

**Annie Galvin (AG):** Hello, and welcome back to *Public Books 101*, a podcast that turns a scholarly eye to a world worth studying. I'm your host, Annie Galvin; I'm the associate editor at *Public Books*, which is a magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship that's free and online, and that you can read at [publicbooks.org](http://publicbooks.org).

You're listening now to episode 2 of a five-part inquiry into the internet—a technology that has profoundly changed how we live, work, and form communities. In the previous episode, two leading scholars of internet history unveiled some of the network's surprising origins: on hippie communes in the 1960s, and within early African-American cyberculture.

Today, we're going to tap into the here and now: into the ways that many of us use the internet in the present day.

I'll be completely honest with you: as soon as I'm done recording this, here's what I'll probably do. I'll retrieve my smartphone, slide my finger a couple of pages to the left, click on a folder where I bury all the apps that I *don't* want myself to use, and I'll open Instagram. About 20 minutes later, I'll look up, bewildered—having “liked” a bunch of pictures, watched a bunch of videos, and, you know, learned some helpful facts about my friends and family—like, who had a baby, whose puppy is cute, etc.

I also will have spied on a number of celebrities, indulging one of my lifelong guilty pleasures. Perhaps I'll feel jealous of their lives or, maybe, confused or repulsed by them. I'll eventually stumble upon some news, at which point, I'll truly start to spiral. In short, I will have done a lot, but I probably won't feel very good.

As it turns out, I'm definitely not alone in doing this kind of thing regularly. Maybe it's something you experience; maybe on a different app. But I've come to believe that interacting with millions of other people on flat, digital screens—and trying to present ourselves well on those screens—has shifted what it means to be human. Our thoughts, our interactions, and our work can now be rated and quantified in real time. And I wonder, who actually benefits from that?

Today, I'm joined by two people who've spent a ton of time thinking about what the internet is doing to us as individuals, as humans. As a reader and fan of their work, I can attest that they've helped people like me understand our own relationships to the internet better.

**Amanda Hess (AH):** I'm Amanda Hess and I'm a critic-at-large at the *New York Times*, where I write about internet and pop culture.

**Jenny Odell (JO):** I am Jenny Odell and I am a writer and lecturer in art at Stanford.

**AG:** A quick note: We recorded this conversation in April 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic had led to lockdowns and quarantines across the globe.

[short music break]

AG: Cool. Well, thank you both so much for being here. We'll start off with a question that I'm asking all of our guests. What does being on the internet in 2020 feel like to you?

AH: To me it feels like work and procrastination at the same time, if that makes any sense? Two things that are supposed to be kind of opposed to one another and that both don't feel super great but to me they feel really linked online, in that it actually is helpful to my job if I am messing around on Twitter and posting something stupid that people like and then share and then follow me and then at some later date see work that I post there. So they're just both really intertwined to me right now in a way that is not particularly appealing.

AG: I'm sure that's a relatable feeling. Thank you. And how about you, Jenny?

JO: I would say that the internet, particularly right now, it feels like a porthole that's really easy to open and really hard to close. And when you open it, it's like you could see anything. Like you could see something amazing—I mean, you will, you'll see something amazing, you'll see something horrible and tragic, you'll see something that makes you cry, you know. It's like fantastic and terrifying and all these things at the same time, which I think has always been true. But right now, you know, it's the sort of means through which I am connected to other places and people. And so I just have this feeling sometimes of trepidation before I go there, where I'm like, what am I going to see and how hard is it going to be for me to step away from it? Because at any time I can open it and I know that there is all of that on the other side and it's like seductive and scary at the same time.

AG: Yeah, I definitely feel that. Great, thank you. So I think today we'll certainly be covering a broad range of your work but I think we'll probably be focusing mainly on the work that you've both done in and around the internet. And so I think for context it would be helpful if you could fill our listeners in a little bit about the work that you do specifically that's focused on the internet. So starting with Amanda could you tell us a little bit about what you focus on in your writing and your video series at the *New York Times*?

AH: Sure. So I am a critic-at-large at the *Times*, which means that I don't have a particular discipline that I write about, but really I tend to write about popular culture and internet culture. So I am looking at artifacts on the internet in a roughly kind of similar way to the way that our movie critics might watch a film. But of course material on the internet is really, really different from stuff that is sort of produced in this more traditional way. So my approach is affected by that too. And so most of the time I'm writing for the newspaper and for the website, but I also make a video series once in a while that's called *Internetting With Amanda Hess*, and it's my attempt to kind of assess material on the internet closer to its own terms. And that means it's hypervisual and there's a collage aspect to it.

AG: Great, thanks, yeah. And I think the video series is a really interesting experiment in exactly what you are saying, in that it combines your voice as a writer but also just the inherently visual nature of the internet. So that's really interesting, thank you. And, Jenny, could you give us just kind of a brief synopsis of—I know that's really hard to do—of your bestselling book, *How to do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, which came out in 2019? Could you just briefly tell us what the book is about?

