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(Article begins on next page)

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Media Technologies and Epistemologies: The Platforming of Everything

Introduction

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This editorial introduction contextualizes seven articles examining developments in media communications against emerging and other Web-based technologies. The analysis combines to account for the role played by platforms and the tensions as well as innovations resulting from adaptations in user behaviors. From hologram-based haptics to online gaming, these technologies extend beyond many of the current considerations being given to artificial intelligence (AI) and the impact from machine learning technologies. Multiple technological developments contribute to the ongoing disruption that is redefining and repurposing global media ecology. Together, the seven articles chart the rise of emerging user behaviors and corollaries like the negotiating of platform logics and governance. Providing timely insight to developments in contemporary online culture, the Special Section prompts reevaluation of some time-honored media histories and epistemologies.

Keywords: platform, deplatforming, misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, hologram, gaming

Technological advances and shifts in cultural mediation and distribution practices characterize the global media ecology by shaping modes of digital communication and user behaviors. The impact from artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning have been focusing scholarly attention and driving public debates (Hussain, Khan, & Malik, 2024; Özyer & Alhajj, 2018), but other emerging technologies and the rise of platforms continue to have distinct repercussions. New and emerging technologies not only alter the dynamics of the consumption and production of communication practices but reframe media histories. In this Special Section, epistemological considerations are brought into focus by articles examining the impact of developing technologies that pose significance not necessarily due to their qualities of disruption but rather how their integration into the global media ecology and emerging practices reveal certain structural dynamics from its growing platform logics (Gillespie, 2018).

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The Special Section complements the renewed urgency surrounding information integrity and media trustworthiness, as well as perennial issues like the challenges confronting user-generated content and sustaining diverse media industries (Ashley, 2020). In addition to threats from misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, structural challenges from technological innovation continue to outpace global regulatory efforts that combine to affect media consumption and user rights (Sisu et al., 2022).

Counter measures to an unregulated tech sector can often emerge from user behaviors that adapt online tools and applications for personalized usage that represent agile maneuverings to corporate agendas. At the same time, platforms and their operators are also responding to the crises surrounding reliable information, in their own ways and for their own purposes.

Each of these factors represent ways in which the global attention economy manifests around the exchange of computational data with implications for the democratic social contract and its dependence on reliable sources of easily accessible and verifiable authentic information. Maintaining information integrity means acknowledging the kind of harm posed by algorithmic feeds and the role of platforms in distorting news and factual information through social media's echo chamber effects (Cinelli, De Francisci Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2021).

Responding to the many challenges posed by media technologies and information systems requires interdisciplinary responses capable of addressing the complexities and fluidity of global communication. The Special Section brings together contributions examining the cause and effect of new technologies to specific domains operating in global media and communication. Critical analysis is developed from "bottom-up" perspectives of individual user experiences through to "top down" viewpoints from platform providers. A rich cross section of media and communication issues span the 7 articles covering gaming, news and journalism, user-generated content, disinformation, documentary, holograms, and education. International in scope, contributors include media scholars working in Italy, France, Australia, and the United States.

The proliferation of digital communication technologies driving social interactions forge innovative intersections with global media industry practices. In the decades since Henry Jenkins (2006; 2008) and others traced the dynamics of participatory culture, these interactions have realized the inner workings of Manuel Castells' (2007, 2010) network society. As the infrastructures and logics of digital communication penetrate ever further into social, political, and cultural orders, along with opportunities, they also pose new threats and risks. Everyday life continues amid the upheavals wrought by digital culture that manifest in ways that outstrip understandings from the separate binaries contained in the 19th-century Marxist model of base and superstructure. Indeed, the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of symbolic reality in the 21st century has seen a decisive shift as a result of the computational architectonics of vast global data networks. The capabilities stemming from the interconnections supplied by information and communication technology (ICT) seen through the mundane interactions of smartphone apps, social media posts, video streaming, etc., give little indication of the scale of the megastructure submerged beneath the surface that organizes our everyday lives. Benjamin Bratton's (2016) conceptual model of "the stack" is one of the more ambitious attempts at articulating and tracing the effects of planetary computation and its myriad impacts as a confluence of symbolic and material form. In articles by Monaci and Maher in this Special Section, Bratton's (2016) "stack" supplies a key formulation for contextualizing the implications of platforms and

their increasing autonomy as processes of platformization regulate and organize global communication and media consumption.

