

Social Media and Society: Platforms, Publics, and Anti-Publics

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Zoetanya Sujon¹, Harry T. Dyer², and Felipe Bonow Soares¹

Abstract

The Special Issue on Platforms, publics, and anti-publics focused on the complex intersection of platforms, including issues around their ownership, datafication, business models, and algorithms; and the emergence of publics and anti-publics online, which has been increasingly impacted by platforms infrastructures and designs. This Special Issue underscores the need to understand how online publics are influenced by sociotechnical affordances and shaped by the political and ideological influence of platforms' governances. The articles featured in this issue explore the role of digital platforms in relation to sociability and public discourse; and dive into the discussion of publics, marked by the emergence of online communities and sociability online, and anti-publics on social media, poisoned by political propaganda and online abuse. The articles included in the issue are extended versions of the research presented at the 2024 International Conference on Social Media and Society (#SMSociety).

Keywords

social media, society, platforms, publics, anti-publics

Introduction

The 2024 International Conference on Social Media & Society (#SMSociety) was held at London College of Communication, University of the Arts London. Co-organized by the Social Media Lab (Toronto Metropolitan University) and the Digital Cultures and Economies research hub (University of the Arts London), the conference is a biennial gathering of social media researchers, providing both a sense check for the current state of research on and about social media and its position within the broader field of digital research. The conference also acts as horizon scan for key debates, emergent tensions, and new methodologies for social media research and scholarship. For over a decade, SMSociety has convened an interdisciplinary and international community, spanning the social sciences, arts and humanities, alongside computational and data sciences to interrogate the shifting entanglements of social technologies, culture, and society.

This 2024 convening in London unfolded in a moment of clear liminality, both in the global multi-disciplinarity of the social media field itself, but also in shifting the conference home from Canada to the United Kingdom, as the conference and Social Media Lab founders, Anatoliy Gruzd and Phillip Mai, passed leadership on to Zoetanya Sujon and Harry Dyer. Of the 183 paper presentations, 50 posters, and

eight workshops presented at the conference, the most prevalent topics reveal platforms caught between legacy architectures and a more fragmented, contested ecosystem, one where algorithmic governance and increasingly overtly political corporate interests collide with emergent protocols of community building, resistance, and civic expression. Current scholarship, as represented by the conference, shows a growing tension between the expanding scope of platforms in everyday life not just as spaces for public life but as structures mediating and shaping pro and anti-social public life. Yet between these poles, between TikTok 'sides', between 'brain rot' and hashtag activism, between Snapchat streaks and flame badges gamifying sociality, there are real tensions around the opening and closure of networked opportunities.

This liminality is understood as the condition of being 'betwixt and between' established modes of being and structures. Originating in van Gennep's (1960) work on rites of passage, it denotes a transitional phase characterised by

¹University of the Arts London, UK

²University of East Anglia, UK

Corresponding Author:

Zoetanya Sujon, University of the Arts London, London College of Communication, Elephant & Castle, London, SE1 6SB, UK.
Email: z.sujon@lcc.arts.ac.uk



potential but also ambiguity, suspension of an established-yet-fragile normative order, and heightened potential for transformation(s). In this state, the liminal entity occupies neither their previous identity nor their assumed future identity, creating a space in which existing hierarchies and meanings can be contested and reconfigured. It is an interstitial condition in which established norms are suspended, identities are unsettled, and the threshold of transformation is at once uncertain, and generative. Yet, we also see extractive infrastructures hardening in exploitative platform dynamics where profit incentives set up conditions for intensified epistemic divides as seen in both anti-publics and pro-social publics. Platforms can equally foster harmful and hopeful communities, not only through extractive platform logics but also in shaping how publics are felt, experienced, and defined (Lupinacci, 2025; Sujon, 2021). There are huge differences between Mastodon communities, which operates through an open source and decentralised platform versus X (formerly Twitter), a microblogging site bought by Elon Musk in 2022 only to remove trust and safety departments and go on to ‘destroy Twitter’ (Conger & Mac, 2024, see also Soares et al., 2025). This is not just about the growing prevalence of ‘anti-social behavior and the widespread presence of misinformation’ on social media (Gruzd et al., 2023, Gruzd and Wellman 2014) which is of crucial importance, but also the ways in which patterns of behaviour coalesce into existing and emergent ‘publics’ – so closely shaped by platform structures, affordances, and governance systems.

