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Stasja Koot & Robert Fletcher

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Popular Philanthrocapitalism? The Potential and Pitfalls of Online Empowerment in “Free” Nature 2.0 Initiatives

Stasja Koot and Robert Fletcher

Sociology and Anthropology of Development, Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT
This article investigates assertions that new philanthropic web 2.0 initiatives can empower Internet users to further social and environmental change. It focuses on two ostensibly “free” web 2.0 initiatives aimed at nature conservation: “Greenvolved” and “Safari Challenge Zoo Adventure.” With Greenvolved, clicking on one’s favorite projects is supposed to support conservation initiatives whereas in Safari Challenge users interact through gaming on the virtual African savannahs to conserve online nature, thereby supporting various offline humanitarian projects. Drawing on discussions of “philanthrocapitalism” and “nature 2.0,” our analysis demonstrates that such “popular philanthrocapitalist” initiatives do not support empowering collective action but instead depoliticize and commodify environmental activism. Such initiatives thereby allow neoliberal capitalism to further extend its reach under the pretense of empowering those whom it marginalizes.

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Introduction

“Web 2.0” refers to the Internet’s growing capacity for interactivity, as opposed to “web 1.0” in which such interactivity was largely absent. Since the turn of the century, web 2.0 has grown into a collective term encompassing contemporary social media including blogs, Wikis, user-posted videos, comments and so forth facilitating digital co-creation. Web 2.0 has thus ostensibly afforded creativity and participation by the growing numbers of Internet users. Many insist, indeed, that social media allow for more democratic participation, empowerment, open communication, social connectivity, creativity, flexibility and progressive possibility for users via their ability to (co-)create content (Coleman, 2010), in this way potentially empowering Internet users (Büscher, Koot, & Nelson, 2017). Today, consequently, more and more Internet users have developed their own initiatives intended to “do good” in pursuit of “everyday humanitarianism” (Richey, 2018).

This dynamic is apparent in “nature 2.0” initiatives in particular, wherein environmental organizations seek to harness web 2.0 technologies to encourage conservation of natural resources (see esp. Büscher, 2017). In this process, new media shape what “pristine nature” should look like while seemingly empowering users to protect this nature through the co-creation of content (e.g. through participating, donating, sharing, blogging, and so on). Such “prosumption” is widely encouraged by new media, via such platforms as (personalized) websites, Twitter, (likes on) Facebook, games and apps, which are increasingly seen as important means to pursue global (environmental and social) sustainability (Büscher, 2013; 2016; Büscher et al., 2017).

This article interrogates this asserted potential of interactive nature 2.0 platforms to empower users by exploring two ostensibly “free” (in that users are charged no fees) online philanthropic
initiatives. This type of “free philanthropy” is an emerging online trend that has thus far received little attention in social scientific or media studies, particularly in terms of its positioning within a broader political-economic context. By analyzing these media as a form of “philanthrocapitalism” (Bishop & Green, 2008; Edwards, 2008; Farrell, 2015; Holmes, 2012; Kapoor, 2012), we demonstrate how such dynamics should be understood in relation to the diffusion of neoliberal capitalist values through nature 2.0 spaces. In this way, we situate nature 2.0 within a longer history of interaction between philanthropy and capitalism, on the one hand, and nature conservation, on the other (see, for example, Dempsey, 2016; Goodman, Litter, Brockington, & Boykoff, 2016; Mendoza, Fletcher, Holmes, & Ogden, 2017; Ramutsindela, Spierenburg, & Wels, 2011), via which nature has been commodified and depoliticized in various ways.

Our first case study is “Greenvolved,” a crowdsourcing initiative intended to support the preservation of nature throughout the world. The second is “Safari Challenge Zoo Adventure,” a Facebook game aiming to support development (particularly for children in Africa) within a virtual (African) landscape. “Free” initiatives such as these claim to offer opportunities for user empowerment, thus promoting a form of “popular philanthrocapitalism” that ostensibly disrupts the concentration of power among rich and famous individuals common within philanthrocapitalism as a whole. Yet both projects are heavily dependent on potential private sector donors. Hence, while they claim to challenge elite accumulation of wealth and resources, in reality they serve to facilitate the concentration of power among the corporations on which their finances depend. As these corporations’ main interest is to create value via collection of user data and personalized advertisements (Zuboff, 2019), we conclude that initiatives such as Greenvolved and Safari Challenge do not support empowering collective action, but instead depoliticize and commodify environmental activism. Such initiatives thereby allow for neoliberal capitalism to further extend its reach under the pretense of empowering those whom it marginalizes.

