“There’s something compelling about real life”: Technologies of security and acceleration on Chaturbate

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Abstract
Adult webcam platforms, or sexcams, can be considered platforms for the laboring of affect: machines that exploit, accelerate, and capitalize on it. As expected, the primary source of value is the broadcast of sexual performances. However, this article argues, the extraction of value on sexcam platforms relies as well on some of the early established conventions of webcamming, such as the perception of real-time and real-life. The location and quality of the shows are relevant for these reasons, along with the various sorts of personal interactions between the audience and performers. While some of these interactions resemble personal or human ones, the characteristics and scale of exchange that the platform enables, with thousands of viewers connected at the same time demanding the attention of one performer, require new technologies of assistance that involve humans and software—and some entanglements in between. Those technologies are located in the tension of generating value by accelerating exchanges while preserving the attributes that give them value in the first place. This article identifies some of the actors involved and investigates how they contribute to this double articulation.

Keywords
platform economy, sexcams, affect, authenticity, acceleration, technologies of security, bots

A Machine of Affect
Once peripheral phenomena on the Web, camming websites—such as Chaturbate, MyFreeCams, or LiveJasmin—have been gaining social and economic importance in the last years, attracting millions of visitors every day (Cunningham et al., 2018). Among other factors, crucial for this popularity is the technical and economic model used by these sites. Like other enterprises that profit from the current version and spread of the on-demand or gig economy, camming websites allow people to informally provide low-cost services and user-generated content through a networked digital platform, with minimum restrictions and lack of contractual ties. Platforms, generally speaking, take advantage of existing markets by mediating between users and providers and becoming the field where exchanges take place (Gillespie, 2010; Smnec, 2016). However, under the appearance “of flat and frictionless digital labor markets” (van Doorn, 2017), on-demand platforms are more than intermediaries: they enact an economic and political vision, a technical model, and a discourse. Technological hybrids, platforms can be considered assemblages that “pull things together into temporary higher-order aggregations” (Bratton, 2015) with unpredictable results. Fact and fiction, the platforms explored here hold bodies of different natures, creating the conditions for their entanglements and profiting from their exchanges.

By promoting circulation through online sexual performances, personal interactions, and monetary exchanges, sexcam platforms are—paraphrasing Patricia Ticineto Clough (2013)—machines for “the laboring of affect”: machines that exploit, accelerate, and capitalize on it. As expected, this extraction is conveyed mainly through sexual shows and emotional work (Hochschild, 2012)—understood here as specific types of reproductive labor (Federici, 2012). However, webcamming is a genre with its own conventions. Following Raymond Williams (1977), a convention is “an established relationship, or ground of a relationship, through which a specific shared practice [...] can be realized.” Albeit historical, conventions are often naturalized, and the “inclusions and exclusions, the styles and the ways of seeing, that specific conventions embody and ratify” become invisible.
By focusing on the JenniCam—the first webcam featuring a human—part one of this article examines how the conventions of the genre, its zones of intensity and ways to actualize affect, were outlined in the late 1990s. The second part explores some of the technologies that Chaturbate.com—at this time one of the most popular sexcam platforms—uses for replicating those conventions in a larger (and accelerated) scale. The technologies examined here are chat moderators, apps, and bots. Drawing freely upon Foucault's (2007) concept of *technologies of security*, I see those actors as technologies located in the tension of generating value by accelerating exchanges while trying to preserve the attributes that give them value in the first place.

This article draws upon a broader research project about work on sexcam platforms that I have been conducting since 2014. For doing this, I followed a research-creation methodological approach (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012; Manning, 2008) combining art-based research,^{1} sensory ethnography (Pink, 2009), statistical analysis, and inductive content analysis. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most relevant insights did not come from using a particular method but from the interconnections among them—including overlaps, conflicts, and disconnections. As Gilles Deleuze explains, “[w]hat defines [the multiplicity] is the AND, as something which has its place between the elements” (as cited in Coleman & Ringrose, 2013a). Collaterally, an interdisciplinary approach incited connections among corpus from different realms, as it can be seen in the section on bots and apps toward the end of this article. Looking for the early established zones of intensity on webcams and their current incarnations, I explored textual and visual information from two different times (1990–2003 and 2014–2018) from public broadcastings and chat logs, dedicated online forums, blog and social media posts, and Web archives.