These platform dynamics demand critical examination, including lines of enquiry and methodological innovations appropriate for the density of platform publics and the in-betweenness of. Given the conference’s open theme, it was telling that a notable majority of papers interrogated clear tensions not only inherent in today’s pervasive and invasive social media landscapes but also questioned the links between platforms and their publics. For example, panels included discussions about topic modelling (Kasianenko et al., 2024), transnational queer cultures (Bayramoğlu et al., 2024), re-imagining AI with afrofuturism (Sharma & Shervington, 2024) and selling play and the digital imaginaries of young people (Coulter et al., 2024). All of these topics challenge how we see, navigate and make sense of platforms. The papers in this special issue serve not only as diagnostic of fissures in our social media landscapes but also as catalysts for shaping and reconfiguring publics. Taken together, these contributions not only go some way to unpicking platform pathologies but also map new methodological and theoretical pathways through the interstices of our ever-shifting socio-technical world – from interfaces to collective identity making, and from organising social infrastructures to social media imaginaries.

Over the conference, and in the papers in this special issue, it becomes readily apparent that we must fundamentally rethink what social media are – as they are simultaneously mega corporations and micro apps, global platforms facilitating small

acts of engagement (Picone et al., 2019) – what Poell et al. (2019, p. 1) define as the ‘penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life’. The shift from ‘social media’ to platforms expands the scope from the single social network sites of the early 2000s to interlocking ecosystems shaped by unique particularities and whole platform ecosystems. Contingently, we must expand if not overhaul our methods and methodologies accordingly. These challenges also open up spaces of possibility. As #SMSociety carries the legacies of 14 years of social media research under a new leadership team, we are both excited and energised to embark on new collaborative horizons on the constitution and meaning making within platform architectures (see Gruzd & Wellman 2014).

From this point, this introduction provides a reflection on the state of social media based on a broad overview of the field. We argue that the shift from social networks sites to platforms involves increasing acknowledgement of social media’s extractive and exploitative logics alongside deeply consumer oriented socialities. This means that despite enabling pro-social and sometimes community interactions, most platforms themselves are also anti-publics, co-opting publicly generated communications, resources and human action for private gain. This does not mean that no good can come from platforms but it does mean that many platform architectures erode the public orientations of social structures on local, national and global scales.

From Social Network Sites to Platforms as Anti-Publics

In the last decades of social media – and centuries of sociological research, many have grappled with what, where, and how technologies impact publics, including who those publics include or exclude. In terms of conceptual models for a broad amalgamation of digital sites and services, we have moved from ‘network society’ – and the social organisation around flows and interconnected nodes to ‘platform society’ points to ‘the inextricable relation between online platforms and societal structures’ (Castells, 1996, 2023, Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 2, respectively). There is a striking continuity between the role of technologies as producing social structures that persists despite changing metaphors of the social/technology relationship. ‘Platforms’ may have replaced how we think about individual ‘social network sites’ (boyd and Ellison 2007) to better capture the complex horizontal and vertical spread of big tech across the technical structures hefting data around the globe alongside new constellations of mediated social relations. We are beginning to see new models of cultural production and global industry convergences, as articulated through ‘social media entertainment’ (Cunningham & Craig, 2019), ‘quantitative behavioural markets’ (Zuboff, 2019) and the rise of ‘data colonialism’ (Coudry & Mejias, 2019; Mejias & Coudry, 2024). Social

media are often understood as the companies, organisations, apps and sites that facilitate social interaction, yet the term does not quite capture these broader social shifts towards platforms, platformisation, and the cultural moment these processes shape and reflect.

