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Introduction

THE POLITICS AND PROMISE OF CRAIGSLIST

You can get anything on craigslist. Right now, you can buy a Dolly Parton pinball machine for $750 in San Diego, and in Bend, Oregon, a custom *Star Wars* snowmobile is up for sale or barter. In Philadelphia, someone is selling forty life-size wax figures in Amish attire, ideally as a set. A burgundy Fitbit was reported lost in San Francisco, five days before a Fitbit charger was posted as found, also in San Francisco. You can find things on craigslist, but you can also find jobs and people to hire. In Philadelphia a county library is looking for someone to drive the bookmobile, and in Los Angeles an actor is offering lessons in impersonating Tom Cruise. Used iPhone? A ride to Baltimore? A one-bedroom apartment in Cincinnati? You can find it on craigslist.

In more than seven hundred cities around the globe, thousands of posts are uploaded to craigslist every day.[1] The site is both a map and a time capsule, a snapshot of the informal marketplace and a mixtape of local opinions. Yet craigslist is more than a window to the world's ephemera—this book argues that when it comes to practicing Web 1.0 values of access and democracy, craigslist is an increasingly lonely outpost in a hypercorporate web. With its stripped-down functionality and minimalist design, craigslist speaks to an older ethos of online life that contrasts sharply with the values of today's mainstream internet. In its rejection of venture capitalists, paid advertising, and rapid design changes, craigslist is the internet, ungentrified.

When I call the contemporary internet *gentrified*, I mean the ways that some forms of online behavior have become ingrained as the "right" way to use the web, while other forms of behavior are labeled "backward" or "out of date." The early web was characterized by excitement at connecting with strangers from across the world and trial-and-error experimentation with online personas. As more people came online and new platforms sprouted to meet their needs, norms of use developed and stabilized, with older practices sometimes falling out of favor. The web we have now is dominated by self-promotion, long-winded legal warnings, and sleek design aesthetics that require constant upgrades. Since the transition from Web 1.0 to 2.0, we've moved from an internet of messy serendipity to one of slick commercialism.

I'm painting in broad strokes here—of course there was self-promotion in the early web, and of course DIY hacking is still an important part of online life. While much of the web has come to feel developed, safe, and predictable, there's still a lot of messiness and experimentation to be found. But there's no denying the fact that a very small number of corporations control what online life looks and feels like for a huge number of people. Google answers our questions about pop culture and local news, while Google Maps affects our perceptions of space and landmarks. When Facebook tweaks its News Feed, it alters what we know about current events, our neighborhoods, and our friends and family. Amazon redefines what's normal in the marketplace, shaping our expectations through product reviews and by predicting our next purchases. These companies have normalized some uses of the web over others, and in the process have altered what we think everyday life on the web should look and feel like. Craigslist represents a different kind of everyday online life, one characterized by aesthetic minimalism, anonymity, and serendipity. The platform is a holdout in its appearance, its business model, and its policies. It is a corner of the web that's light on design changes, heavy on user responsibility, and possibly on the brink of obsolescence.

Most people think of craigslist as a simple-looking site with a few basic functions, a way to sell a used couch or find a local handyman. But in terms of the platform's value to digital culture, craigslist is both popular and multifaceted. Craigslist is the nineteenth most visited website in the United States, and hosts tens of thousands of exchanges every day (Alexa, n.d.). Besides for-sale, job, real-estate, and personal ads, craigslist hosts a range of discussion boards, for everything from pets and haiku to web development and "Rants & Raves," a discussion board where users can post random thoughts and musings, like a less-moderated version of Reddit or 4chan. Until March 2018, the site hosted an active personals section, which

included subcategories for everything from casual sex to strictly platonic relationships. A "Community" section contains sections for rideshares, adopting pets, and local news, plus "Missed Connections," where people can post ads that attempt to contact someone from a fleeting encounter—a cute girl on the subway, a handsome bartender or barista in the neighborhood. Craigslist is at once a marketplace, a job hub, and a message board.