JO: Yeah, it is difficult to summarize actually on purpose, which is part of the thing I'm trying to address in the book. But I would say it's sort of one half defining and disengaging from the attention economy online, so you know that's everything from social media to the kind of cult of personal branding, advertising things like that. And then the second half is trying to offer you something else to reengage with, and it just so happens in my case it was ecology and bioregionalism and like a lot of bird watching. And so it's this kind of – it's like a very strange self-help-y not self-help book. And I think it talks a lot about the internet, but I think maybe more importantly it was just occasioned by a moment in 2016 after the election, and also after the Ghost Ship Fire, which happened here in Oakland where I live, in which a lot of people passed away. It was kind of like my moment of reckoning with my relationship to the internet and to social media in particular and trying to find some kind of balance there—like some way of engaging but also not like wanting to like move to the woods or something and just like leave it all behind.

AG: Okay, great thank you so much. So let's get into it. So you've both been quite critical of the internet in your work, and we'll definitely get into that. But I think you both also recognize the internet as a source of creativity to some degree. And I'd love to first talk about some of the possibilities for creativity and artistic expression that the internet does hold for us, in addition to all of the terribleness and dread that it contains. Amanda, as a journalist and a critic as you were just describing you've written about many new forms of creative expression that have cropped up because of how the internet is designed and how it works as a medium everything from memes to YouTube videos to Bitmoji and people who are writing novels out of emoji, and one example that really jumped out to me was when you wrote in 2017 about sort of a surprising trend or development in how digital videos are being made and consumed. And I'm quoting you here, you wrote that, "We're living in the golden age of the silent video. Though we may still pop headphones in to watch a YouTube rant, social media has cultivated its own mute visual culture." So I'm curious about what are some of your favorite examples of creativity on the internet that you've observed.

AH: Yeah. I mean I guess I would just start by saying that one of the reasons that I like writing about internet culture in particular at the *Times* is that so much of what the *New York Times* covers is based on this traditional hierarchy of artistic and commercial work. So we cover these big blockbuster movies, we cover celebrities—I have covered

celebrities—prestige television, Broadway shows. And it's not that creativity on the internet is a meritocratic medium, but it is this alternate way of assigning worth that I think opens up new things for us to pay attention to. And so a lot of the stuff that I end up writing about would not be considered art or even internet art, but it is at this juncture between things that people create and things that people consume or that people do. So I think one of my favorite things that I've written about in the past couple years is they're known as "hands-only" videos and they're really popular in cooking videos. So BuzzFeed I think is the classic outlet that has popularized these videos. But they also stretch to other kind of craft-oriented sites. And you're not seeing a person's face in the video; you're really just seeing their hands at work, and they become these kind of disembodied hands. Often in horror movies or something, we'll see a disembodied hand, and it's something that has a mind of its own and it's working against the host. It's working against the body. And on the internet they have this other kind of persona, which is that it's like they represent the creativity of the person. And so those are really interesting to me. And I don't think anyone would call like a Facebook crafty video art, necessarily, but it's definitely worth examining. So love the hands videos. The rise of these kind of mute videos is related to that, too, which is often when we're scrolling on Facebook or Twitter, when we used to go on the subway, we might not have headphones or anything but we're interested in watching like a visual, moving medium. And so a lot of content producers have created these ways to communicate without using sound that is just one example of how the internet can often function as a kind of throwback to this like very old kind of medium. And you do see in internet videos just some of like the classic tropes of early silent films whether it's like putting babies in front of the camera and like letting babies do what babies do you don't have to have a voice over to explain what they're doing it's just like they're an interesting subject for a silent film. Like there are a lot of cats and dogs in early silent films obviously also on the internet.

AG: Yeah, definitely. And it's the silent film is an interesting example too of people kind of adapting to some of the limitations of the technology like being on the subway and knowing that people won't be able to listen all the time so it's sort of like well that will spur people to be more visually inventive and that kind of thing. So that's super interesting. And, Jenny, you're an artist in addition to being a writer who has used the internet really as kind of a material or a resource in your artistic work. So I'm curious about what first attracted you to making what you refer to as internet art?

JO: Yeah, you know I think that maybe it's relevant here to mention that I was an English major in undergrad.

AG: Oh, nice.

JO: And so I went to art school for my grad degree, but I have always had this approach of kind of like collecting – kind of like quoting, right, like collecting bits of existing

information and rearranging them. I've always enjoyed doing that in whatever context. And so the internet is sort of made for someone like that to make stuff. So in grad school I got really excited about making these collages out of screenshots from Google Earth, which I did for many years after that. And I was really exhilarated by the fact that like it was free material mostly and that I could sort of find whatever I wanted. And I've always found it very appealing, this idea that the newness that the artist brings is in the arrangement and not necessarily in the kind of like Jackson Pollack throwing a bunch of paint on a blank canvas. And I find that it's also great for my students, who are often not art majors. It's a really approachable art form for them because they already think in this kind of collage-y way and they're very familiar with the vernacular of online imagery. And so for someone who hasn't made art before, I think it can be a really nice like in to that way of working.