Gillespie's (2010) influential provocation on what 'platforms' mean fixed their multiplicity through competing concepts such as 'sometimes technical "platforms," sometimes as "platforms" from which to speak, sometimes as "platforms" of opportunity . . . [all of which include how] providers become the curators of public discourse' (p. 347). Poell et al. (2022, p. 5) later define platforms as 'data infrastructures that facilitate, aggregate, monetize, and govern interactions between end-users and content and service providers'. They go on to argue that social media companies like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok are actually multi-sided markets providing access to content, users, and third parties like advertisers – through seamless and often friction free 'data infrastructures' (Poell et al. 2022). In these ways, 'social media' become specific instances of datafication coordinated around site-specific constellations of audiences, creators, infrastructures, and agencies – what are often understood as everyday publics. Furthermore, the datafication influences how users see themselves through and in relation to data, creating what Burgess et al. (2022) call 'data publics'.

Early work on how social technologies shaped publics focused in on the ways the user navigated the affordances of social and digital spaces, highlighting that ways of being social online offered distinct modes of acting and interacting, encouraged unique socio-technical formations of 'publics'. danah boyd (2010, p. 39), for example, noted that publics are

simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice . . . Networked publics' affordances do not dictate participants' behavior, but they do configure the environment in a way that shapes participants' engagement. In essence, the architecture of a particular environment matters and the architecture of networked publics is shaped by their affordances.

However, as the research presented in this special issue explores, tensions exist beyond the intersections of the platform architectures and users' engagements (see Dyer, 2020 for more discussion of this). Instead, research is increasingly exploring both the political tensions of platform ownership, and the competing definitions and conceptions of 'publics' offered and sustained by other users in highly differentiated, if not polarised, examples of what a public can be. These emergent tensions can be seen in Crystal Abidin's (2021) concept of 'refracted publics' developed in response to boyd's definition of 'network publics', which are

publics that are circumvented by users. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed out of the desire for

refracted perceptions and (2) the collection of subversive or circumvention practices as a result of analogue and algorithmic manipulations of vision and access. (Abidin, 2021, p. 3)

Abidin (2021, p. 3) goes on to note that 'refracted publics are not merely collections of any circumventive, subversive, or off-label practices, but instead are products of their time in a landscape of platform data leaks, political protests, fake news, and (most recently) COVID-19'. As we see in this special issue, new tensions and political dimensions continue to emerge around *new* communities and connections (see Lin and Zabrowski 2025; McLeod, 2025; Tian et al., 2025, this issue), and the amplification and facilitation of gender-based violence (Morales et al., 2025), misogyny, and state-based ideologies (Liu, 2025) in highly commodified and consumptive ways (Entrena-Serrano, 2025).

While the term 'anti-publics' was first coined by Mackenzie Wark (1997), it is often used to capture the anti-social behaviours, discourses and interaction 'routinely and radically flouts the ethical and rational norms of democratic discourse' (Davis, 2021, p. 143). Typically referring to those spaces like the 'manosphere's' extreme misogynists (Bates, 2025), coordinated disinformation attacks (Gruzd et al., 2022; Soares, 2023), and networks of paedophiles surfing coded YouTube videos for exploitable content (Tarvin & Stanfill, 2022). These groups are made up of people with fixed beliefs directly connected to the harm of others. Yet, in the same way that visibility and affiliation can facilitate identity making and new communities, the shift from by-association connection to algorithmically curated 'anti-publics' contributes to the polarisation of epistemic divides. In between publics and anti-publics, there is slippage and ferment. A casual scroll through trending TikTok's can lead to noticeably malevolent influencers alongside much more casually 'anti-public' creators.

A case in point is the seemingly mindless nature of 'brain rot' such as the 'skibidi toilet' viral meme showing a silly spinning head in a toilet and referred to by young people as an emblem of youth culture. This may seem harmless but the popular culture and anti-publics overlap through memes, language, and everyday online experiences. Textual and visual language demonstrates this blurring. For example, 'simp' refers to an acronym for suckers-for-mediocre-pussy; 'beta' is intended to be a derogatory term for 'inferior' males widely used by incels and in the manosphere; and 'Italian brain rot' like 'bambardino crocodilo', an AI generated alligator that 'bombs kids in Gaza and Palestine and doesn't believe in Allah' (Know Your Meme 2025). Many argue that these demonstrate dangerous 'irony poisoning' which pollutes information ecosystems as well as the public potential for ethical reasoning and affective solidarities.