“A Real-Time Look Into the Real Life of a Young Woman”

In 1996, Jennifer Ringley, a 19-year-old college student and Web designer, installed a camera on the top of her computer and started broadcasting through the internet, one image every 15 min. Ringley’s was not the first webcam. Before hers, a coffee pot and a fish tank were available for public viewing on the internet, also revolving around matters of contemplation and control as in a fascinated surveillance. The medium was undeniably the message: the first webcams not only transmitted something but also the evidence of that possibility. Ringley, however, would consolidate the genre and would be part of the history of the internet forever when she directed the camera to herself, in her room. With that gesture, the JenniCam was born, and it would be alive for the next 7 years. Ringley’s was not the last webcam, either. Her action put in motion a multitude of webcammers, most of them women, that would change notions of representation, entrepreneurship and privacy, in and out of the internet.

As defined by Ringley, the JenniCam was “a real-time look into the real life of a young woman” (“jen-ni-cam,” 1999). Despite the small number of images updated per hour, Ringley was lucid in establishing real-time as the first condition of the JenniCam. Real-time is the time of the internet, a reparatory term that denies any mediation but requires an intensification that can only be brought out by technology (Doane, 2006). Real-time is a “sufficiently immediate” time (White, 2006) that “entails the promise of an experience of the now” (Weltevrede et al., 2014). As such, real-time was “the new crack” (Lovink, 2011): the condition for the internet version of a common present, the coincidence that demonstrates that there was someone out there, a zone of intensity.

The JenniCam emerged between the “deep anxieties about the integrity of identity online” (Maguire, 2018) and “the techno dreams of cyberspace as a parallel virtual reality” (Lovink, 2011). Cyberspace, imagined with psychedelic colors and populated by cyborgs, was suddenly just a 320px by 240px grainy (but reassuring) image of a blonde young woman brushing her teeth. Fascinating for thousands of newly connected viewers, it became one of the most popular websites of the early Web. If this fascination started due to its novelty and as a “response to difference” (Smit, 2000), its circulation would produce affect and attract more viewers due to its “stickiness” (Ahmed, 2004). As Ringley elaborated, “I think it’s human to not want to be alone, [a]nd with JenniCAM they put it in the corner of their monitor and it’s like having someone in the next room” (Allen, 1999)—even if their vital signs update every 15 min.

A crucial aspect of the JenniCam was the real life that it featured—its realness (Paasonen, 2011). Visitors of the JenniCam would commonly find Ringley sitting in front of her computer, petting her cat or eating ice-cream out of the container. Less common but most sensational were the brief moments in which she was naked or having sex.

Q: You’re naked sometimes, is this pornography?

A: Pornography is in the eye of the beholder. [. . . ] Yes, my site contains nudity from time to time. Real life contains nudity. Yes, it contains sexual material from time to time. Real life contains sexual material. However, this is not a site about nudity and sexual material. It is a site about real life. (“JenniCam - Frequently Asked Questions,” 1999, emphasis in the original)

Ringley wanted to “show people that what we see on TV—people with perfect hair, perfect friends, perfect lives—is not reality. I’m reality” (as cited in Senft, 2008). Again, not just life but a real one: the evidence that something was happening somewhere right now, without time for ornaments and challenging the ‘cheesy’ conventions of commodified entertainment” (Andrejevic, 2004a). As Ringley stated, “there’s something compelling about real life that staging it wouldn’t bring to the medium” (“JenniCam—Frequently

^{1} Art-based research is an interdisciplinary qualitative research method that includes a work of art (worked upon by the researcher) in the research process (Williams, 2020).
asked questions,” 1999). Again, the medium seemed to be
the message. But what did it say?