AG: Yeah, that's interesting. And I think it's possible that some of our listeners might not necessarily know what internet art is or looks like, so I'm wondering if you could just kind of briefly describe one of the pieces that you've made? A couple that jumped out to me from your website, just I guess based on my own weird internet fascinations, but you have a piece called *People Younger than Me Explaining How to Do Things*, and then you have another one called *Primer*, and both of those just out of your whole archive just really jumped out at me. Would you be willing to explain one of those: What you're doing, what you're going for anything along those lines?

JO: Yeah. So in 2013 I made a piece called *People Younger Than Me Explaining How to Do Things*. Which was a collection of screen shots from YouTube tutorials by people who were younger than me pretty often like children or teenagers. And it could be anything from like brushing your teeth, getting ready for school, peeling a grapefruit, doing a backflip on a trampoline, how to break up with someone just like really anything. And I am not sure how I got on that topic but I just remember being fascinated with like the overall trope and the sort of like authoritative tone that they would take on with the backdrop of like a very domestic backdrop of like a childhood bedroom. And I was kind of like wondering where they learned that tone from. And like it seemed like maybe other videos obviously but even things like just TV and then also thinking about like who are they imagining this – who are they imagining to be the audience for this video? Like who is this anonymous public that they're addressing in this very kind of authoritative way? And so I think just like collecting all of them together and putting them in a grid with these kinds of subtitles it's similar to a lot of other pieces I've done where you kind of can start to see patterns or make general observations when you collect enough of something. I wouldn't say there's necessarily anything like scientific about what I'm doing but it is just like an invitation to just like consider this kind of very specific behavior.

AG: Yeah. I mean that project too kind of reminds me a little bit of something that I know I've heard Amanda say about kind of youth culture on the internet and the way that I think your project, Jenny, it's tapping into the way in which the youth can find a sense of sort of authority on the internet that maybe they don't have another domains of culture, right, like kids in their bedroom teaching who are teaching you how to break up, how to do anything that you need to learn how to do. So I'm wondering, Amanda, if you would have anything to add about the way that young people are able to use the internet to make creative content in a way that's pretty different than they would have been able to do with something like film?

AH: Yeah. I mean I think it's interesting that for teenagers they don't just have this greater access to online forms of expression they have a kind of advantage on people like me who are older than that. And I've been thinking about it recently in terms of quarantine where there are all of these online forms of expression I think principally YouTube and TikTok that were really formed by teenagers like in their bedrooms and in this kind of societal lockdown that they have where like they don't actually have a lot of space to work in. they can't go anywhere they want without their parents driving them somewhere, and all of a sudden everybody else is in this same situation. And it is – and these forums I think especially TikTok were kind of created to cater to that situation. So you see the TikToks that are just they are people who are playing like three different characters and they're representing a different character by like putting a washcloth on their head and that's it, they become the second character. So there is, yeah, there is this opportunity for this youth culture to thrive in a way that someone like me who hasn't been a teenager in many years can only kind of watch and record in awe in some ways.

AG: Yeah, that's well I hadn't thought about that at all really that the teenager's bedroom has always kind of been a space of quarantine in a sense and so they're many steps ahead of us in that respect. So we've been talking about creativity and the word "content" has come up a lot and I'm kind of wondering, you know, I think both of you write extensively about how we kind of think when we're doing stuff on the internet that we're inhabiting this kind of free space of creative play but of course there are always these corporations behind that. and I think to me the word "content" it has kind of a tone of almost like PR or something that feels, I don't know, kind of cheap or false compared to like truly creative material. And so I'd love to hear you both kind of talk about that word "content" and I think, Amanda, I'm thinking particularly about your piece about the kind of the hellscape [ph. sp.] of these pop up experiences that was happening a couple summers ago like the Museum of Ice Cream in New York and L.A. which were these kind of temporary spaces where social media quote/unquote "creators" can go to basically take selfies against ice cream related backdrops and you can dive into a pool of sprinkles and take a Boomerang or whatever. And you wrote, and I'm quoting you here, "The Museum of Ice Cream's Pint Shop (now closed) was only 'creative' insofar as

taking photographs inside a store creates a kind of content.” And so I’m wondering, Amanda, if you see a difference between something that’s really creative on the internet and the kind of content that feels almost like mass produced for social media?

AH: I mean I think one of the most vexing parts of my job is that those two things often feel so intimately intertwined I mean something like the Museum of Ice Cream at least for me is – it’s just on this very extreme end where it becomes obvious what’s going on when you actually physically go to one of the spaces and you see like this slackened faces of people in there because you’re really, you’re waiting for these various photo opportunities. And the distinction between like the vibe within those places and how boring it is and like the production that comes out of it which are these like joyful photos is really interesting. But I’m also not someone who’s very good at taking a joyful photo and [unintelligible 0:28:29.4] posing for anything. I don’t know if for me there’s always a very clear line between creativity and content. But I do know that it’s something that it feels like the platforms take advantage of the ambiguity of it. especially for people who, you know, hope to have some kind of career based on creating things for the internet there is this kind of dangling of rewards. You know, you always hear about the YouTube creators or like the Instagram influencers who make like a million dollars a year or something. And then there are all of these other people who are not just strung along by this idea that maybe they could make money but also this idea that like what they’re doing is in and of itself like representative of what they want to be doing or of what a creative life is or worthwhile life. I do think it’s really mixed up on the internet a lot of times.