Publics and anti-publics are made up of such algorithmic silos and informational flows shaped by often powerful data infrastructures. The slippage and blurring between these

poles can make platform cultures disorienting, marked by endless scrolling and constant validation of likes, shares and clicks (Sujon, 2025). This can make it almost impossible to differentiate between good, bad, and reconfigured kinds of socialities. Based on work with young people, Owens (2025, p. 1) argues that brain rot is a ‘decompression-driven genre of participation’ noting that fluency helps make connections with others, marking out youth friendly spaces shared with other cultural insiders (see also Cammaerts, 2007 on counter-hegemonic belonging). Similarly, many conspiracy theorists are interested in calling out authority and power structures in which they feel alienated – and thus the conceptual nonsense found in misinformation serves an affective truth rejecting the perceived sources of alienation (see Dyer, 2018; Lakin, 2024).

Shaping and Structuring Publics

As platforms continue to evolve, we see new dynamics emerge that reshape how publics are formed and sustained, underscoring persistent and emergent tensions between users and platforms, all of which present interesting dynamics for new research. A clear area of research in this regard is the growing dominance of recommendation algorithms, which not only curate our engagements with platforms and content, but also re-orientate the creation of publics towards content optimised in conversation with visibility. In this manner, algorithmic mediation fundamentally alters the conditions under which publics are imagined, assembled, and maintained.

On TikTok in particular, interactions with other content and users often emerge through the algorithm itself (Gerbaudo, 2024), as well as our understanding and sensemaking of the algorithm (Issar, 2023), a shift that Bhandari and Bimo (2022) describe as producing an ‘algorithmised self’. They note in particular that algorithmically driven platforms shift publics away from social connections alone towards a more complex engagement with content, platform, and temporality. Given the constant feed of content produced on platforms like TikTok, we are faced with recursive and temporal engagement with pasts, presents, and possible futures selves all placed in conversation with specific publics dictated in conversation with an algorithm, while also attempting to hone the algorithm around future publics we may wish to access or avoid. As Ditchfield and Vicari (2025) highlight, this algorithmised self is further complicated by the ways it interacts with existing networks, with interpersonal and networked publics extending onto new platforms like TikTok in complex ways.

This (re)formation of the public sphere around algorithmic logics augments traditional socialities in dialogue with seemingly hyper-personalised media flows, with the user left forming what Taina Bucher (2016) calls ‘algorithmic imaginaries’ to understand and make sense of why we are seeing specific content, and what this tell us both about ourselves, the broader publics that we have deemed as belonging to, and

what publics we *might* want to belong to. We might then view publics through an algorithm as a relationship between content, selves-across-time, and imagined collectives. Such work has been teased out in relation to ‘sides’ of TikTok, which Maddox and Gill (2023, p. 2) note can be defined as

a platform vernacular created and adopted by users to describe their experiences engaging with algorithmically curated, similar content, as well as the subsequent collectives forming around them. Sides of TikTok are imagined. Users will never encounter every single other community member, but they can envision themselves as a part of the collective.

‘Sides’ reflect an inherently socio-technical entanglement with the algorithm, which works to shape how users see themselves in relation to publics, and how they wish to be seen. This process is always already political, shaped through the lens of which conversations are amplified or minimised, as well as how users navigate these ongoing conversations with each other and the algorithm. These imaginaries involve not just understanding what is happening now but also what futures might look like, and how we locate ourselves (and are located) in different publics. As Pangrazio and Sefton-Green (2021, p. 18) note, this is a complicated act that involves ‘interpreting multiple streams of local and global information, and, in the age of datafication, anticipating unknown consequences’. It is important to note here that one of the repercussions of this interpretation and anticipation of publics is the *responsibilisation* of the users to control and shape their algorithm, and to know and navigate or evade algorithmic practices.