This book tells a history of digital culture through the lens of craigslist. While a number of sites could offer a starting point to charting how internet norms have changed over the past few decades, I've picked craigslist for a couple of key reasons. The first has to do with its unusual approach to being a tech company. Craigslist has always been on the small side, with fewer than fifty full-time employees. The current CEO, Jim Buckmaster, has been at the helm since 2000, and as he notes on the company's "About" page, he is very likely "the only CEO ever described by the business press as anti-establishment, a communist, and a socialistic anarchist" (craigslist n.d.[c]). Although craigslist is headquartered in the preeminent tech hub of San Francisco, the company's financial model and design values make it feel more like an outsider—or, more appropriately, a throwback. For people who see mainstream tech companies as overly beholden to profit and shareholders, often at the expense of everyday users, craigslist presents a fascinating countercase.

A second reason for studying craigslist is its longevity. Craigslist started out in 1995 as an e-mail list and grew into a website the following year. Almost as soon as internet access was widely available, craigslist was there, ready to help people search and find, buy and sell. For more than two decades, the platform has weathered the internet's boom-and-bust cycle, while countless peers and competitors have come and gone. Craigslist isn't just old, it's also incredibly stable—the site looks more or less the same today as it did in the late 1990s (see figures I.1, I.2, and I.3). It isn't quite accurate to say that the platform hasn't changed at all: categories for ads have come and gone, while features like uploading photos and integrating Google Maps have been added. But on the whole, craigslist has proven profoundly stable. From both a historian's view and an industry view, craigslist is an outlier, giving us a fixed point for considering the current online norm of constant flux and change.

You might think that craigslist's stability would make it feel safe or comforting to use. Instead, craigslist often summons a sense of fear or anxiety. Fear dominates many people's first impressions of craigslist, mostly in the form of worrying about scams and fraud. It wasn't always this way. In the

event calendar (Java applet)
general info
subscribe / unsubscribe
posting guidelines
recruiters
what are coupons?

I'd Like to Post my resume.
Please post this Job.
I'd like to Post an Ad.

Foundation:
Thanks sponsors!
Policies
Mission
About us
In the news

apartments for rent art jobs
housing wanted business jobs
community engineering jobs
biz ads etcetera jobs
for sale writing jobs
events resumes
tech events

Come work for the Foundation!

Come party with the Foundation!
December 17, 1998

List Foundation
PO Box 833
Orinda, CA 94563
Tel: +1.925.377.7500
Fax: +1.925.377.7525

Questions, comments?

Nancy Melone, CEO
Craig Newmark
Philip Knowlton
25 November 1998

FIGURE 1.1. This screenshot from December 2, 1998, is the earliest screen capture available from the Internet Archive's Way Back Machine.

early days, before Google and Facebook, craigslist generated a lot of hype and enthusiasm. Here was a classified-ad site that helped people find local information and job opportunities, but also connected strangers with similar interests. As more and more people got online, craigslist helped them to get ordinary things done, from buying and selling used goods to dating to learning about one's neighborhood—but as users became more savvy and sophisticated, so did scammers, crooks, and thieves.

Online platforms have always had to contend with rule breaking. The same tools that could be used to communicate for free could also be used for scams and spam (see Brunton 2012). Platforms originally designed to build a sense of community and play also had to contend with unexpected forms of violence and harassment (Dibbell 1999). On craigslist, harassment and spam are real problems, compounded by a small number of highly publicized violent crimes. These incidents represent a tiny fraction of craigslist interactions, while the overwhelming majority go smoothly. Nevertheless, the actual number of violent crimes on craigslist matter less than perceptions that the site is overrun with bad actors. Thinking about craigslist's transformation from the first stop for online exchange to a punchline for jokes about online sleaze opens up questions of what it means to stigmatize certain platforms and the people who use them. What do our fears and judgments say about our relationship to the internet, about our expectations for safe behaviors?