AG: Yeah, definitely. And I think that to me what feels particularly insidious about some of those places like, you know, some of these kind of places that are explicitly meant to lure people in to take photographs, et cetera, is that you know the content that is being created is essentially user generated PR for the brand so people whether they realize it or not are being conscripted into essentially advertising. But I think you’re right that that line is really, really hard to navigate. Jenny, do you have anything you would want to add about content and how you think about it in relation to art and creativity?

JO: Yeah. I mean I think you can definitely see this slippery slope that Amanda’s talking about when you look at like museum exhibitions that maybe weren’t meant to be set up cynically as a photo op but turn into that. So I’m thinking about this exhibition years ago in Palo Alto. So I took my students on a field trip there and it was a show by Team Lab which is like a collective from Japan that does these immersive digital installations that are really amazing and beautiful. And for someone like me I like them because they often involve like things growing and they’re slow and there will be like a projection of waves that have never repeated itself or something very poetic like that. but there were a couple of rooms in particular that had just basically become like Instagram rooms and there was one that had flowers like projected on all of the walls and the floor and the ceiling and

they're all growing and it was just like there was a line to get in because people just all wanted that photo that they had seen on Instagram you know, there are so many art installations that you can think of that are like this. And I'm actually glad that I took my students there because then we could talk about this phenomena. But that's an example of something that, you know, it's not the Museum of Ice Cream or it wasn't supposed to be. But I feel like a lot of public attention directed at any one thing can potentially turn it into that. and I wrote a really short thing for *New York Magazine* earlier this year I think about like what happens when it's like wildflowers like an ecologically protected area and all of these people are descending on it to take the same photo where there's like catastrophic consequences. So it's like, yeah, it is this kind of like spectrum between like is someone going to a place or consuming something as an experience or are they consuming it as a product?

AH: Yeah, there is, I mean there is something just disquieting about the very branding of the term "experience" and like when the experience is [unintelligible 0:34:15.9] any other free experience that a person could have. But one of the most disquieting things I think that I found when I was writing about those Instagram museums was one that I went to called 29Rooms which was – it's created by the women's website Refinery29 and it cost me something like \$60 to go to something like that. And I mean the *New York Times* paid for me to go but it cost a person like 60 bucks and when I was there I found out that at first like in the first few years of the iteration of this it was free because it was so obviously like something that was benefiting Refinery 29 in an equal or greater way than it was the people going because it's such like an obvious branding experience. And so this flip from, you know, even just enticing someone to engage in branding for free to demanding that they pay for it and people gladly doing it because they can feel like they can brand themselves in some way adjacent to the thing I think is an interesting development.

AG: Yeah. And I think just even the concept of free. I mean maybe this can lead us into the concept of the attention economy that you write about extensively, Jenny, but that notion that you're going in quote/unquote "for free" it's like you're still kind of producing value or giving value to the company in some way so those lines get so confusing and kind of mind bending. So it might be a good moment now to actually ask you, Jenny, you used that phrase "the attention economy" in the subtitle of your book and some people might be familiar with it but some people also might not. So could you just give us a brief definition of what you mean by the attention economy?

JO: Sure. So I'm using it pretty much the same way as others have before me in terms of just like it's any economy where attention is currency. So that predates the internet, you know, advertising the entire history of advertising is the attention economy. But now with things like social media I think there is these other forms like this idea of social capital obviously like numerical measures of like "likes" and followers and just kind of



accumulations of attention it's like a form of power and currency. And then on top of that you have this layer of companies that are kind of mining that and creating structures that extract as much attention from a user as possible. So that could be amount of engagement or amount of time spent.

AG: Right. and I wonder just to make kind of a concrete connection because I think to me it feels like, Amanda, what you were talking about the 29Rooms that feels like kind of a clear manifestation of the attention economy in some sense. Does that just – I mean does that make sense to you, Amanda, as like being an example of the more abstract theory that Jenny's talking about and if so can you kind of make that connect?

AH: I mean I do think the attention economy has helped to obscure and maybe invert worse in all of these different ways. Or maybe to capture our own worth and labor for, you know, in exchange for like a bit of novelty or entertainment. And one of the most kind of striking things about it is that we are volunteering so much of our time and our energy and someone's making money off of that and rarely is it us.

AG: Yes.

JO: And so it just feels like something that's a little bit like parasitic on these inherent just desires to connect and feel like part of a community.

AH: There is something that's come up for me recently that's just shown this distinction of when, you know, just kind of normal human behavior gets run through that machine and so right now there are not a lot of ways that I connect with other people that are not on the internet. But there is this one way which is that in New York every night at 7:00 everybody claps and like screams and bangs stuff and that's for thanking the first responders, people who are responding to the Coronavirus. But it's also just for the rest of us who are not doing anything and this is the thing that we do and it's how I see my neighbors like I recognize my neighbors more from seeing them come out at 7:00 every night than I ever did when we could wander freely. And it's just really nice. But it's also something that exists in a different kind of form on social media where it's been promoted by like strategic marketing firms who have like email different publications telling them to publicize it and there's a hashtag that's like clapbecausewecare which really flattens it. it's not that I don't care and it's not that nobody cares obviously we care but it's this like really kind of spontaneous interesting form of expression that's kind of flattened into a kind of smug thing on social media. I saw that the Salesforce Tower had changed the top of the tower to have this a video of hands clapping like the tower is clapping that made me feel just like so icky and terrible. But you really just can't take away from me that like at 7:00 tonight I'm going to go outside and I'm going to feel like my community still exists and it's great. But it has just been this really stark difference in how I experience it online and off.