As Jones (2023, p. 1193) expresses, conceiving of publics becomes a complex act of ‘audiencing, or creating an audience, [which] is partially publicly controlled through algorithmic practices’. In essence, as many papers in this special issue explore, the burden of responsibility for both confronting and anticipating publics and anti-publics is shifted from platforms to individuals, without providing the necessary resources, knowledge, power, or agency to meaningfully address these responsibilities. Users are left with imaginaries of publics without the means to clearly and effectively enact them.

Publics then become refracted through opaque, data-driven assemblages, and in turn users, confronted with the partial visibility of their own datafied selves, rely on speculative interpretations of how and why content appears. These are used to make sense of both their algorithmic positioning and the imagined publics to which they do or do not belong, both now and in possible futures. Maddox and Gill (2023) go on to note that

if users also only see themselves in content being pushed back to them by the site, we can assess an alignment in imagined demographics by user and platform. Sides, like many other publics online, such as Black Twitter, are ad hoc, created out of communal or identity necessity.

What becomes increasingly important here is not only what content the algorithm foregrounds and how the platforms locate us as members of publics but also, as Karizat et al. (2021) explore, the audience's imaginaries and folk theories of the algorithms and the publics they are part of, foregrounding new forms of publicness and belonging. Or as we see in the cases of coordinated misinformation, ad fraud, and online hate, algorithmic mediation can also be divisive and amplify exclusions (see Morales et al., 2025).

Some of the ways publics are formed rely on specific narratives which may be harmful or reductive. For example, as Kevin Guyan's (2022) work around Queer Data highlights the ways in which visibility can be dangerous and used to target and manipulate vulnerable groups. Public narratives of queerness are shaped by various factors, including specific sanitised narratives of queerness, missing data, and the dangers of visibility, all of which inform how and where queerness is seen and what is considered a queer public.

In this manner, publics become political spaces in dialogue with broader public narratives, offering in turn means of resistance and the formation of counter-publics in ways that are also inherently socio-technical. Concepts such as 'sousveillance' (Browne, 2015) become particularly useful for understanding how platform surveillance can be subverted and reoriented outward, enabling users to document abuses of power, spotlight inequality, and strategically reinsert these narratives into algorithmically mediated spaces to resist particular narrative of their perceived publics. For example, Peterson-Salahuddin (2022, p. 2401) documents the ways in which Black creators use challenges and stitches on the app as a way of documenting racism within the app and in their day-to-day lives engaging 'in acts of digital dark sousveillance by leveraging their knowledge of the platform algorithm to both resist it and look back at it' (see also McLeod, 2025, this issue).

A clear manifestation of such resistance lies in the emergence of coded language to get past perceived algorithmic suppression of specific publics. For example, 'algspeak' has been used by users to evade algorithmic content suppression (see Steen et al., 2023). Euphemisms like 'unaliving' (for suicide), 'seggs' (for sex), or the watermelon emoji (to signal solidarity with Palestinian liberation) function as tactical adaptations, revealing the contested nature of visibility and the competing imaginaries of publicness between users and platforms. In this manner what can be seen, said, or shared becomes a central site of struggle between the platform and the users perceived as publics.

Such tactics are not limited to online discourses. As Thomas (2021) documents, police officers have been observed playing copyrighted music in physical spaces to trigger content takedowns by live streaming platforms, by weaponising algorithmic moderation against public scrutiny. Ultimately, these moments render visible the contested nature of platform publics, where users act not only as content creators and consumers but also as witnesses to, and

participants in, ongoing battles over visibility, control, and the shaping of collective memory and possible publics. Algorithms suggest certain ways of seeing and knowing the public, some of which demand alternative engagements.

