989).

It is worth noticing that earlier feminist works and more recent scholarly efforts which resonate with the notion of patriarchy as a societal logic differ in their conceptualisation in at least one important way. Indeed, recent scholarship inspired by the notion of intersectionality is increasingly cognisant of the diversity of women’s experiences in time and space, and has moved away from understanding patriarchy as a universal and historically invariable phenomenon (Crenshaw, 2017). That said, the acknowledgement that gendered injustice cannot be understood through consideration of a single oppressive system is one of the very reasons why the concept of logic is particularly apt to shed light on the inner workings of patriarchy. At its core, in fact, research on logics suggests that social life is shaped by the interactions between multiple, cross-cutting orders – e.g. the logics of family, market, state bureaucracy, religion – all carrying social norms about what constitutes appropriate human behaviour (Besharov and Smith, 2014). Incidentally, this suggestion is especially helpful in illuminating how patriarchy interacts with the other dominant logic I am examining: capitalism.

As has happened with analyses of patriarchy, the idea that a specific logic might underpin capitalist functioning echoes key scholarly debates. It has often been suggested, for example, that capitalism is maintained through deep-seated social rules and the emotional reactions attached to these (Konings, 2015), as well as the reiteration of socially encouraged behaviours (Sewell, 2008). More recently, scholars interested in either patriarchy or capitalism have started to explore how digital technologies may contribute to preserve these modes of organising. Specifically, it has been argued that technologies act as “material carriers” of dominant societal infrastructures (Scott, 2013), whose principles become encoded in various devices. As a result, oppressive power relations are eventually reproduced (Noble, 2018).

In this essay, my overall proposition is that the interconnected logics of patriarchy and capitalism are embedded into digital socio-material assemblages in three distinct ways. First,

both patriarchy and capitalism shape the consumption of technology by individual end-users, with several forms of digital gender-based violence constituting a notable manifestation of this mechanism. Secondly, patriarchy and capitalism are rooted in processes of digital technology production, and into the patterns of labour organisation that descend from this. Thirdly, both logics affect the distribution of digital resources among the genders, which in turn impacts technology usage and production and propagates a vicious cycle of injustice. In the remainder of this essay, I offer some illustrations of these mechanisms from across Europe in COVID-19 times.

Gendered patterns of technology use, production, and distribution in times of COVID-19

Since early COVID outbreaks, several national surveys registered sharp increases in instances of digital gender-based violence. In the United Kingdom, for example, over 2,050 reports were made between March and September 2020 to a government-funded helpline supporting women whose intimate images had been distributed online without consent, marking a dramatic rise from pre-pandemic figures (Criddle, 2020). Additionally, research commissioned by dating app Bumble revealed that during COVID one in four British women noticed a surge in sexual harassment incidents on dating applications (Potter, 2021). In Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Spain, too, NGO Plan International (2020) found during the first year of the pandemic that an average of 63 percent young female respondents had been molested on social media.

Whilst hardly comparable in a systematic manner, these studies point to at least two trends emerged in pre-pandemic years and heightened during the health crisis: the co-existence of multiple forms of technology-facilitated abuse, and the visibly gendered nature of the phenomenon (European Union, 2014). My specific argument, here, is that a closer look to how the logics of patriarchy and capitalism are embedded in technology use can help us understand how and why this happened. On the one hand, I have mentioned above that conceptualising patriarchy as a logic entails paying attention to individual socialisation into sexist beliefs and behaviours. I will now propose that in the digital era careful consideration must be devoted to how socialisation also takes place in online exchanges. Specifically, a plethora of cyber-psychology studies has already demonstrated that the spreading of problematic values and abusive conducts is facilitated by the unique characteristics of digital interactions (e.g. Attrill-Smith et al, 2017). Based on this, it is easy to see how the forced

increase in time spent on the Internet during the pandemic emergency led to an escalation of online gender-based violence.

On the other hand, the incorporation of the capitalistic logic into digital devices is an equally important part of the story. A burgeoning body of research sheds light on the pivotal role that the algorithmic structures and data-mining business models of leading commercial platforms play in the present adaptation of capitalism to a digital environment (see Srnicek, 2017a). Somewhat less studied, yet equally significant, are the effects of said structure and business models on online abuse. It is now well-established that platform algorithms are purposefully designed to present users with attention-grabbing updates, to keep them online as long as possible and produce monetisable data (Zuboff, 2019). And since sexist content is especially likely to attract attention, there are clear indications that its circulation may be explicitly favoured by algorithm functioning – a dynamic peaking during the pandemic (Haugen, 2021).