JO: So, Amanda, I read the piece that you wrote about the clapping yesterday and I thought it was so beautiful. And it was making me think about like – ‘cause when you’re describing the difference between like experiencing it and then like watching or posting a video of it online I was walking around my neighborhood a couple weeks ago and there was this kid who was basically having an electric bass concert in front of his house, like he was just sitting on a little stool and he was like playing like Shuggie Otis like he had a little speaker and he was like playing on the bass. And there were like a handful of people all like extremely spaced out like in the middle of the street. And I just like happened to be walking by. And like I first off was like oh, this is this kind of beautiful moment and that like probably wouldn’t happen otherwise. And also like my instinct was to like reach into my pocket and like immediately start taking a video because like, Amanda, like as you say in your article like it could be the most interesting thing that’s happened all day like it’s understandable to want to like record that and like share it and like look at this thing that happened. But also I felt like gross about – I mean I didn’t but I was thinking about like why what’s the difference between like me standing here and experiencing this and then the sort of like Instagram square version of it that I would be putting into the world? \ And I thought about it a lot and I think it’s like I think the difference for me is partially like if I’m posting that it is a little bit smug and it is a little bit like oh, you know, like here is this interesting thing I saw today and I want to just sit there and like wait for people to like it or something, I don’t know. It’s just – but it was this moment where --- or even things like people putting bears in their windows like people have been putting bears in their windows here and like I would be so sad if I saw a bear on the Salesforce tower.

AH: Yeah. I mean there is like such a powerful urge to share stuff like that that is obviously I think it comes from a good place. But I find that whenever I go to share something I go on Twitter or Instagram I’m thinking about how to put it and the way I’m thinking about how to put it is not totally about the best way for me to express what I want to say it’s like there’s a part of me that’s probably the majority part that’s like how can I put this that will have some kind of traction that people will like it and share it even though that’s so insane and stupid there’s no reason for it but it’s so ingrained in that process it’s difficult to get outside of it.

JO: You feel like you’re packaging it almost.

AH: Yeah.

JO: Like I feel like I’m my own social media manager when I think that way.

AG: Right. And I think I mean it reminds me of kind of what you said at the very beginning, Amanda, about how it is kind of part of your job, right, there is an economic imperative to package things in the right way because maybe you’ll get engagement from the posts

and then you'll get followers and your profile will raise so there's that kind of economic imperative but something else that I'm hearing from what you're saying and something that I find just really, I don't know, just really difficult to think through about the internet and the attention economy is the way that it's designed to kind of gin up these feelings in us that become addictive whether it's feelings of outrage or feelings of joy and pride and then of course places like Salesforce co-op them and start making ads about them it just reminded me that there are sections in your book, Jenny, where you write about kind of the just the terrible experience of feeling your emotions getting like worked up online but then that becomes kind of addictive like it's really difficult to step away from a heated Facebook thread about the latest political outrage or from Instagrams of bears in the window or people clapping for the essential worker is there anything you want to say about kind of those addictive feelings that the attention economy sort of traffics on or runs on?

JO: Yeah. I mean I think it kind of actually goes back to what I was saying at the beginning about the porthole. I think that's why it's so hard to close the porthole is because you open it you're going to have all these emotions that I don't know, it's kind of interesting to me like how – I'm not a psychologist but like emotions seem really seductive like no matter what they are. Like if you're angry you want to stay angry. If you're happy you want to stay happy. And so it's like logically, right, like I can't explain to myself like why I am doing this thing that I recently saw described as "doom scrolling" which is like where you're just like scrolling like I'm opening the porthole and I'm like going in and I'm just going to see just – I'm going to be horrified. And then I'm horrified and I'm like yes give me more horror. Like that doesn't make any sense from like a logical point of view but like there I am and it's like hour two and I didn't maybe make a totally intentional decision to still be there. Like I think there's a really interesting spectrum between habitual behavior and what you would call intentional behavior and there's like a lot of space in between. But I find that the attention economy really plays on the habitual side where you kind of find yourself somewhere. Like I am amazed at how effective this Chrome extension is that I downloaded a while ago called Facebook Newsfeed Eradicator it just makes your newsfeed go away. Everything else is still there. It's replaced by a quote about like taking control of your mind or something. And I now like I barely go on Facebook. I still will go to find like the address for – well, not now but the address for an event or something like that and then I get my information and I leave. And it's such an illustration of how before I eradicated my newsfeed it had that affect, right? And I could talk about it all day oh I hate the newsfeed and then as soon as I encounter it it's like I get totally sucked in and it's playing on all of my emotions and it's playing all these videos and it's just grabbing my attention. So I think that it's really a force to be reckoned with.