Platform Tensions With Owners, Designers, Users

As new platforms and affordances emerge, new sociotechnical manifestations of publics will continue to emerge, as boyd (2010, p. 39) recognised in her early understanding of digital publics as 'the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice'. Increasingly the relationship between users and platform designers is marked by friction, not only due to design features and affordances as discussed above but also due to the broader geopolitical and ideological entanglements of platform ownership. Many of the papers at the 2024 conference emerged in direct response to tensions around the political landscape of the designers of social media platforms – from discussions of TikTok's geopolitical position amplifying tensions between China and America, to the ethical and social ramifications of Elon Musk's ownership of Twitter/X, for example. These tensions are typified by the presence of multiple technology designers and owners present on the stage of Donald Trump's second inauguration on 20 January 2025, including Sergey Brin (co-founder of Google), Elon Musk (owner of xAI), Jeff Bezos (founder of Amazon), Mark Zuckerberg (co-founder of Facebook), and Shou Zi Chew (CEO of TikTok) among others. Increasingly visible and obvious leadership that sits on the front stage of political power impacts how we frame responsibility for platform (mis)behaviour. Their visibility not only underscores the growing fusion of mega-corporate technological power with political authority but also obfuscates questions of platform accountability. As the contributions to this special issue suggest, researchers must increasingly contend with publics not just as emergent from sociotechnical affordances, but as shaped within contested arenas of media power, governance, and ideological control.

Much has been written in the past decades about the marketisation of public space, but the increasingly apparent political machinations of platform owners have made this commodification ever more stark (e.g., Hardy, 2022). In many ways the tensions over the ownership of TikTok highlight the ways in which recommendation systems and engagement metrics serve not only to maximise advertising revenue but also to shape public and personal discourse in ways that are seen as reflecting the geopolitical and economic objectives of those at the helm. In turn, every user action, driven by what Silke et al. (2025) calls an 'engagement at all costs' approach to commodifying publics, becomes a node in a broader apparatus that overlaps tensions between corporate power and political influence, in turn co-producing the terms and terrains of our digital publics.

Such tensions commodify the platforms for public discourse, setting the agendas for how publics are structured and sustained, or indeed as Collins et al. (2020) point out, how publics can become a depletable resource. It is notable then that many presentations in the 2024 conference, and many of the papers in this special issue, directly discuss the ongoing depletion and mutation of publics as newer algorithmically driven platforms emerge and present tensions in how publics are commodified as depletable resources. As Haythornthwaite et al. (2024a, 2024b) point out, ‘the operation of a taken-for-granted, open social media platform can suddenly become fragile, susceptible to collapse through the whim of ownership’. This ongoing instability and fragility of both the platforms and the publics sustained on them, as well as movements between emergent platforms (see Ittefaq, 2025) present key dynamics for researchers to grapple with.

#SMSociety Special Issue

In the context of complex relationships between platforms, their algorithms and ownerships, and how publics and anti-publics emerge online, this special issue brings together cutting-edge studies that look at both of these dimensions. The research from Entrena-Serrano (2025), Butkowski and Corry (2025), and Alloing et al. (2025) focus particularly on social media platforms and their affordances and the public discourse about these platforms.

A key element in how platforms influence the formation of publics online has to do with their affordances and interfaces. While there has been a now-long tradition in studies looking at algorithmic recommendations, the work of Entrena-Serrano (2025) focuses specifically on platform’s interface design and how it shapes users’ interactions with and on the platform. Using an innovative walkthrough method to investigate TikTok’s interface, he shows how the platform pushes users towards a more passive consumption through the algorithmically driven For You Page. The study also underscores how TikTok’s interface discourages users from disabling data collection, and how the platform actively hides information that could provide further transparency about algorithmic curation.

Along with TikTok, many new platforms gained attention in recent years, including during migration movements from X (formerly Twitter) to other spaces, like Meta’s Threads and alternative platforms like Mastodon and Bluesky. In these crucial moments, public discourse has been responsible for how we understand and imagine these online spaces. Butkowski and Corry (2025) tackle this topic by looking at mainstream media discourse about TikTok, BeReal, and Threads. They identified that the discourse about these new platforms often carries elements of expressions of nostalgia, referring to practices from the earlier days of social media, both in how it feels to be in these platforms and in how affordances influence users’ experience. Consequently, these platforms are inserted into the public discourse in relation to

more prevalent and older platforms – even if as an alternative to something that is no longer there. Butkowski & Corry push beyond discursive framings, positioning social media as experiencing a kind of ‘mid-life crisis’ which have a longer term impact on future platform imaginaries.