The second part of my proposition pertains to how the overlapping logics of patriarchy and capitalism influence not only the inner workings of digital technologies, but also their ways of production. This mechanism applies, I argue, to various levels of the digital technology supply chain: from technological design (a field in which women are still vastly under-represented, Wang and Degol, 2017), to the lowest echelons of the industry pyramid (e.g. platform workers, factory personnel, and other underpaid sectors where women are instead over-represented, or face gender-specific additional challenges, Giugni, 2022). An exhaustive analysis of the global dynamics of labour distribution within the tech sector falls outside the bounds of this essay. Still, recent European developments offer us precious insights into the general picture. During the pandemic, especially, several European countries saw a marked increase in the reporting of exploitative labour conditions from women platform workers. These included Irish social media moderators – whose daily job, like that of the protagonist of one of the initial vignettes, involve the Sisyphean task of deleting from the Internet the very abusive content that commercial platform design stimulates users to produce (Criddle, 2021). Another intriguing development lied with the organising of British and Italian “influencers” and digital content creators (Tait, 2020): labourers operating within a precarious and largely feminised job market (women represent over 80 percent of Instagram content creators globally, Statista, 2019). Importantly, there was a common reason behind this international turmoil. Following the over-use of Internet platforms during COVID-19, heterogenous women platform workers all faced a significant increase in their workload, which was not matched by better financial rewards or improved labour protections.

Returning to my central conceptualisation, there are evident links between these developments and some of the latest incarnations of the capitalistic logic: for example, tech corporations' tendency to entrusting low-paid, "replaceable" labourers with tasks that are key to enable Internet platforms' operations, while depriving them of traditional employment welfare (Srnicek, 2017b). On the other hand, as shown by the cases of both moderators and digital content creators, tech workers' gender may also amplify their vulnerability (namely, female moderators were specifically affected during COVID-19 by their increased exposure to misogynistic online content, Criddle, 2021). Both these dynamics thus confirm my proposition that the pandemic acted as both a mirror and an accelerator of the capitalistic and patriarchal trends embedded into technology production processes.

Finally, one last mechanism to be considered is the gender-unequal distribution of digital resources. Already prior to 2020, and whilst performing comparatively better than other continents, Europe exhibited a significant gender gap in access to the Internet and key digital skills. To this day, only 19 percent of EU-based IT students are female, and just 1 percent of girls across the continent report they intend to work in technology (Eurostat, 2023). Even in relatively gender-equal countries such as the UK, women represent almost 60 percent of those excluded from technology use (Office of National Statistics, 2019). And yet again, these deep-seated disparities can be connected to both patriarchal stereotypes regarding the relationship between gender and technology, and the division of labour that has historically supported capitalism, which preferentially allocated high-skilled, technical jobs to male workers while relegating women into care-centred roles (e.g. Wajcman, 1991). As a result of this legacy, when COVID-19 struck women and girls were disproportionately affected by the sudden necessity to connect to the Internet to work and study. Female students, above all, reported alarming difficulties in attending online classes due to the lack of both adequate devices and appropriate training (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Tellingly, UNESCO (2020) estimates that such events might visibly reverse the gradual but clear improvements registered in previous decades in terms of gender-based educational parity. And it is not hard to identify the potential impact of this regression on the other indicators of injustice I previously examined. In fact, women excluded from both technology and education are less likely to develop the ability to protect themselves from digital violence. They are also less likely to gain future access to high-skilled technology-related professions, thus reinforcing a vicious circle that links educational inequalities, labour exploitation, and exposure to abuse.

In conclusion, trends from COVID-19 times reveal the extent to which the patriarchal and capitalistic logics intersect amidst advanced digital innovation, and of their joint impact over processes of technology consumption, production, and distribution. As we come out of the pandemic, we should deem it equally vital to expand our understanding of such intersections, and to gather empirical data that might illuminate their impact over specific contexts. This short essay is therefore meant as both a photography of current times and food for thought towards future theoretical and empirical studies.

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