We begin by explaining the methodology employed in this study. Next, we outline research exploring popular philanthrocapitalism and its relation to web 2.0. After this, we introduce our two case studies, focusing on their ostensibly empowering characteristics, followed by a discussion of both initiatives’ disintegration and responses to this process. We use these cases to explore the promises and pitfalls of (popular) philanthrocapitalism in the context of transnational informational capitalism. We finish by highlighting the larger implications of our analysis.

**Methodology**

This analysis is grounded in “virtual ethnography” (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012; Hine, 2008). We have been following both Greenvolved and Safari Challenge since November 2013, participating in the games as well as online discussions surrounding them while maintaining field notes about our experiences. In this sense, virtual ethnography can be understood as a type of “autoethnography” entailing self-observation and reflexive investigation by researchers (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Koot, 2016). The activities that we took part in were, for example, “boosting” projects in Greenvolved (see below), collecting pictures, texts and prints screens. We have played Safari Challenge for many hours, which Aarseth (2012) considers the most important method for analyzing games. We also held five in-depth interviews using Skype, focused on experiences with Greenvolved and Safari Challenge, to understand the personal motivations of platform participants. We have collected further data through email, Facebook Messenger and LinkedIn Mail and have joined and followed two Safari Challenge Facebook groups. Both projects are now defunct, allowing us to follow their inception, rise and downfall.

**Philanthrocapitalism and web 2.0**

The ostensibly liberating potential of the Internet was the subject of heated debates around the turn of the century (Morozov, 2011, 2013). Since then, the rise of web 2.0 has reinvigorated these debates (Roberts, 2009), with assertions that top-down business models will be replaced by “collaborative
culture,” “peer production,” “mass creativity” and “co-creation,” leading to an increase in transparency and democracy and thereby empowering Internet users. Various scholars and business gurus (e.g. Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2012; Leadbeater, 2008; McGonigal, 2012; Tapscott & Williams, 2008) promote the web-based economy as a form of techno-optimism, in which collectivism, socio-political participation and creativity will thrive, increasing democracy and consumer empowerment (see Fuchs, 2009; McChesney, 1998; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009; Zwick, Bonsu, & Darmody, 2008).

We contribute to this debate concerning the empowering potential of web 2.0 by exploring the possibilities it offers for philanthropic support of social/humanitarian and environmental causes. Web 2.0 activities take place within a political economy of “transnational informational capitalism,” in which large corporations become ever more powerful on and through the Internet (Fuchs, 2008, 2009; Zuboff, 2019). Hence use of these platforms for philanthropy can be understood as a form of “philanthrocapitalism” (Bishop & Green, 2008). In philanthrocapitalism, a new breed of philanthropists contend that the same methods and ideas that made them successful capitalists can address social/humanitarian and environmental challenges. This is grounded in the assertion that previous forms of philanthropy have been largely ineffective due to their weak integration of core business principles. Philanthrocapitalists’ claims rest on their success in the business world, which they claim can be replicated in philanthropic endeavors (Bishop & Green, 2008; Farrell, 2015). In this way, the very rich address social/humanitarian and/or environmental causes “by applying business techniques and ways of thinking to their philanthropy” (Bishop & Green, 2008, p. xii). From this perspective, the values, management systems and techniques that have played a crucial role in creating enormous wealth are thus considered the solution for both the growing inequality (Bosworth, 2011) and the environmental degradation produced in the process.

Many of today’s most prominent philanthrocapitalists have deep connections with IT industries and often made their money in this sector. Bill Gates of Microsoft, Jeff Skoll of eBay, Sergey Brin and Larry Page of Google, Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard of Hewlett Packard, and Andy Grove of Intel, among others, are famous for their philanthropy originating in the IT sector (Bishop & Green, 2008; Edwards, 2008). These connections continue today and even intensify: in the annual list of the 50 biggest givers in American philanthropy of 2017 – the “Philanthropy 50” – those who made their billions in the technology industry dominate, with 11 individuals donating 60% (US$ 8.7 billion) of the total. Topping the list are Microsoft’s Bill and Melinda Gates (US$ 4.8 billion), Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan (US$ 2 billion) and Dell’s Michael and Susan Dell (US$ 1 billion). Zuckerberg and Chan, in particular, can be considered “new tech” philanthropists, whose fortunes are made with the use of social media and Internet. Other such new tech philanthrocapitalists in the list are eBay founder Pierre Omidyar and his wife Pam (at 9), Facebook executive Sherryl Sandberg (at 25) and the CEO of Salesforce.com Marc Benioff with his wife Lynne (at 27) (DiMento & Lindsay, 2018).