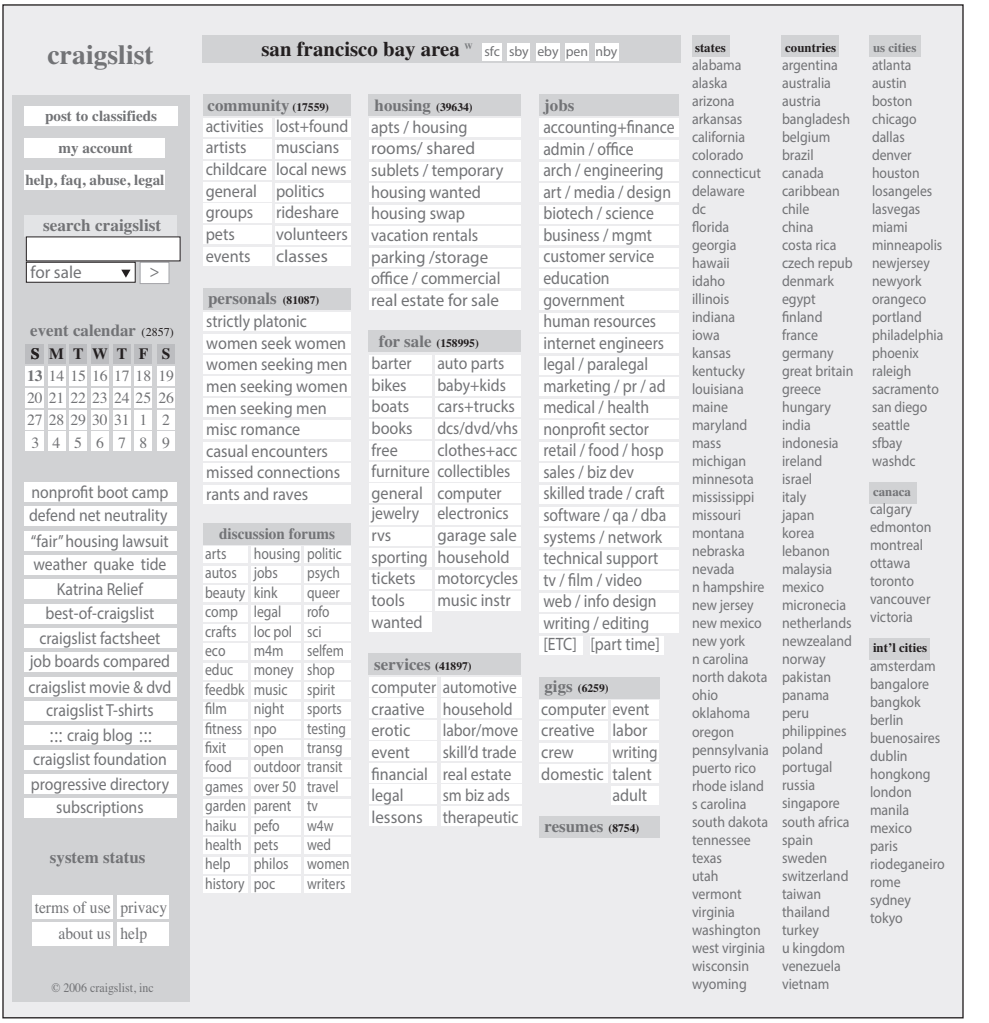

FIGURE 1.2. Image from June 30, 2006. By 2006, the site design had expanded without significantly altering its aesthetics, a difference of degree rather than kind.

The many general-interest books about craigslist fall into two broad categories: how to make money, and stories about sex and murder. The first is a collection of entrepreneurial self-help books with tips and tricks for making a profit selling used goods, including advice on how to describe items, when to post, and selling etiquette. The second cluster of books includes sensationalized accounts of real-life crimes connected to the platform, as well as tell-all tales—autobiographical and fictional—of sexual and romantic encounters made via the site's personals section. The two categories make sense as reflections on our assumptions and apprehensions about the internet: an

