

Platform Design and Moral Reasoning in the Face of an Existential Threat

A Ukrainian Case Study

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Introduction:

Neorealists claimed Ukraine would crumble instantly. Why has this prediction failed?

- Despite the Ukrainian government's shortcomings, Ukrainians have maintained collective agency through informal cooperation, altruism, and solidarity.
- For this war, individual agency is uniquely important. Hence, individual morality is important.

Thesis:

Digital platforms helped Ukrainians act on unconditional moral obligations by preserving their practical identity in the face of the existential threat.

Structure:

1. Platform design and practical identity
2. Digital platforms and the war since 2014
3. Platform influence and the Ukrainian practical identity in 2022
4. Can we generalize the Ukrainian case?

Preliminary remarks

- I will discuss the moral reasoning of Ukrainian civilians during the initial stage of the full-scale war only.
- I won't discuss well-studied issues such as misinformation & propaganda.

1. Platform design and practical identity

A definition of platforms

- Platforms are "technical-economical systems" that "standardize and consolidate the terms of transaction through decentralized and undetermined interactions" (Bratton, 2015).
 - Platforms standardize social interaction. This has moral implications.
 - This standardization is not explicit and doesn't necessarily feel as enforced.
 - Examples of platforms: Instagram, Facebook, Amazon Marketplace, Binance, etc.
 - Platform design is how they are engineered, and what for.

A slightly narrower definition of platforms

- Platforms are technical-economical systems that shape decentralized and undetermined interactions through algorithmic performativity.
- In this talk, I'm concerned with algorithmic performativity as the design feature of platforms.

What is performativity in AI?

- Performativity = the ability to make predictions with AI systems about populations and forms of social interactions which then significantly affect and shape those populations in a way that can be unexpected to both those who predict and those who are predicted (Hardt et al., 2022).
- In AI practice, performative effects are ubiquitous. For instance, “filter bubbles” on social media is a performative effect.

Performativity and platforms

We can generalize some ethically relevant performative effects in digital platforms as *social world persistence*:

- Platforms keep users in contact with a representation of their social world.
- This representation is less affected by external factors, i.e emergencies., or is affected with delay.
- By design, platforms make users feel in control and smooth over the shock of facing an existential threat.
- Overall, we can metonymize social world persistence as “reflective inertia” of the users.

Social world persistence and practical identity

- Practical identity is what we value in ourselves.
- Practical identity gives rise to unconditional moral obligations by providing “content” to the categorical imperative (Korsgaard and O'Neill, 1996)
- What we value, in particular, depends on what social world we inhabit.
- **I claim that social world persistence is an effect that helped Ukrainians maintain their practical identity.**

2. Digital platforms in Ukraine and the war since 2014

Volunteer movement in Ukraine heavily dependent on digital platforms for:

- Promotion of army-related projects;
- Organizing volunteer communities;
- Fundraising;
- Collecting feedback;
- Ensuring transparency and accountability;
- Gathering intelligence (also military).

(Pankova and Kasperovich, 2022)

Reasons for volunteering in pre-invasion Ukraine:

- Previous participation in Maidan protests (“a fight for Ukraine’s better future”).
- Fear of war spillover to hometowns.
- Concerns with the precarity of combatants and displaced individuals.
- Also, many volunteers didn’t “decide” to volunteer. Instead “it just happened” to them.

(Stepaniuk, 2022)

**3. Platforms and
the Ukrainian
practical identity in
early 2022**



Conventional war is a threat to the social world

- Friends, relatives, colleagues become unavailable or die.
- Everyday life changes significantly.
- Life purposes become unavailable.
- ...
- Therefore, conventional war is also a threat to **communitarian** aspects of practical identity.

Examples of individual moral choices most Ukrainians faced in early 2022

- Should I condemn Russia on social media? If Russia wins, I may be punished for that.
- Should I donate money to the military in a situation of severe economic uncertainty?
- Should I stay in Ukraine or leave?
- Should I join a territorial defense unit to defend my imagined community? I have no military experience and may be killed at once.
- Should I go to a pro-Ukrainian rally in an already occupied town and risk being shot right away?

Existential risk and practical identity

- Being at risk increases tensions between constituents of a practical identity.
- Without maintaining the Ukrainian part of one's practical identity, it is harder to act on moral obligations which facilitate collective action, solidarity, and altruism during war.