Yet philanthrocapitalism is not without its critics, who point out that there is little evidence to support its effectiveness. On the contrary, detractors contend that philanthrocapitalism merely increases the concentration of power and wealth among the rich while also extending “competitive principles into the world of civil society, on the assumption that what works for the market should work for citizen action too” (Edwards, 2008, p. 69). Moreover, funding is not channeled through democratically elected governments and projects are often isolated from their wider political-economic context (Dean, 2005; Edwards, 2008), thus promoting “private visions of the public good” (Raddon, 2008, p. 38). This has led to a preference for projects based on quantitative goals and short-term targets, based on management styles developed in the commercial (tech) industries that favor technical solutions for socio-economic and environmental problems instead of support for less quantifiable (activist) activities emphasizing structural social change (Edwards, 2008).
Expanding philanthrocapitalism to the masses through web 2.0

Yet philanthrocapitalism need not be limited to the elite; web 2.0 initiatives in particular are ostensibly capable of “making available to everyone the essential features of philanthrocapitalism that only recently were available only to the super rich” (Bishop & Green, 2008, p. 239). Websites such as GlobalGiving, DonorsChoose and Facebook Causes apparently “allow ‘micro-philanthrocapitalists’ with only a few dollars to give to achieve some of the ‘hyper-agency’ of a Bill Gates or George Soros” (Bishop & Green, 2008, p. 239). The microfinance website Kiva.org, for example, is seen to have “reflected the intrinsic appeal of a new form of philanthropy made possible by the phase of evolution of the internet known as ‘Web 2.0,’ which allowed unprecedented, innovative social interaction on a global scale” (2008, pp. 238–239). Other social network-based giving platforms have also ostensibly “democratized” philanthrocapitalism. The Chinese film star Jet Li, for example, started the One Foundation, through which more than a million Chinese have donated via their mobile phones and website technology, demonstrating that “around the world, the philanthrocapitalism revolution is starting to transform mass philanthropy by people with tens or hundreds of dollars to give away, rather than the billions of the Super Rich Friends” (2008, p. xv). Bishop and Green (2008, p. 242) thus assert that “there is a massive potential in online popular philanthrocapitalism.” Similarly, McGonigal suggests that digital games, in particular, can “raise rates of democratic participation … tackle global-scale problems like climate change and poverty … and empower us to change the world in meaningful ways” by employing “clever fund-raising” strategies such as including corporate advertising (2012, p. 14, 235). Various other philanthropic, free online games can be found in which capitalist mechanisms are promoted to “do good,” whether for social/humanitarian, environmental or health causes (see for example Büscher, 2016; Fletcher, 2017; McGonigal, 2012).

Like web 2.0 generally, such platforms are asserted to promote more democratic participation leading to the empowerment of Internet users. However, critics point out that to base philanthropy on majority opinions carries the danger that decisions rely on mass-mediatised information flows (Roberts, 2009). Through the Internet, millions of people can make their opinions known, creating an abundance of information with ostensibly high democratic potential. However, in this “phantasy of abundance,” individual messages are no longer part of a process of mutual communication to which a response is expected, but are merely “contributions to circulating content” (Dean, 2005, p. 58). In fact, such “networks of global communications relieves top-level actors (corporate, institutional and governmental) from the obligation to respond” (Dean, 2005, p. 53). Thus, what seems at first blush to be empowering may ultimately prove “depoliticizing because the form of our involvement ultimately empowers those it is supposed to resist” (Dean, 2005, p. 61).

We contribute to these discussions concerning the ostensive empowering potential of both philanthrocapitalism and web 2.0 by exploring how this integration plays out in the context of interactive nature 2.0 initiatives concerned with environmental conservation and socio-economic development. We develop this analysis through the following two case studies.

Popular philanthrocapitalism in practice

**Greenvolved: connecting majority opinions with corporate funding**

Unlike most crowdfunding platforms, where giving is the prime objective (Büscher, 2017), Greenvolved users can support a multitude of nature conservation projects (listed on the Greenvolved website) all over the world, without making a donation. By merely offering their “opinion,” users can “boost” (a maximum of three) projects and later “vote” for the highest-ranked (meaning most boosted) projects. Based on the majority opinion (i.e. projects with most votes), corporations can then donate to these most-selected projects. From the start, the initiative was intended “to empower the Facebook like, to make your click meaningful.”