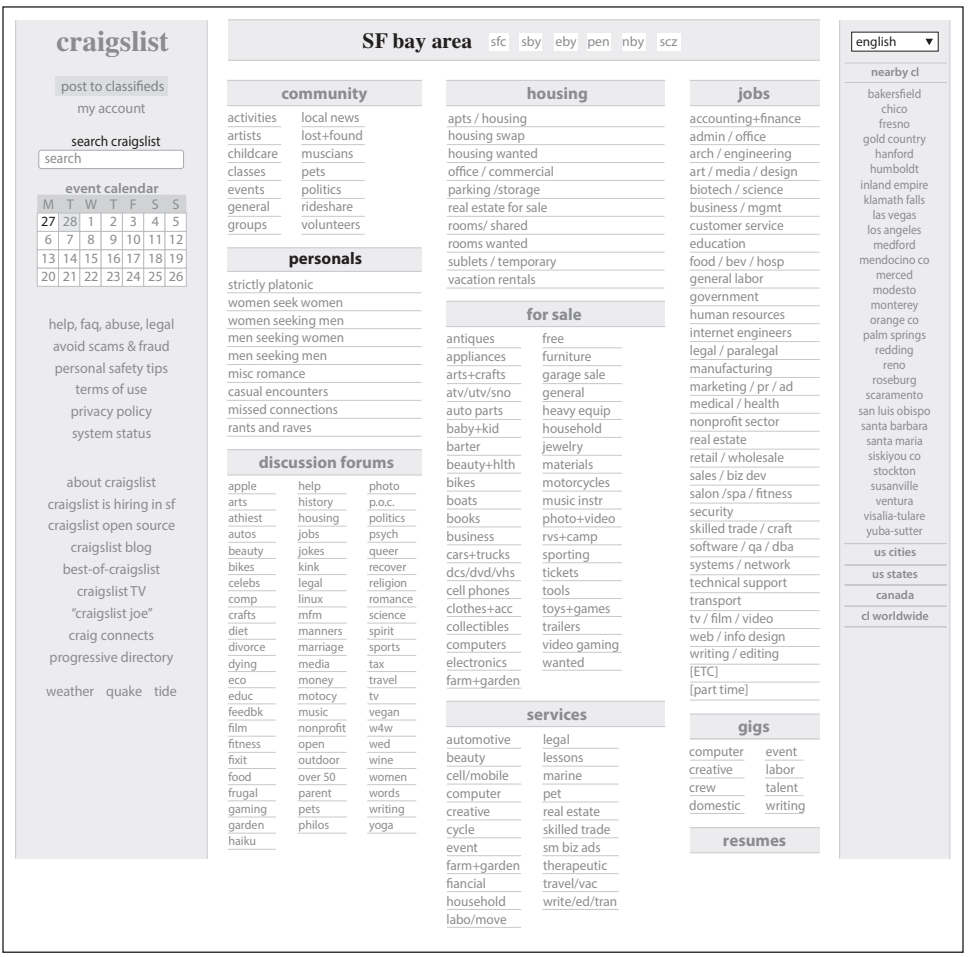

FIGURE 1.3. Image from June 15, 2017. Eleven years later, the site had barely changed—in fact becoming more simplified by removing the count of posts per category.

only half-glib assessment might say that the majority of internet use is about either making money or watching porn. Moral panics about the internet tend to concentrate on either fraud or sexual predation—conjuring images of bogeymen roaming the web, trying to swindle people out of money or into sex (see Marwick 2008).

Fears about a technology can paradoxically illuminate our hopes. When it comes to the internet, anxieties about fraud and predation contrast sharply with the initial hype of diversity and tolerance. Early narratives about the internet and techno-optimism have been critiqued by scholars like Wendy Chun (2008) and Megan Sapnar-Ankerson (Ankerson 2018;

Sapnar-Ankerson 2010). People who saw the internet as a powerful tool for social change and education were relying on the problematic assumption that access to technology could level out differences of class and privilege, despite radical differences in geography and background (Burrell 2012; Warschauer and Ames 2010). But access to technology can only mitigate so much when it comes to significant differences in wealth and education. Moreover, while projects like Wikipedia and Linux are very much in line with early web values of collaboration and openness, not everyone is content to cooperate without compensation. Nevertheless, initial aspirations for a technology often linger, sometimes long after early proponents have changed their views. When people describe their anxieties about using craigslist, I hear the echoes of an earlier hope—for an internet that could bring people together to share ideas, solve problems, and build community.

In thinking about how digital culture has (and, in some ways, has not) changed since craigslist first burst onto the scene, a number of elements have to be brought into view, including the social, political, and technological—that is, the *publics* that form online, the *politics* that shape our interactions, and the *platforms* that host our activities and conversations.

"Publics" has become a popular term to refer to groups of people who come together online for a shared activity, whether that means gaming, socializing, or commenting on the news (see Langlois et al. 2009; Papacharissi 2002, 2015; Varnelis 2012). The term has less baggage than the word *community* and feels more socially oriented than *network*, which has more technical connotations. For Michael Warner (2002), publics form around texts, and specifically around the practices of shared interpretation. Texts play a key role in publics—as well as counterpublics, meaning groups that are in some way marginal or subversive—because they allow for the creation of shared terms, concepts, and meetings. Thinking about craigslist in terms of publics allows us to sidestep romantic connotations of community and to avoid overemphasizing the site's technical components, looking instead at ordinary practices and politics of use.