The real life of the webcam, what Ringley was bringing
into being, was a particular one: the real life of a young
woman. Although in her time the gesture was mostly framed
as exhibitionism (Dazed, 2016; Shalit, 1998), Ringley was
direct in stating that “the cam has been there long enough
that now I ignore it” (“JenniCam - Frequently Asked
Questions,” 1999). Indeed, the camera has been there long
enough. Following Raymond William’s (1997) framework,
Ringley did not make history by establishing a new subject
but a new matter: a young woman in a domestic space in
charge of her representation in the domestic space—through
the internet. Like other self-declared camgirls of that period,
Ringley’s social experiment engaged explicitly “with the
concept of being looked at” (Maguire, 2018). Or, as Mark
Andrejevic (2004a) puts it, performing the “work of being
watched.” Being observed was not a source of discomfort to
avoid but a familiar space to explore and inhabit. There, the
assumed performer and the connected audience could
meet, building meaning and representation together through
interactions (Senft, 2008; White, 2006) and the “affective
dynamics of looking” (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013b).
Through those dynamics, camgirls and audiences participat-
pated in the creation of a particular type of representation
and the establishment of a “confession culture” (Senft, 2008)
with a long-standing impact, challenging beliefs about the
political of the personal.

Unlike other webcammers that pursued a more explicit
performative or pornographic engagement with the webcam
(Snyder, 2000), Ringley soon committed to what Senft
(2008) calls “theatrical authenticity,” construct that would
define the genre onward. That authenticity entailed a refusal
to seek monetary gain out of the JenniCam. “I feel like a
traitor,” she said when implementing a paid subscription
model for subsidizing streaming costs (“JenniCAM Guests,”
1997). The internet was going to be free, in different senses,
and the means of production would be horizontally distrib-
uted—we were told. However, despite being the only one in
charge of what would become a popular media show, Jennifer Ringley was rarely portrayed as a Web pioneer or
media producer but mostly as “a curiosity” (Andrejevic,
2004b). Ringley herself contributed to this narrative by pre-
senting the JenniCam as a “sort of window into a virtual
human zoo” (Ringley, 2000), without highlighting the
intense labor it required in terms of setup, maintenance and
care for the audience—on camera and through a separate
IRC chat. Drawing upon Terri Senft (2008), self-entrepre-
neurship and emotional labor shaped what the real life of a
young woman meant.

“The interesting thing is not me, the interesting thing is
the camera” Ringley said (Hagenbaugh, 1997). Not only the
camera, though. Albeit commonly confused, the JenniCam
was not Jennifer Ringley, nor the camera alone. Ringley was
explicit on the hybrid nature of the compound: “[w]hen

An Accelerated Togetherness

The closing of the JenniCam “marked the end of an era”
(Senft, 2008). Among other factors, camgirls were no longer
a novelty, webcams more accessible, and the confessional
culture spread to other media. Around 10 years later, the
webcammer as a massive phenomenon reappeared with the
rise of the on-demand platforms that allow people to provide
low-cost services and user-generated content in an informal
way through the internet. However deviating from Ringley’s
concept, the zones of intensity of the JenniCam and the bod-
ies it assembled have influenced webcamming onward.