In this way, Greenvolved developers asserted, “all you have to do to change the world is have an opinion” (Greenvolved, 2019b). This was also the ambitious philanthropic vision of Greenvolved: to
change the world not by changing users’ behavior, but by using a for-profit business model engaging only with “responsible” companies. What is expected from users is merely to change their perception about corporations from polluting entities to something much more positive: responsible because they work according to the principles of “smart business, realistic environmental policy, sustainability, and ecological awareness” (Greenvolved, 2019a). Users are assumed to engage in Greenvolved because it makes them feel good about themselves. This engagement is then intended to leverage companies’ Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) since “[c]ompanies will only fund projects at Greenvolved, if they know there is a huge interest in it” (Greenvolved, 2019b). Therefore, when the platform approaches corporations knowing many people follow a project, this “presents an amazing opportunity for these companies to become the superheroes for all these users.” The Greenvolved funding model is therefore very dependent on the voluntary willingness of corporations to fund the most popular conservation projects. For Greenvolved, “[t]he key lies in openly recognizing the efforts of responsible corporations; in embracing management teams that pursue profit, but not at the expense of the environment” (Greenvolved, 2019a).

**Safari challenge zoo adventure: gaming is giving**

The Facebook game Safari Challenge Zoo Adventure was started by a company called Desert River Games. Grounded in the slogans “Where every click counts!” and “Gaming is Giving,” gamers can support various humanitarian NGOs simply by playing the game. The philanthropic causes that users can contribute to are, *inter alia*, water wells, meals for hungry people, playgrounds and orphanages. While this initiative is based on imagery of and interaction with virtual African nature – and can thus be considered a “conservation game” (Sandbrook, Adams, & Monteferrì, 2014, p. 118) promoting nature 2.0 (Fletcher, 2017) – the offline aim of the game is humanitarian philanthropy, with a specific focus on development projects for children in African countries. DRG calls this strategy “Empowering Gamers to Impact the Real World” (Desert River Games, 2015). When playing, gamers collect “Impact” points (Safari Challenge currency) that can be donated as “real money” to projects in Africa, by choosing an NGO to their liking, allowing gamers to “partner with corporate America to affect real change” (Desert River Games, 2015). Like Greenvolved, then, this game is also “free” for users and gamers are not expected to change their actual behavior.

Gamers prowl virtual African savannahs, where they can conserve online nature (e.g. through anti-poaching activities or nurturing, rescuing, releasing and feeding animals etc.) and build their own settlements. This virtual world contains many different species of wildlife (e.g. elephants, rhinos, lions, giraffes and baboons) as well as vehicles, tracking collars, lodges, cameras and of course the crucial “Impact” points (coins). These Impact points are acquired by doing all kinds of activities in the game, such as feeding the captured animals, releasing them, and so forth. Before anything else is built, gamers start with a 7-Eleven supermarket and petrol station. When subsequently building one’s settlement, possibilities arise to explore 3D adventure parks where one can feed, capture or photograph more than 40 types of African animals using a Garmin GPS.

Impact points are shown as a pile of coins, and gamers can invest them in building blocks for the settlement or in the animals’ welfare. For example, users can spend points on food (to nurture animals), safari clothes and equipment, vehicle maintenance, a hatchery, flower gardens, children’s playgrounds, a wood mill, or a big wheel. In addition to Impact points, water and sapphires can be obtained and these can also be used as currency. A peculiar option to receive extra water opens by clicking a button labeled “get cool stuff,” after which one has to watch an advertisement in return for more Impact points and water.

An important element of Safari Challenge is that it contains the possibility to accelerate by using real (offline) money to buy Impact points, a dynamic called “freemium.” In the freemium model, something valuable is held back that can be paid for, while users are still able to continue playing the rest of the game “for free” (cf. Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Safari Challenge is available free of charge on Facebook. Facebook, of course, collects user data that are then sold as a commodity to
advertising clients (Zuboff, 2019). The longer one spends on Facebook, the more data become available for sale (Fuchs, 2013; Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). In the case of Safari Challenge, Facebook received thirty per cent of the games’ earnings as well (Angulo, 2013).

The disintegration of Greenvolved and Safari Challenge

Despite its ambitions, by mid-2015 Greenvolved’s fundraising results had been disappointing. At that point few people had been able to vote, since this can only start when the first sponsor is on board, and since then Greenvolved’s website has been offline. By mid-2014, the model’s dependency on large corporations and the difficulty of convincing these to participate had become questioned. Indeed, almost a year later, Greenvolved’s CEO had become more critical, explaining that “our business model is based on a false assumption,” meaning that the CSR efforts and environmental funding of companies is not necessarily done to create good publicity and branding, but to “satisfy big clients […] rather then [sic] 1,000,000 “regular” clients.”

