ANARCHY, STATUS
UPDATES, AND UTOPIA

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What will it take to bring the rule of law to social software?
COUNTDOWN
THREE STORIES

* Privacy on Facebook
* Banishment from Google+
* Censorship in The Sims Online
TWO ANXieties

- The God problem: technical power
  - Code is law
  - And the platform owner controls the code
- The Cheers problem: social lock-in
  - Social software is social
  - No one wants to be the first to leave
ONE CLAIM

- These anxieties are closely linked
- Technical power is inescapable …
- … and inescapably social
THE MASTER SWITCH

- Protests against the “new Facebook” in 2011
- … and 2009 and 2008 and 2006
- Unceasing privacy-architecture churn
- Google suspends accounts, often without warning
- Censorship rumors outpace reality, but there is some
“Like the Internet itself, Diaspora isn’t housed in any one place, and it’s not controlled by any one entity (including us).”

“Bitcoin uses peer-to-peer technology to operate with no central authority … .”

“A central objective of Solipsis is to create a virtual world which is as independent as possible from the influence of private interests, such as server ownership.”
INEVITABILITY

✶ Code is law

✶ Online social media can’t not have software

✶ Freezing the code forever is not a realistic option

✶ Bugs are inevitable

✶ Unexpected use cases mean contested use cases

✶ So someone has to be able to make changes
Social software enables social connections

But it also requires social agreement

What makes Facebook Facebook? Facebook.

What makes Diaspora Diaspora? Diaspora?


These issues do not arise with non-social software
The God problem is more immediately dramatic

But the *Cheers* problem has real bite in the long run

God can’t be nerfed; exit can never be made costless

To join a platform is to commit to a community

Technical change over time is inevitable

And those technical choices are inherently political
IMPLICATIONS
Ex ante contracts can’t possibly be complete enough

Even when embedded in software

Especially when embedded in software

The choice among communities is “free and forced”

Don’t just think of Facebook dictating terms

It’s also Facebook’s other users dictating them to you
Evil BigCo rhetoric is (mostly) overblown

- Zuckerberg doesn’t set a daily oppression quota
- There are petty tyrants, too
- User drama is a customer support cost
- Platforms don’t want to be in the adjudication business
- But social media, by their nature, create conflicts
Governments stand for popular will and rule of law

Except for jurisdictional mismatches

Except when they don’t understand the problem

Except when they are the problem

The mountains are high, and the Emperor is far away
UTOPIA

- Formal rule of law will be in platforms’ own interest
- Even if they’re not always good at recognizing it
- A rule-of-law culture must come from the users
- Governance = cart, polity = horse
- Broad debate and “civic” engagement are essential
- Restraints on the abuse of technical and social power will come from the community, not from the software
The rule of law will come when we, the users, build it.