AG: Amanda, does that resonate with you at all that experience? I find that something that I've observed about a lot of your writing is that it seems like you're starting from a place of curiosity about sort of your own habits both mental and physical and scrolling and everything and then you kind of move from there. So I'm wondering whether Jenny's description of the doom scroll or some of these other phenomena resonate with how you've been kind of thinking and feeling lately?

AH: Yeah, I mean I think one of the most insidious things about the way that the internet is set up is that it does feel, it can feel so self motivated and self directed and it can feel so grassroots and crowd sourced when really it's all ultimately in the service of something else and it's set up that way in ways that are obscured from us. I mean one of the things that I've thought a lot about is how not just brands work on the internet but how everyone is made complicit in that and how it's sort of set up for us all to cultivate our own personal brands. Which is this interesting like kind of inversion of the typical branding process. If you think of like the way a typical corporate brand works, it works by trying to humanize a product. And a personal brand works in this opposite way it works to like commodify a person and this is supposed to be like an exciting thing that we can all do. I was thinking that the idea of a personal brand when it was coined it was in the 90s in I and this writer named Tom Peters wrote about this concept and he presented it in this way that was like this great opportunity like you don't have to work for a company anymore because you will be the company. You can advertise yourself, you can differentiate yourself from other human brands and you can live this kind of like free existence outside of the corporate structure. This is like around the time – this is like *Dilbert* era like *Office Space* era like that was like the [unintelligible 0:52:41.3] had this very kind of white collar like corporate appearance. And now we are kind of we're living in this economy that Tom Peters had foreseen and gig economy and it seems like now more than ever we are working in service of corporations it's just that we've been like freed from health insurance or retirement contributions or whatever. And of course especially now those jobs are among the most at risk because they're putting people, you know, they're the people who are going out and delivering groceries or delivering medications or whatever. And so there's just this – there's such an insidious way that something is presented when really it's not about serving us at all. It's about serving corporations. That's just it's so – it's just so pervasive in so much of our online experience.

AG: Definitely. I find that I just keep laughing but it's this really like cynical sad laugh.

AH: Yeah. there was a moment when I was trying to fix my online personal brand because when you Googled me Google would port in the Wikipedia page of Amanda Hesser who is another writer who has worked for the *New York Times* who is not me. She writes like very delightful things about cooking. And she's great but we're different people. And so I went to Google's like online IT chat thing which is made up of volunteers who are working for some kind of like digital badges or clout. And I was like can anyone help me

like when you Google me it ports in the information for Amanda Hesser and that's not even my name so maybe we could stop it from doing that? And everyone, all the answers were like you need to become more famous. Like you need to have more information about yourself on Google for it to recognize you. Which is really depressing. But I think like now that I work for the *New York Times* I have like succeeded in my information in putting more and better information about myself and now when I Google me I come up. But it's just so sad that that's the solution. Like in order to be recognized as a person you need to give us more and more.

AG: Yeah. Jenny, do you have any thoughts about that idea of personal branding?

JO: I wish you could see my facial expression I was just like wow, my eyes are like popping out of my head. That sounds like my worst nightmare I mean it's like I mean it's just – I mean some of it's a personality thing but I really love the idea of just like temporarily like becoming invisible or just kind of receding from the world for a while kind of like on my own terms. Obviously like the circumstances of my life are such that I can afford to do that. But I think part of what horrifies me so much about the idea of the personal brand is like this feeling of overexposure. Like everything you have is on the table and I sort of worry about interiority and thinking about – I teach a class on internet art once a year and I think it was last year I had my students give presentations on it's called Internet Niche phenomena. It just means like I want them to like notice some weird like thing or behavior or whatever online that they don't think anyone else knows about. And someone did their presentation on how Instagram influence – I may be getting this wrong but it was people who are really big on Instagram who went to Fashion Week and then the student had observed that their YouTube videos as opposed to their Instagram had basically like not bloopers but like seemed very honest. So it would be like a video of them in their hotel room being like well I went to Fashion Week and I didn't get invited to anything and I'm just here in my hotel room. You know? And so we were talking about it in class and I was like well if that's the sort of backstage then what's the actual backstage? Is there one? I don't know. Right? And so as someone who, you know, I happen to very much prize interiority and reflection and like the kinds of thoughts and processes that aren't externalized to the world and maybe are not even like fully conscious to you as a person like that really scares me.

AG: Yeah, definitely. Okay. So I do want to kind of start heading toward wrapping up. I mean I feel like we could keep going down so many rabbit holes. But what you are addressing about interiority, Jenny, I think one of the really interesting claims that you make throughout the book is that attention is really fundamental to politics. It's fundamental to taking care of the world and changing the world for the better. I think often when we hear the word "attention" it's sort of like in this kind of productivity gospel like develop your attention so you can be a better worker but if you think about it more expansively it's really crucial to all the good things in the world. And you talk about a strategy called

Refusal in Place as one way out of the attention economy or one way to exist maybe more humanely within it. And earlier in this conversation you had said that your book is sort of like a non self-self self-help book. So I'm wondering if you could talk about that concept of refusal in place and maybe how we can think about possibly adopting it?