This disappointment showed almost a year after Greenvolved’s optimism to support a sustainable economy, by using “these same forces that act on the economy, but to move them [corporations] towards doing good. Not fighting the forces, you know, because then I think it’s a lost battle. I am not Don Quixote.” Moreover, working with the “opinions” of many users can create “a popularity contest” among projects, such that “projects regarding lions or dolphins … will be much more attractive than a lizard or a snake.” At first, however, the competition was regarded a core strength of Greenvolved: the competition improves our projects and we feel that by starting this competition on our website, more non-profits will be able to learn along the way how to market their projects right, and how to construct projects that are built for online fundraising.

Meanwhile, Safari Challenge was shut down on 1 August 2014. In two Safari Challenge Facebook groups, enthusiasts expressed sadness over this development. Many gamers sent all of their Impact points to charities. Apart from this option to give away their last Impact points, however, gamers felt powerless. In the (closed) “official” Facebook group the Original Safari Challenge Community (OSCC), one gamer explained that “from a point of view of empowerment, there was nothing the people could do.” A statement by the OSCC administrator explained that “this decision was NOT made by [founder JB] and was completely out of his control. He made a gallant effort to save the game and the vision, but was unsuccessful […] Safari Challenge made a very real Impact.”

If this is correct it raises the questions of who decided to close down the game (and for what reasons) and, more importantly for our purposes here, how powerful initiators like JB are in reality. In the end, no “official” reason was given for the shutdown (despite queries from various people). Several gamers, however, pointed to the game’s central logic, asserting that “the concept of giving is gaming really doesn’t work. This is the third game I was in that closed down.”

The administrator of the OSCC responded, on the other hand, by claiming that “the downfall to SC [Safari Challenge] was in no way related to the very successful giving program that was established.” This led another gamer to ask, “Do you think [founder JB] will give us some information as to what happened?” but this question remained unanswered. Instead, the OSCC administrator shared some of the results that Safari Challenge had achieved. She stated:

In a short 557 days, YOU as part of the Safari Challenge community made the following possible …: 3000 vaccines were distributed through Sim + Med; 50,000 meals were provided to children who did not know where their next meal would come from; 1 Water Well was funded and almost 30% of another was funded; further, ¼ of the funds needed to build an Orphan Home was raised.

This is nothing short of amazing!

The second (open) Facebook group, called the Safari Challenge Gamers Club (SCGC), was created by one of the most enthusiast gamers and active members in the OSCC (called MA). When the end of Safari Challenge was announced, MA explained that this usually happens with
philanthropic games and that “there is nothing we can do about that as always.” This made another gamer wonder:

[W]hen games like Safari challenge are so popular and help at the same time why some computer genius hasn’t [sic] managed to set up a game that lasts? … Surely fb owners make enough money to let some go for charitable causes … WE WANT OUR GAMES BACK

MA explained to us why he thought Safari Challenge and other, similar philanthropic free Facebook games (e.g. WeTopia and Sojo) shut down in this period. First, the founder JB moved to another state in the US and therefore had to close the DRG office. Second, hacker software has apparently been released in Safari Challenge. Third, if Facebook wants to support a charity they do not necessarily have to do this via games. Fourth, and most important, a lot of competition among philanthropic games and other, quite similar, free (Facebook) games, such as the immensely popular Farmville, exists. Finally, Safari Challenge’s success in terms of popularity, and therefore generated finances, was lower than expected; not enough revenue was raised to cover operating (mostly salary) costs. At Facebook “popular” means a minimum of a million players, something that was never achieved by Safari Challenge (which at its peak was played by about 50,000 people), and sponsors want a popular game to invest in to reach as many people as possible. The market for digital games in general has become very competitive, making it harder for any game to become successful (Sandbrook et al., 2014). Consequently, gamer PD explained that there simply wasn’t enough interest from corporations to sponsor this type of philanthropy. Despite her critical attitude towards the corporations’ power, however, PD did not question the underlying vision; she simply considered games such as Safari Challenge dependent on corporate sponsorship and marketing: “The best we can do is hope that some other corporation will see that the people will support their company when they support games and endeavors that we’re interested in.”

Just as with Greenvolved, then, “this system highly depends on sponsor companies qualities.”