If conventions are established relationships, they are
habits, zones that carry a particular intensity. The early
conventions of the JenniCam have had an enduring impact
on who is observed on the webcam and how, where this
subject is, what they are doing, what the spectacle is
about, how affect is actualized. On current sexcam plat-
forms such as Chaturbate, one of the most popular sexcam
platforms and where thousands of webcammers broadcast
sexual performances, work is often seen as “an irritation”
and shows appear to be “the products of leisure, not of
work” (Hofer, 2014). Because monetary compensations
seem to be voluntary, people who ask for money are con-
temptuously called “token-whores” and direct associa-
tions with sex work are avoided. Streaming from what
looks like their own rooms (and labeled as such), webcam
performers state clear that, more than working, they are
having fun: “I repeat myself but it’s important for me to
let you know how much I enjoy my time online with you!,” a popular performer declares (Lewis, 2017). Even in those that are called “studio farms”—webcam studios that manage several performers at the same time—rooms are often disguised as bedrooms and professional traits masked, trying to sustain credibility in the *realness* of the performances. As in amateur pornography, the tensions “between work and the home, labor and pleasure, public and private spheres” (Hofer, 2014) produce a particular quality and shape the perceptions of authenticity, intimacy, and leisure. The real life of the JenniCam, where people work but appear not to be and the gaze seems unlimited, is still *real* on current sexcams.

The perception of immediacy of the webcam, its particular *realtimeness* (Weltevrede et al., 2014), is always relevant but continuously redefined. If the JenniCam displayed a new frame every 15 min, current technologies allow and promote different habits of vision, with ranges between 24 and 60 frames per second. Although with a different expression, the expectation of simultaneity and confirmation that someone is out there persist. Not just *out there*, though. In a one-to-many model of broadcasting, performers are supposed to take care of thousands of viewers at once. This augmented emotional work requires long-lasting sexual performances, entertaining, attention, and conversation to the members of the audience. “I prefer girls like you who interact with us. If I want to see images of women having sex, there *are* millions of places on the web for that. The interaction is what makes this interesting,” a participant states during a transmission. Personal interactions are not limited to the timeframe of the shows but spread to other social media platforms that extend and intensify the work (Berg, 2016; Richardson, 2018; van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). The audience collaborates as well in this construction because rooms in sexcams, as in the JenniCam, are often not only sources of transmissions but places of reunion and *togetherness*, where they meet and socialize with and around the performer.

The togetherness that happens in sexcam rooms is accelerated through technologies. These technologies allow to increase the number of viewers and their exchanges, with the performer and among them. Following Sara Ahmed (2010), this circulation produces affect (or actualizes it), sustaining the compound and making it *sticky*. This stickiness will attract even more viewers and new components to its viscosity, making compelling for several actors to invest in this circulation. The platform, for example, rather than trying to balance the uneven distribution of the audience, regularly implement new technologies for speeding up the circulation of the most popular rooms. In this way, while the most popular ones will be displayed on the front page of the website and will attract even more viewers, most of the performers will hardly be noticed in further pages. This newly *accelerated togetherness*, however, will require new technologies of assistance.

### Technologies of Security (and Acceleration): the Simple, the Compound, and the Spurious

The sexcam platforms discussed in this article—like other platforms that provide user-generated content and informal services—extract value from qualities such as intimacy and authenticity (Liang et al., 2018). Still, a context of thousands of simultaneous exchanges and requests toward one performer creates a complex scenario for maintaining those perceptions. The intensity of those properties, that *something compelling about real life* that gives value to the platform have to be simplified for managing its circulation.

The technologies of assistance for managing circulation on sexcam platforms could correspond to what Foucault (2007) calls “technologies of security.” Technologies of security are a wide range of norms and practices that operate by simplifying the social to a limited set of behaviors. They try to prevent the disruption of the system and create a milieu—where circulation can be accelerated. In the case of Chaturbate, a variety of actors collaborate sustaining its accelerated togetherness. These mechanisms are located in the tension of increasing affective value by accelerating exchanges while preserving the aura of authenticity that gives it value in the first place. The actors involved in those technologies are human, machines, and some entanglements in between. Among them, this article will comment on the role of moderators and automated components such as bots and apps.