In this book, I almost always use *politics* in the lowercase sense, as opposed to the Politics of federal or international elections, laws, and agreements. Small-*p* politics are about the daily interactions that make school, work, and neighborhood life possible—decisions about including not just dead white guys in high-school English classes, employer policies on maternity and paternity leave, and judgment calls about when and how to call the police if a crime takes place in your neighborhood. Whether or not we consider these acts to be political, they have important consequences for

how we think of and treat one another in everyday life, and, moreover, can accumulate into much bigger norms and paradigms of how people are valued. Put another way, small-*p* politics echo the 1960s slogan, "The personal is political." An overarching goal of this book is to think about the changing norms of the web by looking at policies, practices, and perceptions as political in important (but small-*p*) ways.

The notion of online life as political goes back long before the appearance of sites like Facebook and Twitter. In his ethnographic account of early 1990s chat rooms (called MUDs, or multiuser dungeons), Julian Dibbell (1999) described the different political philosophies that emerged as controversies arose around the disruptive behavior of bad actors. In Dibbell's account, most people agreed that some punishment was needed, but deciding the process for administering it was much less clear. Some favored an anarchist ethic of total nonintervention from programmers (dubbed "wizards" in the parlance of the time), leaving everyday users to manage themselves. Others took a more libertarian view of minimal intervention, where wizards should be involved only in extreme cases. And some favored democratic processes of decision-making and consensus, with elected representatives to step in when tensions arose. People used words like *anarchism* and *democracy* to represent their values, underscoring both how expressly political these issues were at the time, and how early on these discussions were being had in the history of the internet. The conversations and debates Dibbell described are alive and well in the present, as evidenced in everything from shifting policies on moderating content (Crawford and Gillespie 2016) to controversies like Gamergate, when women game designers and journalists were harassed and threatened across multiple platforms and over months or even years (Schulten 2014).

Platform is an umbrella term for describing the many tech enterprises that host online conversations and connections, including social media companies. The word also has nontechnological connotations, particularly in the realm of politics, where it is used to describe politicians' ideological foundations (Gillespie 2010). Interestingly, the implication in the social-media arena is the opposite—referring to a site as a platform suggests that it's just a neutral stage where people come to perform, share, and voice opinions (Gillespie 2018a). For social-media companies, the term is appealing because it allows them to portray their relationship to content as agnostic, or not ideologically invested in or responsible for the views of any individual user. Alongside the concept of Web 2.0, the term "platform" became popular in the early 2000s as part of Silicon Valley's efforts

to rebrand the internet after the dot-com crash; the new vocabulary helped create some rhetorical distance from the slew of failed 1990s web companies. On the technical side, websites were becoming increasingly complex and bundled together as social-network sites, and at the same time, users were increasingly publishing and mashing up content rather than simply reading it (see Helmond 2015; Jenkins 2006; Marwick 2015). Thinking of social-network sites as platforms jived with this shift from read-only to read-and-write functionality.

A platform binds a wide set of actors together: tech companies, politicians, law enforcement, and everyday people, which includes good actors and bad, "n00bs" (newbies) and experts, dupes and cons. As an object to study, a platform can be useful because it provides a broader context for reflection, a way of scaling up and down a sociopolitical-technical chain of stakeholders. In this book, I cover a range of actors with a stake in craigslist's operations, from its founder and early employees to its everyday users and scammers, from lawyers and regulators to competitors and detractors. Beyond painting a well-rounded portrait of craigslist, my goal in raising these different perspectives is to set up a more robust discussion of the changing norms of online publics and platform politics. The various tensions and tactics that have taken shape on craigslist can point us to some key debates about the web as a whole.

In the course of everyday life online, we typically encounter many publics across many platforms, each with different political norms for how we interact and get things done. A key argument of this book is that as the web has stabilized, platforms have become more commercial and less democratic. It may be that more people have access to the internet now, but modes of surveillance have become more sophisticated and less visible. Despite powerful counterexamples like Wikipedia and Linux, it's become the norm to assume that tech initiatives must be oriented toward profit. People are encouraged to post content, but they don't retain the rights to that content once it has been shared, and platforms can sell user data to third parties, often in ways that users hadn't imagined (or understood from dense legal agreements masquerading as terms of service). As the internet has gentrified, sites like craigslist start to feel not just outdated but dangerous and sleazy. To build my critique of the gentrified internet, I'll take us on a tour of craigslist, stopping to look at the institutions it has disrupted and the legal precedents it has set, as well as its buyers and sellers, devotees and pranksters, and the competitors that tend to have more features, slicker designs, and more corporate orientations.