Discussion: the promise and pitfalls of popular philanthrocapitalism

Instead of enhancing democratic governance, empowerment or resistance, networked communications such as Greenvolved and Safari Challenge appear to achieve exactly the opposite: a further depoliticization of capitalist production and its contributions to the very social and economic problems that philanthrocapitalism seeks to address, through the commodification of communication (Dean, 2005). On one level, there simply does not seem to be enough interest on the part of corporations when these initiatives do not reach a large enough audience to whom they can promote themselves. Arguably, there is not even enough interest from users either; the responses of the Facebook group members when their beloved Safari Challenge was shut down was, with few exceptions, one of acquiescence rather than protest. More fundamentally, however, it may be that, as Greenvolved’s CEO suggested, the basic business model underlying such initiatives is fatally flawed. Value within capitalism, after all, is mostly produced through the extraction of surplus value from workers and exploitation of the “free labor” provided by natural resources, hence creating the very social and environmental “externalities” that philanthrocapitalism seeks to address. Internalizing such externalities, as philanthrocapitalism intends, would thus eliminate the source of profit from which the corporate funds to support popular philanthrocapitalist initiatives are supposed to derive. Hence, there may be a fundamental disconnect between the aims of (popular) philanthrocapitalism and its envisioned means of finance. This dynamic warrants further investigation.

Why for free?

An important question is why Greenvolved and Safari Challenge are offered for free to users. Many services on the Internet today are “free,” and since most web 2.0 websites have so far turned out to be
unprofitable, they need to increase their value first of all (for example, by becoming a well-known brand), in this way attracting users, publicity and visibility. Often, users play a crucial role in this visibility and the expansion of its value. In the end, exploitation only happens when users buy-in, which leads to profits generated in various ways, including the selling of information for advertising purposes (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Moreover, users are tempted to further consume through the personal advertisements that appear on their screens, based on the “surplus behavioral” data that is collected and commodified via their activity (Zuboff, 2019). In both nature 2.0 initiatives discussed above “free” has thus become a crucial element of service economies, in which our opinions, movements and preferences are the price paid to the market (Lovink & Rossiter, 2009; Zuboff, 2019). But if this price is not high enough, meaning that the transaction does not create enough revenue for corporations, the financial exchange quickly comes under pressure, revealing important relations of power and dependency.

In web 2.0 initiatives there is a strong tendency to offer “free” gifts and commodities (such as using a search engine) for users, who provide their labor unpaid and learn that buying goods and spending one’s income is the way to create change. Such gifts play a crucial role in attracting and holding users, which will in turn increase advertisement rates. And these advertisements are a crucial element of what Langley and Leyshon (2016) call “platform capitalism,” in which business arrangements and socio-technical systems are incorporated into wider processes of capitalization (see also Zuboff, 2019). This happens through the extraction of revenues and the data that are being created through online circulations. Neither Greenvolved nor Safari Challenge disrupt the capitalist processes underlying “free” gifts; on the contrary, they fundamentally rely upon it (as opposed to, for example, alternative models of production that stress open knowledge, cooperative production and open access). Such free gifts are made possible because of the user-generated content they create and the possibility for targeting personal advertisements (Fuchs, 2009; Zuboff, 2019). This (personalized) advertising functions as the fuel for endless growth and consumerism, pursuing “the total commodification of human creativity” rather than “a democratisation of the media towards participatory systems” that interactive web platforms might support if designed and operated differently (Fuchs, 2009, p. 82).

Then who are the donors?

So obviously the corporate donors play a crucial role in the business model, which raises the question who they are and how they relate to both case studies. Whereas Safari Challenge remained rather obscure concerning who its donors are (but likely 7-Eleven and Garmin are among them, as also suggested by the moderator of the SCGC Facebook group), Greenvolved was very open about its funding strategy. To avoid the pitfall of being used for “green washing” by large corporations, Greenvolved claimed to only work “with companies that meet exacting environmental standards, and will not promote ‘green-wash’ collusion” (Greenvolved, 2013). To do this, they evaluated the core business and the transparency (the public availability of documents) of companies using Internet and Newsweek ratings to ascertain whether a company already donates for similar projects. Corporate reporting around sustainability is, however, often inaccurate and unreliable (see, for example, Barkemeyer, Comyns, Figge, & Napolitano, 2014; Barkemeyer, Preuss, & Lee, 2015). Google, for example, can be considered a highly polluting company, since every search produces some CO₂, but Greenvolved considers this pollution the result of consumption, while they would not collaborate with companies like BP. Interestingly, Google, with its extreme focus on advertising and promotion of consumption through deriving commercially significant data for targeted advertising (see Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009; Zuboff, 2019), is regarded as a “good” company while BP, like Google, also pollutes as a result of consumption. Other companies that Greenvolved has good contacts with are, for example, UPS couriers and Patagonia Outdoor Clothing & Gear. Both are also instigators of consumption through transport and travel (and therefore rely heavily on companies such as BP and Google). In early 2014 Greenvolved was also in conversation about sponsoring with EMC.
(one of the biggest global data companies in the world), IBM and Deutsche Telekom (Binyamin, 2015). In May 2015, IBM and Facebook announced their new partnership to improve personal marketing and advertising strategies based on big data (Lohr, 2015, see also below) and Deutsche Telekom was even among the top six global knowledge corporations in 2007, which together had a larger GDP than that of the African continent, demonstrating their enormous economic power and ability to influence human decisions (Fuchs, 2009).