Social world persistence effect helped Ukrainians keep in touch with their practical identity

- Social world still was represented through platforms, although might have been destroyed in reality.
- Because of social world persistence, users were reminded of their pre-invasion normative judgments, expressed online.
- Online, being in control is possible. While offline, little control is available.
- Perhaps, in early 2022 platforms might have *forced* certain practical identity aspects on Ukrainians. One could not escape being Ukrainian even if one wanted to, for some reason.

Also, platforms allowed Ukrainians to act individually upon the outcome of war as such

- Donating to the Armed Forces directly.
- Asking for international support.
- Sharing military intelligence.

These activities turned out to be very streamlined by platforms, for unrelated business reasons. Accidentally, platforms facilitated resistance.

4. Can we generalize the Ukrainian case?

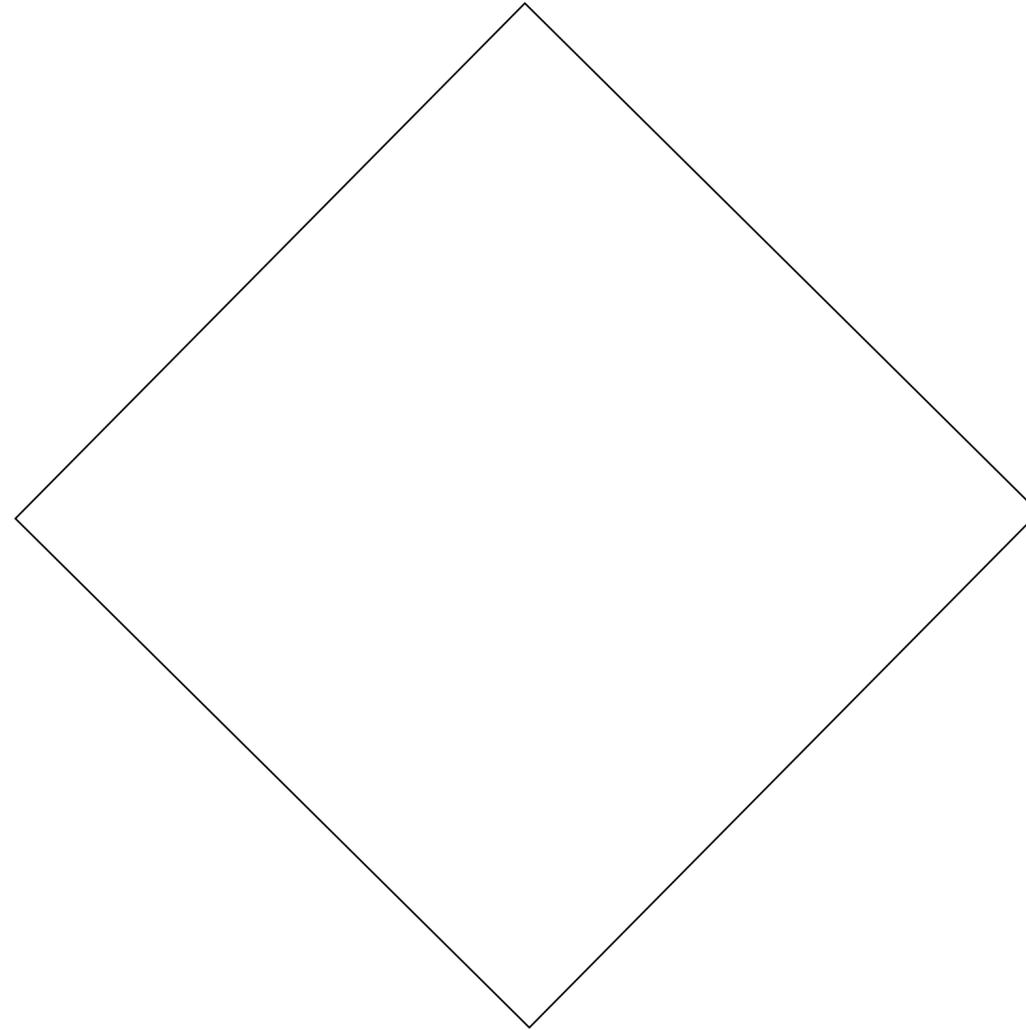


Ukrainians during war constitute a community which:

- values itself as a community;
- faces a threat that was known beforehand, and is believed to be external;
- is an algorithmically infused community;
- has government and institutions.

So, can platform design nudge towards praiseworthy behavior in similar cases? Or is the Ukrainian situation unique?

Thank you!



Questions?

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