### Moderators

In its most common form, moderators (“mods”) are fans of the performer who have received permission for managing the chat, generally as a recognition of their commitment. As in gaming platforms (Taylor, 2018), being a mod is considered an honor and a duty: a promotion that reduces the distance to the performer and creates a special position among other fans. During the transmissions, moderators have direct communication with the performer and can mediate with the audience if problems arise (“What is a mod?,” n.d.). Although the role usually has no monetary retribution, some moderators obtain access to privileged content (private shows or videos, for example) or receive extra attention from the performers through social media or text messages. Their role consists mostly of protecting the chat from disruptive behavior, silencing users and spambots, as well as encouraging donations to the performer. Because a big part of the attraction of sexcams is the togetherness, this “positive chatroom environment” where nobody seems to be working (“How do I fulfill my duties as a mod?,” n.d.), mods prevent performers from being distracted with administrative tasks—including asking for money. As promoted by a Chaturbate’s affiliated site, moderators contribute to the atmosphere of the room in several capacities:
Avoiding disruption, moderators help to maintain “live streams as functioning social and communicative spaces” (Taylor, 2018) and are de facto technologies of security. However, as such, they have to keep the circulation between the optimal and the acceptable (Foucault, 2007). Therefore, it is not only about control but also modulation. As explained by a moderator, “[a] good mod is an asset. A bad mod will kill your room so fast you’ll wonder what’s happened” (perseus1967cb, 2016). A bad mod is characterized as overprotective and controlling, a person that “will silence anyone & everyone he/she doesn’t like.” This behavior will “tend to have a chilling effect on comments and activity in the room, which most models definitely shouldn’t want” (Buttler, 2016). Armed with emoticons, prewritten messages, and mute buttons, moderators exert and incarnate some of the technologies that the accelerated intimacy the site exploits require. But they do not only execute robotic maintenance tasks: They can be, and often are, replaced by bots.

**Bots**

In the context of Chaturbate, apps and bots are open-source software instructions that extend the capabilities of the rooms, serving as tools for handling and attracting audiences. Apps and bots are written in the same language but receive either name according to their degree of complexity, and they are made (or adapted) by independent developers, usually fans of the performers or performers themselves. Enacting the “programmability” of platforms (Mckelvey, 2011), apps do not modify them permanently but actualize for a moment some of their potential (Bratton, 2015). Accordingly, bots on Chaturbate can enable contests, display messages, and ask for money. They can also perform less visible duties like blocking the ability to chat for users without tokens or banning the use of specific words, such as the ones expressing demands, denoting spam or that can come across as inappropriate.

Bots are primarily visible in the chat window of the room, principally used by the audience to communicate with the performers and among them. Unless someone is typing in behalf of the performer, the performer’s side of the chat shows mostly informative texts produced by bots, such as the rules of the room, the tip menu, and the received donations. In this way, bots on Chaturbate not only facilitate the management of a broad audience but also alleviate the performers of their most repetitive communications. As a performer declares, “I’m sorry but when rooms get busy it’s very difficult to thank everyone personally. I have missed several tippers due to very active chatting. I would rather have something acknowledge every tip then have someone feel unappreciated” (kmoore, n.d., emphasis added). Messages produced by humans and machines render in the chat in a similar way, where the distinction between them not only does not seem to be relevant but it is erased actively to accelerate circulation.

Bots in Chaturbate, however, resist a regular classification. Although these bots are *bots in a chat*, they are not precisely chatbots or socialbots that intend to pass as autonomous entities (human beings or not) as in other social media sites. If to exist socialbots need *a face and a brain*, a profile and a socialbot software (Boshmaf et al., 2011), bots on Chaturbate do not need a different persona other than the performer. Following this definition, they could be considered *cyborgs*: a hybrid category describing “bot-assisted humans or human-assisted bots” (Chu et al., 2010a). Still, these entities are easier to grasp by borrowing a taxonomy for the nineteenth-century automata.