All in all, it seems nearly impossible to divide between “good” and “bad” companies in today’s entangled capitalist networks in which most companies rely on and cooperate with a multitude of others. Based on largely arbitrary choices, consequently, Greenvolved sought to accelerate consumption through support of CSR for large commercial corporations. This raises the question of whether the model indeed promotes pursuit of a greener world, or rather capitalist values and mechanisms such as profit maximization and mass consumption that play a crucial role in environmental pollution and social inequality themselves.

**Nature 2.0: empowerment or transnational informational capitalism?**

Thus, while web 2.0 promised a new era in which grassroots values of collaboration, communal creativity and sharing would be widely promoted, this process has now been thoroughly integrated with conventional capitalist processes of commerce and consumerism (Van Dijk & Nieborg, 2009). The collection of metadata is not done primarily for the collective good, but is treated as a commodity, giving rise to “transnational informational capitalism,” in which knowledge corporations have enormous economic power and with the help of technologies they can influence human worldviews, thinking and decisions (Fuchs, 2008, 2009). Some therefore claim that data are the new oil, creating lots of wealth and power for only a small minority of people (Zuboff, 2019), a minority that ironically also contains many of the new philanthrocapitalists. True “systemic change,” by contrast, “involves social movements, politics and the state” (Edwards, 2008, p. 37).

The biggest recent Facebook scandal should therefore be regarded as a much more pressing issue than one only relating to privacy and the risk of influencing political processes. On the contrary, it raises fundamental questions concerning the crucial trajectory of our global economy. Alphabet, the parent company behind Google, is currently valued at more than US$ 720 billion based on advertisements predominantly and Facebook is still valued at more than US$ 475 billion (Ball, 2018). When users simply agree to the terms and conditions of use they hand over the value of their data in exchange for nothing else but the services that these companies provide (Zuboff, 2019). The recent increase in wealth in the US since 1978 – when the richest 0.1% owned 7% as opposed to 20% today – cannot be seen apart from the technological dotcom era that we are currently in, when most of these fortunes were made (Ball, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). Such a dramatic concentration of wealth has never been seen before in the history of humanity and cannot be understood apart from the larger economic policies that allow for, and often promote, wealth and power concentration since the 1970s (Piketty, 2014). Despite often messianic promises of connecting the world and decentralizing power through technology, in particular the data and information industry, this power, and the wealth it confers, have instead become concentrated in the hands of a very few (Ball, 2018), who have based their fortunes – and thus their philanthropy – on the masses using the Internet today.

Historians of communications have warned before that we should be careful to accredit social changes, such as democracy, participation and empowerment, to new technologies; the political economy, power relations and the wider social and cultural transformations surrounding the technologies tend to be much more determinant in such processes. *Real* participation is something different than simply participating via technological conduits, and on the Internet participation is often no more than a fantasy; people **believe** that they make a difference by simply clicking or playing a game (Dawson & Bellamy Foster, 1998; Dean, 2005; Fuchs, 2014; Roberts, 2009). It remains unclear, however, how this type of participation actually empowers. In the end, there is nothing that distinguishes
it from other other initiatives prompting so-called “clicktivism” (Morozov, 2013), in which the online activities satisfy users’ urge to “feel good” instead of impacting real-life situations (Hawkins, 2018), often based on the logics in social media practices rooted in elite thinking rather than democratic politics (Budabin & Pruce, 2018). In the end, a selection of choices has already been made for users, which means that they are at best a chooser in the web 2.0 business model (Büscher & Igoe, 2013). Thus, Internet users can make an illusionary difference through web 2.0, while in reality corporate interests control most processes using ingenious marketing ideologies aimed to advance capital accumulation, thereby potentially making all users “small” philanthrocapitalists (in the sense that they are not all extremely wealthy). Moreover, levels of participation in new media can vary widely and the production and accessibility of technologies is in itself not highly participatory; the visibility of information, the attention it gets and thereby the difference it can make, the control over decision-making processes, the structures of ownership, discourse and power all influence the level of participation (Fuchs, 2009).