Platforms have been conducting internal research for years, including some with a specific focus on emotions. While this topic came under scrutiny when Facebook published a controversial study about an experiment with users’ timelines and ‘emotional contagion’, there have not been many studies exploring platforms’ approach to understanding of emotions in detail. In relation to public discourse, Alloing et al. (2025) devote attention to this gap by looking at 58 studies published by Meta and Google researchers addressing how they empirically operationalise emotions. Alloing and colleagues show that these platforms often fail to define what they mean by emotions in their studies and use these studies to help optimise recommendations and understand how to improve well-being of users to keep them online and engaging in the platform for longer, reflecting key aspects of platform capitalism.

The other papers in this special issue are interested in various dynamics about publics and anti-publics in digital platforms. In particular, they explore how users respond to platforms’ algorithms and affordances to engage in various forms of pro-social and anti-social behaviour. These studies also explore a range of demographics and platforms to understand in more depth the emergence of public and anti-publics on social media.

Lin and Zaborowski (2025) explore the gamified elements of sociality on the Chinese platform Douyin. Their study adopts a robust methodological approach combining walkthrough and diary-interview techniques. Their findings show a dichotomous process of interaction between users and the platform. On one hand the gamified badges promote various elements of sociability between users, who are encouraged to interact with their peers. On the other hand, users are also aware of how the platform and its algorithms exploit and gamify users’ interactions, which foster more cautious practices from these users when interacting on Douyin.

In relation to the formation of publics and communities on social media, McLeod (2025) provides a detailed analysis of the emergence of Black Twitter, looking at the pre-Elon Musk microblogging platform. Through an ethnographic approach, she explores how Black Twitter users make sense of this online space as their own and how it relates to the historical positioning of Black communities. McLeod’s investigation shows how platforms might have multiple facets when it comes to the emergence of online publics, as the platform now (even more) corrupted by hate speech and disinformation, was also a space where users of Black Twitter could strategically use various affordances to protect their community.

Moving towards political discussions and how (authentic and inauthentic) publics use platform spaces for activism,

Liu (2025) looks at gender controversies on the Chinese platform Weibo. In particular, her study explores users' responses to a gender controversy initiated by posts from party-state media in China. Much of the discussion was around the use of labels such as 'extreme feminism' and 'fake feminism' to diminish critics against the Chinese Communist Party. Users used Weibo to claim that the political party betrayed its original promise to liberate women, showing the emergence of a public to express their concerns against how the women have been instrumentalised for political gain. This study provides a view of the complex process of public formation and digital activism in contemporary China.

Tian et al. (2025) also looks at the influence of the Chinese government in the emergence of publics and anti-publics on social media. In particular, her study explores how foreign political influencers are used to promote pro-China views on Twitter. With a particular focus on propaganda and information operations, Tian explores how ten political influencers supported China based on their tweets. The study shows a dual use of these influencers to promote a good view on China online. Some of them focus on promoting Chinese culture using personal testimonies to portray authenticity in their emotion-focused tweets (defined as 'explorers'). Others present themselves as 'experts' by signalling their expertise in the country – these are often academics or journalists. Altogether, these are key figures in promoting China's reputation on social media, even when their political affiliations and connections to the country remain ambiguous.

Finally, Morales et al. (2025) focus on a main behaviour of anti-publics online: gender-based online violence and abuse. In their discussion of how Canadian men engage in this form of violence, the role of technology and digital platforms is highlighted by the key concept of the study: gender-based technology-facilitated violence and abuse – used both to underscore the specificity of what is studied in relation to gender and social media, but also keeping it broad to explore various forms of violence and abuse. Their findings point out that political ideology is central to understanding this form of anti-social behaviour, with conservative participants more likely to accept myths related to gender-based online violence, employing minimising and dismissive logics to gender-based harms. This study contributes to the understanding of how technologies and platforms' affordances can also contribute to and shape the emergence of anti-publics.

Conclusion and Future Directions

With this in mind, the papers in this special issue both unpick publics, anti-publics and their densely entangled relationship with platforms, they also offer, as Jandrić et al. (2018, p. 895) call for,

a 'holding-to-account' of the digital that seeks to look beyond the promises of instrumental efficiencies, not to call for their

end, but rather to establish a critical understanding of the very real influence of these technologies as they increasingly pervade social life.