Studying craigslist: Notes on Methods

There are a number of ways to tell a story about a platform like craigslist. I could give a purely historical account of when and how craigslist developed over time. I could take a user-experience (UX) approach, evaluating its aesthetics or usability. A social-affordances approach would consider how the platform's policies encourage some behaviors and practices over others. I have opted for an approach that includes all three: a discussion of craigslist's historical and legal context, user accounts of everyday successes and failures, and thinking about craigslist's design and policies.

This book relies heavily on interviews. In addition to interviewing the site's founder, Craig Newmark, I have spoken with employees from craigslist's early days and key players in the Bay Area tech scene of the 1990s. These viewpoints help us understand the initial vision of craigslist, as well as the wider tech industry that shaped the company's goals and assumptions. I have also interviewed journalists, legal experts, and security specialists for perspectives on craigslist's role in shaping certain legal precedents around platform responsibility and data ownership. Craigslist runs a public-facing blog that dates to 2005, mostly penned by current CEO Jim Buckmaster, which I analyzed for information about how the company sees itself and its responsibilities.

These sources are all centered on insiders, people who have built craigslist as a platform and have a depth of knowledge about how the site works from the inside out. But in order to understand craigslist as a platform, it's also crucial to gather accounts from ordinary users. With my collaborator Jen Ayres, I interviewed people who buy and sell used goods on craigslist, as well as competing services like Free Your Stuff, eBay, and TaskRabbit. I have also conducted interviews with people who look for work on craigslist, using the platform to find jobs and gigs. A third set of interviews focused on craigslist personals and people who have gone online to find friends, hookups and long-term partners. In addition to interviews, I conducted a small ($n = 102$) online survey to gather descriptive statistics on craigslist, which helped me understand the most common uses of (and complaints about) the platform. Two other data sources of user experience are the craigslist help forum, which I analyzed for references to cons and fraud, and a data scrape of a Reddit thread devoted to craigslist. These different entry points provide a rich set of narratives about craigslist—its design and legal history, norms of use, and moments of failure. With this multilayered approach, I show the breadth of interactions that take shape on craigslist, and also how

the policies and politics around those interactions reflect an earlier ethos of the internet, a set of politics that contrasts with the contemporary paradigm of the web as increasingly closed off, homogeneous, and commercialized. Additional notes on interviews, data collection, and analysis are available in the methods appendix.

Outline

This book is divided into two parts: the first provides historical lenses for understanding craigslist, and the second dives into how people use craigslist in everyday life. In other words, the first part of the book gives critical information on *what craigslist is*—technically, historically, and legally—and the second part looks at *how craigslist is used*, by good actors as well as bad.

In chapter 1, I describe craigslist's transformation from an e-mail list to a massively popular online marketplace. I start with the role of the San Francisco Bay Area in the development of craigslist's purpose and ideology. During this early phase of the tech industry, democratic values of openness and access held sway, values that have shaped craigslist's look and feel ever since. Using interviews and textual analysis of craigslist's public-facing blog, I describe the site's basic features and rules, as well as the company's values and policies. My goal is to explain how the San Francisco tech scene shaped craigslist's ideas about online publics and politics.

How do online classified ads fit into the larger history of people and media? The limited body of research within media studies on classified ads (e.g., Bader 2005; Cocks 2009) hasn't been connected to online platforms, even though the web has become far more popular than print as a way to post ads. Meanwhile, craigslist has been blamed for destabilizing newspapers' advertising models, with heavy costs for local papers (e.g., Blodget 2008a; Reinan 2014; Weiss 2013). In chapter 2, I trace a media history of craigslist by examining the development of classified and personal ads through the arrival of the digital age. Craigslist has played a key role in the struggle of legacy media like newspapers to stay afloat, disrupting what had previously been an easily overlooked but crucially reliable source of funding.