JO: Yeah. I think it has to do a lot with almost like paying attention to your attention. Like being able to pull back like mentally and psychologically as opposed to like literally exiting the political situation all together because that is irresponsible. I mean I think a lot of people want to be helpful. And so I have found that the attention economy I think it trades on a really specific and shallow form of attention even like what you were saying about productivity gospel attention in that context is also considered to be pretty consistent like it's just this one thing that can be directed at different things at different times whereas I really feel that there are different almost like forms and shapes of attention it's like something that I had thought about a lot as an artist and I have experienced other art works that have helped me develop other forms of attention that are maybe slower or just different, have a different tone. And I think that being able to cultivate those forms of attention and then actually direct them at your own interactions with the attention economy can be one way of kind of refusing to participate as asked maybe you're sort of like participating a little bit the wrong way like you're making yourself into a shape that doesn't quite fit or you're like watching yourself watch ads or you're like looking at the ads critically instead of just having them go straight into your brain. Like in all of these cases I think there's like just a layer of removal between you and the sort of knee jerk reaction and type of attention that the attention economy assumes that you have.

AG: Right, yeah definitely, that's great. Amanda, is there sort of a healthy way to use the internet or do we need to log off entirely? Are we all lost causes? How do you think about the hygiene of your brain and your attention in its relationship to the internet and social media?

AH: I mean I find it really, really difficult even as someone who is ostensibly doing this professionally in that there will be times when I'm scrolling through Instagram and I realize like months later that I had followed someone for some story that I was writing about influencers or something and never stopped following them and then they just became a part of my routine and I would be like interested in what they were wearing and like what kind of [unintelligible 1:02:35.7] they're using or whatever. And sometimes it will literally be months before I realize that. so I mean I actually have to tell you, Jenny, is like the book is like the book that got away from me because I've been wanting to read it for a while and I went to a couple of bookstores like early this year that didn't have it which I think is great for you, congratulations, they were out of stock. And then I finally found it at my local bookstore about a month ago and I read the first chapter and then I left it at work and then I never went back to work and so I've been waiting like I should

just – I’ve been thinking like I don’t want to give up. It feels like giving up to order a new one ‘cause I’m like oh, I’ll go back. But I’m really interested in reading your book about what I can do. But I do think that one of the most difficult things is that often participating does feel like resisting, like it can feel like resisting in ways even when it’s not. I’ve written about political engagement on social media and it really does feel like we have such great influence online like it feels like we’re so close to candidates and that we have a lot of say. Certainly more than we could have on cable news or something like that. but so often it’s directed either into this cult of personality that’s really about propping up the candidate as opposed to how politics in democracy should work which is like compelling candidates to understand what we need and what our issues are. I’ve been thinking a lot about how – you know I read this package that’s about social media and the 2020 election last year and when it came to writing about Joe Biden I was like the thing I had to write about Joe Biden was like there’s no online grassroots like activity around this candidate there’s just not – it doesn’t really exist and as we’ve now seen he is the presumptive Democratic nominee and he has this very traditional kind of pull which is that he was the vice-president of a very popular Democratic president. And that’s just more powerful. So I do think there’s a way of maybe consuming or participating on the internet while also keeping one eye off of it and just understanding the context that you’re working in and that it is a particular context and it’s not everything can maybe be helpful. But I think ultimately these platforms have so much power and that’s something that I think people are aware of now more after the 2016 election. But that has not yet sort of materialized into an actual political response why is what I think we need to solve some of these problems and to break kind of some of the monopolies on our attention. So yeah. I don’t know what to do. I’m excited to read your book, Jenny.

AG: It’s funny just given how the internet makes us feel like we can access anything when there’s a physical object that we don’t have access to. I had the same issue where my copy of Jenny’s book is left in my office at Columbia campus. I was trying to prepare this morning and I was like I don’t have the book, like the physical book you know but I can get anything else that I want on the internet. So in a way it’s comforting to run up against those kind of physical limits every now and then.

Okay, so I think just to close off we’re asking everyone kind of a closing question and the question is I guess kind of pointing forward. So what do you think is the next big question that we need to be asking or reckoning with in terms of how we use the internet and think about the internet? Jenny, do you want to start?

JO: Sure. I think an interesting question to look at would be how to use the internet to strengthen like local ties because I think a lot of folks are going to be thinking about their communities and things like businesses closing and people out of job. I mean we’re already seeing kind of an upsurge in interest in things like mutual aid networks so I think

that would be interesting is like what are good and healthy ways of using the internet to help with that?

AG: Yeah, that's a great point. And how about you, Amanda?

AH: I mean I always find that when I try to forecast something that will happen it never does. But what I would like to see happen is a greater ability to like literally see the power structures that we're dealing with when we're on social media. All of these companies claim to be very interested in transparency but obviously they are not. I think if there were strategies for making that stuff more visceral I would be interested in that.

AG: Yeah, that would be very helpful.

JO: If you were to go down that route I would really, really recommend talking to Wendy Liu who just, I think her book published today *Abolish Silicon Valley*. The subtitle is *How to – I have it right here on my desk. How to Liberate Technology From Capitalism*.