Coming to terms with the scale and consequences of shifts in contemporary media from technological developments necessitates tackling meaning making in social actions occurring throughout multiple domains of communication. Uniting the 7 articles are aims that seek to differentiate between causation imposed by new communications technologies and effects from user uptake and customization responses. Providing a common ground for analyses that tackle a breadth of technologies spanning holograms to Roblox gaming, the Special Section also provides a timely reminder of the need to reconsider media epistemologies as prolonged disruption continues to alter the industries, practices, and institutions beneath the systems of global media communications. As media practices that were once mainstream become sidelined, it is not just new ones that emerge. For example, in the wake of the ascendancy of the amateur and the prosumer, media creators of all kinds take on a new significance within the historical development of communication industries. The rise of the user continues to have profound implications for what it means to be a producer as well as consumer of media content. Identifying trends and patterns from amateur practitioners that persisted throughout history can cast new light on more recent developments by highlighting how media industries may never have been as neatly bifurcated along the lines of consumers and producers.

Reconfigurations brought about by shifts in Web-based and digital technologies are often met with user responses that can overcome the constraints or dominant purposes imposed by platforms that is indicative of participatory culture. Whether it be in response to the digital haptics emerging from hologram technologies (Archer and Conner), the motivations behind news verification practices (Bucy and Prettyman), or shifts that challenge the operational determinism of platforms (Monaci, Maher), user behaviors supply the cornerstones of participatory culture that innovate by adapting system protocols (Gillespie, 2010). For some users and groups, it is about leveraging a platform's business models for user-generated content beyond reasons of monetization that drive the accumulation of followers and likes. By adjusting influencer strategies, these creators can develop sustainable business models for cultural and educational content (Taddeo and Diaferia). For gaming communities, platform logics can be leveraged for the kind of peer-to-peer support that fosters lifelong learning skills (Morreale and Rosa). The exponential growth in connectivity may be driven by the commercial imperatives of the tech sector through their data gathering services, but they are not wholly determining when users and online groups interact across platforms and come together to deliver unexpected community-orientated outcomes.

One of the most persistent challenges of online communication centers on the effective responses to unreliable information and the mounting challenges from the sharp rise of mediated falsehoods. Approaching this vexed issue is Erik P. Bucy and Duncan V. Prettyman's "What Prompts Suspicions About Information Integrity? Motives for Fact-Checking Suspect Content." Employing extensive national survey data collected from across the United States and with a focus on user motives, Bucy and Prettyman obtain new insights on the reasoning behind verification practices employed to evaluate fact-based and authentic news. Identifying 8 themes and examining different user responses based on news knowledge, skepticism, and motivations, analysis of findings from their survey data points to how casual users have the ability to "parse the veracity of news-like information." Findings on user verification practices reveal the role played

by news literacies and motivations for media use, attributes that are brought into sharp relief by two forms of distinct behaviors: those derived from searchers who do so actively and those of nonsearchers of news verification. For the authors, key issues of public trust and certainty are influenced by such motivations for accessing mainstream media that reflect its ability to serve as sources of reliable information that assist fact-based consensus. Ultimately, qualities of information consumption combine into the factors that influence processes in support of effective democratic decision-making (Bennett & Livingston, 2023; Bucy & Newhagen, 2019; Zelenkauskaite, 2022).

The negative dialectics of information are the basis of Sara Monaci's "The Governance of Disinformation: Everyday Practices of Platform Sovereignty," which provides critical analysis of deplatforming in response to misinformation and disinformation from the structural perspective of self-governing platforms. Drawing on theoretical perspectives offered by Bratton (2019) and Zuboff (2019), Monaci details practices of deplatforming that occurred during crises like the Capitol Hill assault in Washington DC in 2016 and continues amid designations of Russian propaganda as part of the war with Ukraine. Deplatforming refers to deliberative sanctions openly initiated by social media platforms that establishes platform sovereignty over user's contents. For Monaci, controlling the flow of information through content moderation and other assorted practices evidences how major platform providers like Facebook, Instagram, X, and Google operate beyond the mere service provision roles of infrastructures. Positioned as crucial gatekeepers of information these platforms function in ways and levels that were previously the preserve of nation states and supranational institutions. Routinely administering sovereign practices, findings reveal how the primary motivation of these corporate entities is not providing oversight and quality assurance over the veracity of information. Rather, it remains firmly fixed on the profit-motive behind preserving marketplace dominance through accumulation of data feeding their algorithms in the service of predictive models of user behavior.

Monaci's analysis avoids the contentious issue of free speech and instead centers on how deplatforming and issues of platform sovereignty affect broader matters of information governance, a function that is marked by indifference to social media content against prioritizing what has been described as defense of the data stack (Bratton, 2016). Monaci tempers the totalizing aspect of Bratton's megastructure conception of "the stack" by incorporating perspectives from Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) approach to platforms. Stressing their political orientation, Zuboff's position supports Monaci's view that the efforts of platforms and their providers are aimed at monopolizing the instrumentalization of power, something that is aided by the cultivation of radical indifference (Zuboff, 2019). Monaci identifies how despite recent and ongoing crises like the Capitol Hill uprising, the war in Ukraine, and the COVID-19 pandemic, urgencies surrounding access to factual content and information remain unattended from key legislative and supply side players of information. In the face of platform sovereignty and the internal governance practices of major tech companies, regulation in the United States and European Union has proven ill-equipped to ameliorate the deleterious effects from disinformation. Monaci's findings highlight how public interest outcomes, previously safeguarded by a robust public sphere equipped with legislative oversight of media and communication sectors, are compromised by the platform sovereignty that perpetuates conspiracy theories and contributes to disinformation (Mahl, Zeng, & Schäfer, 2023).