In 1821, Robert Willis proposed three categories for describing automata: “the simple, the compound, and the spurious—or, those depending on mechanism alone, those moved by machinery but also in communication with a human agent, and those controlled solely by a human agent ‘under the semblance only of mechanism’” (Sussman, 1999, p. 74). In this mode, bots displaying notices could be considered simple ones and the bots displaying messages as performers could be considered compounds of machines and humans. But there are some spurious ones as well. Indeed, some bots display messages prewritten by the performer as if they were chatbots. Designed “to be stealthy” (Boshmaf et al., 2011), they try, however, not to pass as humans but as chatbots. Hence, they have bot names (*Zax, Liz*) and introduce themselves unapologetically as such, autonomous agents without responsibility for their words. The following text is part of the code of a bot, showing possible replies that would appear randomly in reaction to some words previously defined:

```javascript
var otherSnarkText = [

'S, I think you need a girlfriend.!',
'Dude, have you considered therapy?!
',
'Are you . talking to me? ' ,
'S, I don't think I like you. ' ,
'Go read a book. $',
'Allow me to present "Robot Not Caring" \u2192 [ZAXBOT]',
'Bite me. ',
'Meh. ',
'*sigh*',
'Don’t you have anything better to do than talk to a robot on a lovely ',
' + day() + ',
'dude?',
'\C\mon, my database only has so much snark
```
to share...’; ‘$ maybe you need to get off the computer and rethink your life,’ ‘All I hear is a faint buzzing’.

(universitysmiles, n.d.)

These bots are described as tools for “models who aren’t naturally passive-aggressive but find it appropriate in response to demanding users” (universitysmiles, n.d.) or as “a bitchy AI for models who don’t like being bitchy” (codeanon, n.d.), helping performers to maintain that friendly environment where payment is not an obligation. Although pretending otherwise, these bots are not autonomous entities. Yet most of the performers, addressing thousands of viewers at the same time, are not independent either. By sending messages that could or could not have been written by the performer, more than deceiving the audience, bots contribute to the formation of a kind of robo-sociality (Bakardjieva, 2017): a sociality simplified to accelerate its circulation while keeping some of the characteristics that actualize affect.

Apps

The most popular apps on Chaturbate allow the audience to trigger the vibration of sex-toys remotely through monetary donations. The services are often advertised in terms of “give me pleasure with your tips!” and performers who use those apps correlate the amount of money received with the intensity, duration, and pattern of the vibrations. In line with the tradition of the automata and coin-operated machines, the audience expects to perceive the effect of their tips on the performer’s body. Their reactions are a source of public entertainment and a sort of video game where the audience collaborates in the orgasm of the performer. Due to its high gratification level (“why tip if it is not going to show” a member asks in a chat), this type of application became popular quickly, changing the landscape of Chaturbate. They standardized shows and increased the number of monetary exchanges and viewers on the site, contributing as much to the acceleration as to the homogenization of the platform. Conventions of the genre, such as the authenticity and simultaneity of the JenniCam, do not disappear but change their expressions.

With the use of these apps, the evidence of a connection between audience and performers is no longer only by chatting but through the reactions that monetary donations seem to produce on the performer’s body. Conversational and entertaining skills, before valuable assets in webcam platforms, lose their importance and allow performers to handle bigger audiences, facilitating the emergence of webcammers that do not speak English—even if English remains as the primary language of the platform. Monetary donations acquire a more significant and literal potential with the use of these apps, which leads to an acceleration in the circulation of currency on the platform. This acceleration, however, does not necessarily entail speed: A more passive attitude of the performers, waiting to be affected by the vibrations, brings back some of the slowness of the JenniCam.

These new forms of authenticity and togetherness received criticisms: “[s]ince models use this kind of toy, no more real shows. Models are waiting in front of cam without doing anything. Really annoying. Furthermore, most of them simulate pleasure. What a fake!” (geni_xxx, n.d.). In fact, besides the exaggeration—or not—of the performances of pleasure, the setup of these sex-toys is a complex process that involves the app, a specific browser, and a phone. A user in the same forum complains: “I refuse to tip models using this toy because there is NO SURE WAY TO KNOW if they are using the correct apps necessary to make the toy work properly or just faking a reaction.” And another person replies: “who really cares if they are faking it as long as the person who is tipping enjoys the reaction.” As with the JenniCam, sexcams challenge standard classifications: The simple, the compound, and the spurious—and the affective viscosity where these categories dissolve.