AH: That sounds great. I can't wait to read that.

JO: yeah, it really like it's pretty like hard hitting and doesn't cut any corners. It made me feel like my book was too vague like it's very much just like calling a spade a spade.

AG: Well, I think it's good to have many books that approach the question from different angles. But that sounds super interesting so thank you. I think that's good for now. I mean this was super interesting and I feel like I could definitely keep going down the road of many questions but I think that was really, really great and I appreciate it so much.

AH: So I think one thing that happens is that when people speak out against something that's going on on Facebook or Twitter those are the places that we have to do it and that can be a weird kind of self-reinforcing thing where we're going back – like Twitter is just full of people complaining about Twitter it's amazing. And that's something that I've seen in these other contexts too. So I've written a bit about the way that political organization and activity on the internet and on social media can take on the contours of other kinds of fandoms that thrive there. So people who go online with an interest in participating in the political process are often kind of pushed into these modes of engagement that are similar to what you see with like fans of Taylor Swift or Kayne West. And so those kinds of engagements they can feel like democracy in that there are many people who are participating but ultimately they can serve to create these cults of personality around the candidates in a way that makes them actually less accountable to us because the candidates often in these fandoms are turned into these kind of celebrity figures obviously President Trump is the biggest example of this where you see his head like Photoshopped onto a gladiator's body, he's literally turned into this untouchable



authoritarian kind of figure but you see it with other candidates too. You see it with Hillary kind of turned into this like sassy mom character or you see it with Bernie Sanders, like the most interesting meme to me to come out of the 2016 election was Bernie Vs. Hillary on the issues. And the way that the meme worked is that it compared Bernie and Hillary on the issues but the issues were something like Nintendo games, or like *Lord of the Rings*. And so it painted Bernie as someone who is like very nerdy and cool and understanding and Hillary as someone who was not knowledgeable and was a bitch basically. And so whether or not you agree with Bernie Sanders or with Hillary Clinton that mode of engagement is really about focusing on aesthetic and in-group ties. Whereas like real grassroots democracy would need to be focused on like creating coalitions and pushing candidates to listen to constituents as opposed to constituents turning the candidate into a kind of celebrity. So with politics on social media you know it often just really feels participatory but it's in many ways ultimately non democratic.

AG: I think Elizabeth Warren's kind of an interesting example where there was so much really passionate performative online fandom and if you spend a ton of time on Twitter and Instagram you would think that Elizabeth Warren like ran away with the nomination, you know, she fizzled out pretty quickly so there's this strange disjuncture between like the visibility that a candidate might get through their fandoms online and the actual material exercise of politics

AH: Right. No, that's absolutely true. And it's also probably true that turning Elizabeth Warren into like a Hermione Granger figure may be like a really intoxicating and appealing to a small group of people but not to like the hundreds and millions of Americans who would be voting in the election so there is a way that it can be self-defeating too.

JO: Can I add a plug for bird nature cams? Just because we're talking about the internet and attention.

AH: Yeah.

JO: Especially now that I'm inside a lot I tend to have like one of the tabs in my browser is usually one of three bird cams. So there's an eagle in Iowa that I found on Explore.org there are some nesting osprey in Richmond which is actually really close to here. And then there are some Peregrine falcons that live in the tower at UC Berkeley and they're all nesting. So I think the eagle has just hatched which is very exciting. And so I like to kind of just leave it on in the background and occasionally check on it because I find it really interesting as like it's something else that you check on but it feels very different it's just a bird that's just there And for me it's been a reminder of just time, like time is passing when you check on it at night it's dark. When you check on it at sunrise it's sunrise I mean depending on what time zone it's in. I've been recommending that to

people who are spending a lot of time online or have to spend a lot of time online it's just like the little reminder of something that's existing very much outside of the human time frame.

AG: Thank you. I love that. and that's a really nice example of the internet actually facilitating something that's natural, you know, witnessing the glory and splendor of the natural world in kind of a rare but nice way so that's wonderful. Thank you.

[short music break]

AG: And that's our show! A huge thank you to Amanda Hess and Jenny Odell for sharing their thinking about what it means to be a person in the digital age. You can find links to their work at [publicbooks.org/podcast](http://publicbooks.org/podcast). There, you will also find a list of further readings, curated by our guests, in case you want to read further or use this material in your classes. You can follow this show, and Public Books, @PublicBooks on Twitter to learn more the work we do. (I promise it won't be a doom scroll.) If you have thoughts about this podcast, you can tweet at #PublicBooks101. We'd be so grateful if you would subscribe to the show in Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or Pocket Casts. And if you like the show, please tell a friend, or even a few friends!

Next time on *Public Books 101*, I talk to two leading scholars who study the internet in a broader, social frame. This big topic is going to be split into two, shorter episodes: first, Siva Vaidhyanathan convinces me that Facebook, the largest social network, is seriously threatening democracy—and not just because of Russian bots. And then, Alice Marwick helps me understand where, exactly, our data goes when we feed it into online platforms—and who gets hit hardest by digital privacy violations. So I hope you'll join me for part 3 of *Public Books 101: The Internet*, as we wonder: What is the internet doing to societies?

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