The determining qualities imposed by platform architectures may have been designed to operate in terms of the instrumentalization of power, but countervailing forces from online communities and user behaviors continue to realize the transformative potential of digital communications and interactions. Platform constraints imposed on creators are shown to be challenged in analyses of peer-to-peer gaming communities (Morreale and Rosa), education orientated content and outcomes (Taddeo and Diaferia), and factual media content partnerships (Maher). Despite future uncertainties posed by emerging communications technologies, online tools will continue to influence social interactions based on user affordances with correlations in media consumption, participatory practices, and information dissemination. Aside from misinformation threats, with increased levels of connectivity there still remains potential from online interactions to strengthen communities built on shared practices and values that prove capable of reorganizing cultural production and socioeconomic relations.

Sharing practices that underpin the interactions of online gaming groups are at the center of Domenico Morreale and Alessia Rosa's examination of the participative culture of Roblox gaming communities. In "Roblox and the Pervasiveness of Play: What Game-Making Communities Can Teach Us About Participatory Practices in Affinity Spaces," online gameplay takes on new meaning through close analysis of the potential offered by online participatory practices that feature parallels with traditional social learning processes (Gee, 2007). The authors identify pedagogical value in the Roblox game-making community by ways in which users have managed to independently design games in virtual environments and play games created by peers and other gamers. The analysis reveals how community game design and gaming's educational potential aligns to the psychocognitive development of childhood as described by Piaget (1932; 1966). Moreover, the shared practices circulating among Roblox's game-making community reflect how Roblox promotes the kind of learning that extends beyond childhood developmental processes. By harnessing independent game design in virtual environments that combines gameplay, creativity, and social interaction, Morreale and Rosa maintain the user-generated content enabled by Roblox has not only created a community wherein players can design and share their own digital worlds, but also fosters versions of peer education and social participation indicative of lifelong learning and adult cognitive development.

Platform logics and the influencer economy may be characterized by profit driven motives based on the hyper commercial objectives of online marketing, public relations, corporate sponsorship, and advertising (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). But users who pursue cultural and educational content demonstrate that they are capable of employing and adapting these profit-making tactics to sustain activities motivated by civic participation and in support of agencies like nongovernment organizations (NGOs).

By comparing the various strategies of 40 educational content creators, in "Economics of Educational Content Creators on Social Media," Gabriella Taddeo and Jessica Diaferia examine how educational influencers in Italy have managed to adapt platform revenue models. Survey data employed by Taddeo and Diaferia reveals how creators combine a respective platform's tools with other specific assets drawn from traditional media and target relationships with cultural institutions. These educational creators navigate sustainable content production by putting into practice the transactional features of the sharing economy (Codagnone, Karatzogianni, & Matthews, 2019; Munger, 2021). Operating according to the principles of networked spaces and social capital, educational content creators are using multiple platforms to leverage the commercial dynamics of the influencer economy. But by cultivating revenue formulas based

on sharing economy qualities like platform payments, tips, and subscriptions, these creators reduce reliance on the traditional marketing-based approaches of product placement, sponsorship, and advertising. Analysis by the authors reveal how cultural creators can combine various forms of rewards in the pursuit of sustainability—strategies that do not necessarily conform to platform imposed "popularity logics" for generating widespread appeal but instead combine multiple platforms and offline agencies to deliver revenue models as part of bespoke financial solutions for educational outcomes.

Maneuvers by user-generated content creators that negotiate constraints imposed by platforms and retool their standard functionality for custom purposes has antecedents in the media relations characterizing documentary filmmaking. As a traditionally marginalized form of media content that struggled to find support from commercial and public broadcasters and theatrical distributors, the history of documentary filmmaking has little in common with mainstream fiction filmmaking. Targeting niche audiences and often requiring legislation or public subsidies to support its productions, as creators of nonfiction programming, documentarians have operated in very different domains and commercial terms from that of fiction filmmakers associated with Hollywood.

