From Users to (Sense)Makers: On the Pivotal Role of Stigmergic Social Annotation in the Quest for Collective Sensemaking

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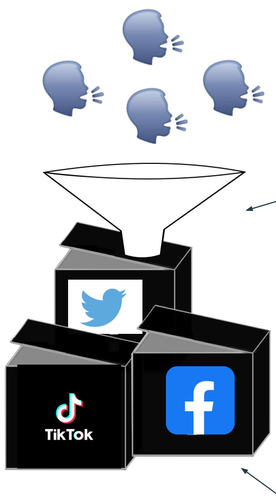
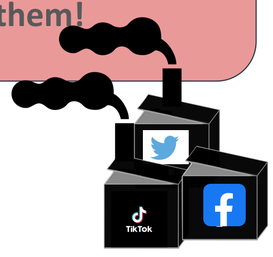
Polluted platform-centric information ecologies



Centralization: a few giant platforms have gained unprecedented control of our attention

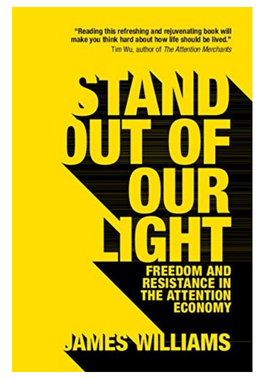
Opacity: data and algorithms hidden from public/scientific/ethical oversight

Degraded {collective attention spans, sensemaking, social cohesion,...} at a time when we most need them!



Surmounting the formidable challenges faced today by humanity requires that "**we give the right sort of attention to the right sort of things**"

"If we're at all serious about promoting freedom and autonomy in the digital age […] what that would entail is starting to assert and defend our **freedom of attention**"



What's so hard about that? Just push the do-not-disturb button on your phone!

Or better yet, make platforms nudge people to be more mindful of their attention!

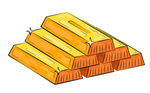
Freedom of collective attention is a **systemic infrastructure problem** and not merely an individual problem (like obesity, climate change, etc)

Ok, freeing collective attention sounds grand on paper, but how does it translate into real technology?

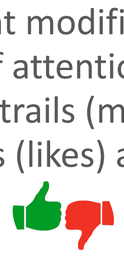
Stigmergy: powerful theoretical lens on collective attention

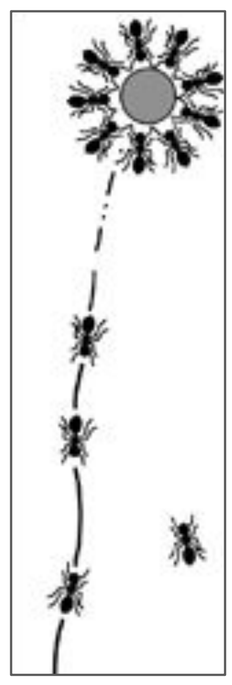
- **Stigmergy**: large-scale, indirect coordination mechanism mediated by environment modifications
- Agents make modifications which other agents react to (e.g. ants making pheromone trails)
- Collective intelligent behavior emerges from local stigmergic feedback loops

<u>Stigmergic markers: attention economy gold</u>



- Pheromone trails are a particularly valuable kind of environment modification called **markers** - signals of attention, importance
- Digital pheromone trails (markers) include explicit annotations (likes) and implicit (clickthrough data)





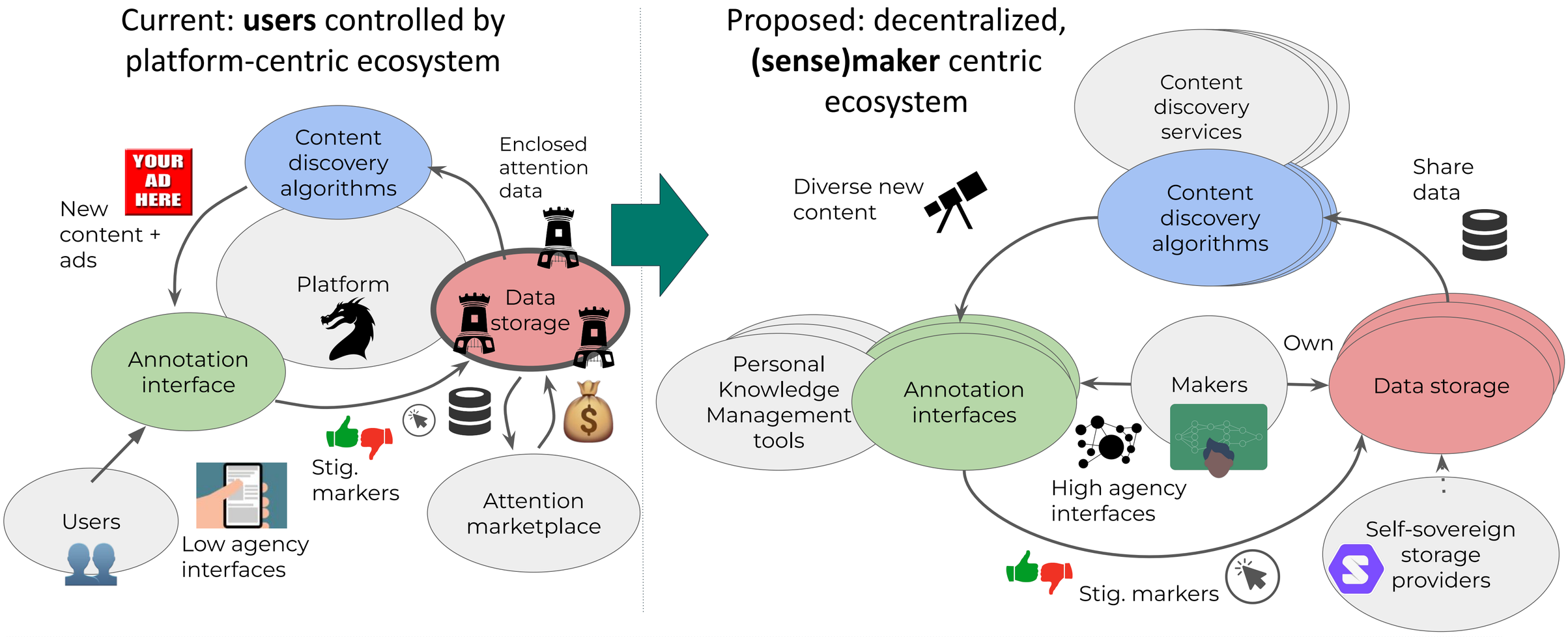
<u>To control attention, control stigmergic markers</u>

Centralized platforms hoarding stigmergic markers

Idea: **Decentralize** control of stigmergic markers. Empower individuals and communities to regain control of their attention by regaining control of their digital attention traces!

Proposal: Open Source Attention ("Free the 'like' button")

Similarly to how we can share **knowledge** or **code** as a **public good,** we should be able to publicly share our **attention data**



<u>Challenges</u>

- Cold-start problem, entrenched centralized networks
- Funding models - public infrastructure? Subscription-based?

<u>Promising directions</u>

- Protocols, Not Platforms
- web3 data co-op models

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