Although often overlooked as a serious tech-industry player, craigslist has helped establish some crucial legal precedents with wide-sweeping implications. In chapter 3, I describe two key strands of legal arguments that craigslist has repeatedly—and, for the most part, successfully—made: first, that websites cannot be held responsible for the behavior or activities of its users, and second, that a platform's data should be protected from

third parties, particularly tech companies looking to make new products. Craigslist's legal battles present a complicated picture of its politics. On the one hand, the company has shown a commitment to freedom of expression and user agency. On the other, craigslist has quashed experimentation and creativity when it comes to other parties trying to use its data, even for projects that do not compete commercially with the platform. These legal battles show what happens when craigslist's politics run up against legal complaints, exposing the platform's view of responsibility, or what it owes to its users.

The second part of this book shifts from what craigslist is to how it is used by everyday people. Many different kinds of interactions take place on craigslist every day, from neighborhood gossip and soapbox rants to buying and selling goods to looking for jobs and employees. The chapters in this part each focus on a different set of tasks, relationships, and connections that unfold on craigslist every day. Craigslist's platform politics manifest in top-down decision-making about design and policy, but also in the norms that take shape as people bring craigslist into their everyday lives.

For most people, craigslist is mostly a marketplace. In chapter 4, I focus on craigslist's role as a secondary marketplace for used goods, meaning a market that operates outside of formal businesses and vendors. Drawing on interviews with users, I describe motivations for using craigslist to buy and sell used goods. These reasons range from community building and limiting waste to economizing and entrepreneurialism. Interviews also revealed different ideas of value that emerge in secondary markets, meaning both the monetary value that has to be decided on when there is no vendor acting as a middleman, and the social value attached to pre-owned goods. The second half of this chapter looks at what I call the "mash-up catalogs" of craigslist, meaning the digital accounts dedicated to archiving craigslist exchanges. Having gathered over one hundred accounts from Tumblr, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, I analyze these efforts to document craigslist as an entry point for theorizing the social lives of craigslist's things. The politics of buying and selling incorporate a range of economic, environmental, and social motivations, with negotiations of value that can alternately re-create and critique mainstream markets.

In chapter 5, I look at the hustle to find work on craigslist. Using interviews with craigslist users recruited through the site's gigs section, I put craigslist job searching in the context of shifting norms around work, like the reliance on digital tools to find employment, and moving away from long-term careers toward a string of short-term gigs. Understanding craigslist's jobs and gigs also points us to a discussion of class. Many participants

saw craigslist as part of the "poor people's internet," and described a form of stigma around the jobs found on the site. While early narratives around the internet assumed that access to digital media could overcome class divides, the class bias associated with craigslist's gigs shows how these assumptions fall flat.

If talking about work and employment opens up class politics, talking about personal ads opens up questions of sexual politics and the stigma around online dating generally and craigslist specifically. Craigslist shut down its personals section in March 2018, following the passage of the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA), a bill that holds platforms responsible for crimes involving human traffickers. FOSTA is just the most recent in a long series of laws around acceptable online behavior. Human relationships have always provoked rules and norms, which are sharpened and crystallized in the design and policies of online platforms like craigslist. Drawing on interviews and an analysis of a Reddit forum dedicated to craigslist, in chapter 6 I look at what made craigslist personals distinctive from other online dating platforms, focusing on shifting norms around anonymity and a persistent social stigma.

Chapter 7 examines the problems that are created and solved as people connect with, sell to, exploit, and protect one another on craigslist. I draw on interviews with craigslist users and a scrape of craigslist's help forum to analyze the ways that people negotiate violations of platform policies. For the most part craigslist transactions go smoothly, but moments of success and failure are important to understanding the politics of everyday online life. When things go right, it's because formal and tacit policies are in place, and because a steady stream of users are working anonymously and without pay to enforce rules and norms. When things go wrong, however, we see the limits of policies around community moderation. Listening to interviews and reading through the craigslist help forum has allowed me to make sense of how users connect through and negotiate craigslist's policies around community moderation and flagging. In particular, I focus on craigslist's commitment to user anonymity, which can alternately be seen as a tool for privacy or a threatening way of being online.