Nonetheless, it has been shown that nature 2.0 initiatives can empower internet users under certain circumstances (see, e.g. Hawkins & Silver, 2017). Crucial here, however, is that this empowerment took place in the absence of commercial firms. In Greenvolved and Safari Challenge, by contrast, activism took quite a different course, and the most striking difference is that these are models fully aligned with neoliberal capitalist values from the start, commodifying communication and its data and depoliticizing the process to make way for a further commercialization of the Internet through philanthrocapitalism.

**Conclusion**

Non-profit actors have increasingly incorporated important components and values of neoliberal capitalism to achieve their social/humanitarian and/or environmental goals (Levine, 2002). In this way, capitalist mechanisms and structures are not questioned, but supported: the role of the market is “normalized” and the free market is assumed to be the key mechanism for social/humanitarian and/or environmental change (so for philanthropy), whereas social and environmental problems are regarded the result of state actions or weak philanthropy. New “business models” for philanthropy are asserted to handle these problems better. In this way, projects most aligned with capitalist principles are favored, thereby strongly influencing the non-profit sector and threatening its potential for democracy (Farrell, 2015). As long as society is dominated by the capitalist logic of accumulation and competition, this has a strong impact on the opportunities for participation, empowerment, democracy and cooperation that the Internet contains (Fuchs, 2008, 2009).

In both nature 2.0 initiatives examined above, the act of philanthropy, of “doing good” itself, through “free” clicking, had become commodified. In this way, “doing good,” either for environmental or for social/humanitarian projects, sought to generate financial value and only therefore could be done “for free.” This demonstrates the ingenious ways that capitalist mechanisms can commodify almost everything. Technological media that have been created can thus potentially contribute to empowerment and democratization, but through corporate domination, the capitalist system has been quick to appropriate these possibilities to its advantage. When new “democratic,” “empowerment” initiatives arise, most of these only survive if they adjust to and support the mainstream capitalist economy, thereby depoliticizing the users’ activism and activities. And even then they are heavily dependent on fickleness within the priorities of the private sector.

Web 2.0 provides for “popular” philanthrocapitalism, which, we argue, is even more problematic and symbolic of contemporary capitalist dominance than traditional philanthrocapitalism by the “very rich.” Edwards (2008, p. 92) thus concludes his book *Just another Emperor? The Myths and Realities of Philanthrocapitalism* by explaining that “voluntary action releases incalculable social energy – the sheer joy of collective action for the public good, free, as far as is humanly possible, of commercial considerations and self-interest.” What our case studies have shown is that the web 2.0 theoretically indeed provides for such “free” and voluntary civic action, but that
philanthrocapitalist ideas and its underlying ideology have also become (popular) public goods. Consequently, Edwards’ optimism has now been surpassed by capitalism’s propensity for creative destruction. When integrated into corporate capitalism, a real empowerment through web 2.0 initiatives seems nearly impossible.

Notes

1. With the two CEOs of Greenvolved (OP, 27 February 2014, and YA, 19 June 2014), of which YA is also the head of environmental projects, with two Safari Challenge enthusiasts (MA, 23 May 2014, and PD, 26 August 2014), of which MA was also the founder of a Facebook group, and with one representative of Kids Around the World (CM, 29 August 2014), an NGO supported by Safari Challenge. Unfortunately, we have not been able to interview JB, the founder of Safari Challenge, who after several attempts explained that he is “no longer affiliated with this project so I will not be making any comments about it” (Facebook Messenger, 9 January 2015).

2. Interview YA, 19 June 2014.
4. YA, LinkedIn Mail, 8 April 2015.
5. Interview YA, 19 June 2014.
10. EFW, 30 July 2014.
15. MK, 7 August 2014.
17. 26 August 2014.
18. MA, SCGC, 10 August 2014.
19. Increasing personalized marketing as a strategy for capital accumulation has a long history on the Internet, see, for example, Dawson and Bellamy Foster (1998) and Fuchs (2013).
20. At the time of writing, Facebook was in the middle of a big scandal after leaking much of its big data of over 50 million users (mostly from the US) to the company Cambridge Analytica which has very likely influenced the 2016 Clinton-Trump elections in the US (Ball, 2018).

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ORCID

Stasja Koot http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8625-7525

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