Setting “the stage for actions to unfold” (Bratton, 2015), the platform allows the materialization of a new assembled body: an overlap of the compound automaton and the spurious one, a mix of humans and machinery—and its impersonation. As with the Industrial Revolution’s automata (Sussman, 1999), this fiction does not surge in a void but in a techno-economic landscape where it could exist, where capital not only reproduces global processes in bodies—as feminist scholars have recalled—but fabricates ones that can affect and be affected by thousands. The automaton is not only a figure here: if a body is formed by relations of forces and velocities (Parisi & Terranova, 2000), these apps facilitate to re-configure the bodies of the performers by embedding capital in their structure, taming, and making them able to react to stimuli sent by thousands of unknown viewers. Likewise, this new generated speed of circulation modifies the bodies of the audience as well, giving them the power to affect the body of a stranger remotely, bounded to this assemblage by the sticky qualities of the accelerated affect.

Conclusion

Sexcam platforms are machines for the laboring of affect: machines that exploit, accelerate, and capitalize on it. This extraction entails the exploitation of zones of intensity with always new technologies. However, despite the novelty of these technologies, some webcamming conventions established more than 20 years ago are still relevant for its extraction of value. Following Raymond William’s (1977) characterization of conventions as established relationships, this article understands them as zones of intensity. From the beginning of webcamming with the JenniCam, in 1996, those conventions rely on the perception of simultaneity, intimacy, and authenticity—among others. In the large and
accelerated scale of the platform, extracting value from these perceptions require the assistance of a particular set of technologies.

The technologies mentioned above are located in the tension of generating value by accelerating exchanges while preserving (or mimicking) the attributes that give them value in the first place. These technologies are equated here to what Foucault (2007) calls “technologies of security”: a wide range of norms and practices that operate by simplifying the social to a limited set of behaviors. This article identifies three of them: moderators, apps, and bots.

An exploration of the technologies of security of the platform shows an array of assemblages of human and non-human actors—and their impersonations. While some of those assemblages (such as bots) have received a cyborg denomination (Chu et al., 2010b), this article proposes the adoption of a taxonomy for the Industrial Revolution’s automata (Sussman, 1999) for a better understanding of such constructs. An unveil of the compound and spurious creatures of the platform contributes to problematize the technocratic aspects of its discourse. It shows as well that acceleration is not only an increase of speed but, involving movement and displacement (Massumi, 2017), entails the transformation of actors and structures.

A critical examination of the zones of intensity of the webcam and their genealogies reveals the uneven landscape of the platform. Instead of the flatness that the term evokes—or even Bratton’s (2015) “stack”—the platform seems to be pullulated by a collection of provisional structures and abandoned assemblages. This analysis shows, once again, that the machine that labors affect is not neutral but an opportunistic one that profits from, and perpetuates, pre-existent zones of intensity—such as biases and inequalities. Engaging in what Anna Tsing (2015) calls salvage accumulation (2015) calls salvage accumulation, these machines can co-opt and exploit those pre-existent zones, seeking to impose their logic of extraction.

Finally, this article contributes to illustrate the non-linear history of media. If media and media technologies are “not a fixed substance but [. . .] a realm of affects, potentials, and energetics” (Parikka, 2010), it can be expected to have different temporalities, pockets of intensity that seem to be inactive but, as potential, can always be actualized.

Acknowledgements
I want to express my deep gratitude to the editorial committee of this special issue for their dedicated, kind, and thoughtful work. It is an understatement to say that this article would have had a more rudimentary existence without their help. My sincere thanks also to the two anonymous reviewers for their detailed work and encouraging comments.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Note
1. For more on the art component of this research, see antonia-hernandez.com

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