It becomes increasingly important for research to challenge the narrative, logics, and surface-level dynamics of social media interactions and to instead question the consequences of platform logics extending into both visible and shadow publics, both pro- and anti-socialities, and at once public and anti-publics. We must also consider how we accept and normalise these consequences in our research choices, and which (re)presentations and reconstitutions of reality we affirm. As one of the editors of this special issue writes in his forthcoming book (Dyer 2025, 23):

Researchers interested in digital society face a significant choice early in the project as to how they position themselves in relation to the power structures that pervade and manifest through technology . . . This is apparent not only in how we prioritise online content in the framing of our research questions, but also in which voices, logics, and processes we normalise in our research focus and choice of participants.


As the dynamics of platforms and publics continue to shift and follow complex sociotechnical trajectories, there is a pressing need for critical research that traces new, existing, and emergent sociotechnical realities. Research is needed that unpacks the ramifications of the curatorial nature of increasingly privatised and for-profit platforms, and what this means for the algorithmic structuring of participation, governance of attention, alongside public discourse and narrative formations.

Along with these changing platform dynamics and the consequences for and in publics, we also see a shift in our ability to access platforms as reliable forms of data. The papers in this special edition highlight ways forward, including how we as researchers are having to challenge, adapt, examine, and imagine how platforms and publics intersect and are constitutive of socialities. The papers here present interesting evolutions of methods including exploring interface design on TikTok to unpacking public imaginaries of the future of social media. Together, these authors (and editors) join in a call to question social media and think through pathways for solidarities over epistemic divides – all questions to be taken up in #SMSociety 2026 and the broader field.

ORCID iDs

Zoetanya Sujon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4280-8222>

Harry T. Dyer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1629-730X>

Felipe Bonow Soares  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4850-9255>

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Author biographies

Zoetanya Sujon is a Reader in Communications and Social Technologies and Programme Director in Communications and Media at London College of Communication, University of the Arts London (UAL). Originally trained as a sociologist and anthropologist, Zoetanya draws from an interdisciplinary lens and her research broadly addresses the relationships between social technologies and everyday life. Zoetanya is the joint lead organiser for the *Social Media and Society* international conference, Project co-Lead for DISKAH, and was the Principal Investigator for the AHRC funded project: Transforming the Gap: Inclusive Digital Arts and Humanities Research Skills (DARes) with under-represented researchers as co-designers. Zoetanya is also the UK's Key Regional Leader for the TikTok Research Cultures Network. Zoetanya is the co-director of the Digital Cultures and Economies Research Hub (UAL). Zoetanya is the author of 'The Social Media Age' (Sage 2021) and has published work in leading journals, such as *Social Media + Society*, *New Media and Society*, and *International Journal of Communication*.

Harry T. Dyer is Associate Professor of Education and digital sociologist at the University of East Anglia. His research explores the impact of digital technologies on culture and education. His forthcoming (November 2025) book with SAGE Publishing

'*Researching Digital Society*' explores some of the current debates around how digital technologies are shaping the social world. Harry's first monograph is 'Designing the Social' (Springer Nature 2020). Harry serves in several roles supporting research and scholarship around technology, culture, and education. He is a joint lead organiser of *Social Media and Society* (SMSociety), editor of *Digital Culture and Education*, co-convenor of the British Sociological Association's Digital Sociology Group, Thematic Chair for Digital Social Sciences at SeNSS, and Course Director of the BA Education suite of courses at UEA.

Felipe Bonow Soares is a Senior Lecturer in Communications and Media at London College of Communication – University of the Arts London (UAL). He earned his PhD in Communication and Information from Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). His research interests include online discourse, political communication, social media, and disinformation. Before joining UAL, Felipe was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Social Media Lab (Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada). Felipe has been working on multi-year initiatives on anti-social behavior and misinformation on social media with an international team of researchers. Broadly, his research interests include online discourse, political communication, social media, disinformation, and online anti-social behaviour. His work has appeared in highly regarded scholarly journals such as *Social Media + Society*, *International Journal of Communication*, *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, and the Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review.