Throughout *An Internet for the People*, I point out the different politics that surface in everyday online encounters. In a moment where online platforms are being questioned for their ability to support or threaten the quality of political life (Kreiss 2016; Persily 2017), it's worth taking a broad view of how democracy works online. In the concluding chapter, I describe how craigslist lives up to the democratic possibilities of the web, how it falls

short, and how the site offers important lessons for holding on to an open, accessible, serendipitously messy internet.

There are two main areas of craigslist that I have left out of this book: housing and discussion forums. Beyond the fact that no research project can cover a platform completely, these sections are missing from this book for different reasons. In terms of housing, many of the people I interviewed about used goods, work, and dating had also used craigslist to find apartments and roommates. But none of these conversations about housing turned up the ideological tensions attached to buying and selling used goods, the class distinctions about work, or the character judgments about personals. Arguably, my framework of a gentrifying internet makes the omission of housing searches especially ironic. But in the interviews I conducted, housing was the least contested use of the platform, making it less relevant for my research questions on craigslist's contributions to digital culture. Discussion forums presented a different issue. In the online survey I conducted, just 2 percent of respondents reported using the forums. During interviews, very few people mentioned reading the forums and no one reported having posted to one. Another omission in this book is the lack of focus outside of the United States. Craigslist is a global website, active in seven hundred cities across the world, but 90 percent of its visitors are from the United States (Alexa, n.d.), which is a key reason for the geographic limitation of my analysis. Given that this is the first academic monograph on craigslist, I have opted to investigate the parts of the platform that are both familiar and provocative, although I certainly hope others will pursue research on the topics that I don't focus on here.

This book argues that craigslist helps us understand how the web has changed in the past quarter century, and it might seem as though I'm setting up craigslist as a white knight meant to save us from evil corporate profiteers, or that I'm nostalgic for a simpler, purer internet. But the story I tell in this book is much less straightforward than a zero-sum game of good guys and bad guys. The fact that craigslist has kept its look, feel, and core features intact for almost three decades makes it a useful object of study, but it doesn't make it perfect. For example, I disagree with how craigslist has handled requests to use its data. It's one thing to fight other companies' monetizing of user-generated content posted to craigslist, but it's another to go after people who simply want to play around with craigslist's data (Opsahl 2013). The site has struggled to overcome a reputation for fraud and crime through a somewhat naïve notion that it can doggedly work with law enforcement behind the scenes and expect users and the broader public

to notice. Although I argue that there are democratic values in maintaining a simple design, I definitely do not want the entire internet to look like craigslist. What I do want is to consider what it means to have a site like craigslist endure on the web for so long, and to think about how its policies and practices can help us understand important changes in online politics.

Chances are either you or someone you know has sold something on craigslist. Maybe you sold a used car without worrying too much about the potential for fraud, or maybe you went to great lengths to protect yourself and your privacy when it came to meeting a buyer for a used phone. In researching this book, I met a number of people who never or rarely use craigslist to buy or sell anything, but nonetheless find it useful or entertaining. Some peruse craigslist posts to check the going rate for a used item; others are simply amused by looking through the "Best of craigslist" or "Missed Connections" posts. Whichever features interest them, most people use craigslist without thinking about how the site manifests a form of technological politics. And yet, politics are always present just beneath the surface—in everything from how we describe our neighborhoods when we search for a roommate to how we respond to a suspected scam. From craigslist's perspective, many of its policies also have a political bent, most clearly in decisions such as not allowing the sale of guns or military paraphernalia, but also in more subtle conflicts: in frictions between lawsuit litigants, between different kinds of sellers, between fraudsters and dupes, between craigslist and its competitors.

In my tour through the marketplaces, moderation battles, and court cases of craigslist, I tease out a number of claims about politics and online publics. Developing a multifaceted account of craigslist gives us an in-depth understanding of a site where you can get almost anything, from a free eighteen-foot sailboat (assuming you can get it out of a backyard pool in Phoenix, Arizona, without damaging the lawn) to Tom Cruise–impersonation lessons. On its own, craigslist makes for an interesting case study as the internet's longest-running garage sale, but tracing the site's history also presents a framework for considering how digital culture has changed. With its long history, stable business model, and almost unchanging aesthetic, craigslist is like an island that has stayed mostly the same while the web around it has changed. By looking at the politics and promises of craigslist, we can reflect on how the web has evolved in the past twenty-five years, how it has stayed the same, what we might want to protect, and what we should think about changing when it comes to everyday life online.

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