Routinely described in terms of a discourse of sobriety (Nichols, 2017) and traditionally produced and consumed in terms likened to "good medicine," audience appeal was based on documentary's information and awareness raising qualities over its entertainment or storytelling values. Unexpectedly, however, with the advent of streaming platforms and the notable rise of Netflix, algorithmic data harvested from subscriber downloads revealed a growing popularity around documentary content. With the emergence of "docuseries" and subscribers of streaming platforms embrace of true crime documentaries, consumption and production of documentaries continues to soar (Bosselman, Shanfeld, & Ferme, 2021; Sherman, 2022).

Swathes of online user-generated content may be categorized as forms of nonfiction filmmaking but fully fledged documentaries have also been surfacing on social media platforms with implications for traditional financing, distribution, and exhibition models. More recently, social media platforms like LinkedIn, Instagram, and Snapchat have made forays into funding partnerships that effectively moved them into executive producer roles as well as distributors (Salazkina & Fibla-Gutiérrez, 2020). The shifts produced by online convergence and disintermediation from both streaming and social media platforms continue to have a significant impact on documentary form and production processes. In "Reframing the Impact on Documentary From Social Media and Streaming Through Media Theory Informed by Platformization," Sean Maher analyzes documentary filmmaking through emerging critical media theories responding to the intersections between Web-based platforms and factual programming. Particular attention is paid to the ramifications on documentary's remit as a social movement media and its relationship to groups who employ it as forms of social and political activism (Borum Chattoo & Jenkins, 2019). The author employs critical media theory to account for the upheavals affecting documentary that take fuller account of the "platformization" affecting Web-based media. As the era of globally networked communication continues to reconfigure iterations of certain social, political, and economic apparatuses, the analysis applies emerging and speculative media theories like Benjamin Bratton's (2016) "the stack" to contextualize the impact online platforms are having on this key legacy media object. By examining changes occurring in online settings, documentary is reevaluated against its traditional status as a secondary filmmaking practice. Informed by an online perspective reuniting documentary with amateur modes of filmmaking, the critical reframing

contributes to expanding epistemological perspectives on documentary and its place in traditional film history.

As new technologies stretch what were once the confines of audio-visual based media they facilitate experiences and interactions that are familiar in terms of virtual, augmented, and extended reality (Doyle, 2015). These simulation-enhancing technologies extend the scope of mediated realities across sensory realms informing our interactions with physical environments. By incorporating more senses that feed our perceptual reading of objects and environments, these technologies generate embodied experiences that go beyond epistemological considerations and call into question some of the fundamental ontologies that have traditionally distinguished human perception.

Concentrating on holographic technologies, Jason Archer and Thomas Conner explore some of the repercussions that arise from the tactile qualities of three-dimensional immersiveness. In "Haptic Holograms: The Liminal Communication of Emerging Visio-Haptic Apparatuses," the authors investigate holograms equipped with new levels of tactility that enables virtual objects to be both viewed and touched. Analysis centers on how this confluence leads to the material aspects of imagery by producing technical "image-objects." Exploring what ontological category holographic objects confer reveals how midair haptics and holograms, when combined, challenge traditional concepts of visuality, touch, and communication. Exploring three types of holograms that combine varying degrees of touch with 3-D imagery to produce new experiences, Archer and Conner argue new classifications are required when it comes to virtual objects and sensation. Utilizing haptic articulations and the notion of the "technical image" (Flusser, 2015), the authors contend 3D rematerializing does not return a representation back into its object but rather creates new representations that deliver unique liminal spaces for novel cultural objects, knowledge, and communication methods.

Whether it is Facebook's Meta or product launches like Apple's Vision Pro goggles, the tech sector's forays into immersive embodied media thus far have seen actual uptakes repeatedly fall short of expectations. Issues from VR goggles include the elimination of peripheral vision that causes nausea and similarly bodily disorientations have been argued to prevent widespread interest (Knibbs, 2023; Nguyen, 2023). However, as phenomena like holograms and spatial computing continue to edge into everyday life, tactile holographic experience derived from touch as well as aural and visual senses present technological advancements that may be poised to overcome obstacles presented by cumbersome wearable media. By examining how tactility and haptics reorganize holographic experience, Archer and Conner emphasize distinctions between virtual and augmented realities that cater to emergent spatial and embodied media. With haptic holograms and developments in tactility generating "felt feedback," the author's findings call into question separating ontologies of mediated imagery from material objects, presenting significant philosophical and practical repercussions on phenomenologically based meaning making.

Online cultural practices and production classified under user-generated content has long been redefining many distinctions, notably between producers and consumers, users and creators (Rosenbaum, 2011; Shirky, 2009, 2010; Wyrwoll, 2014). Participatory culture was a recognition of new formulations and definitions like "prosumers" amid disrupted media ecologies. As user-generated content becomes increasingly monetized, it has shifted online content from the periphery to the mainstream. With the arrival of new services like Wattpad and cocreation platforms, disruption of intermediaries like publishers continues. Bypassing

traditional gatekeepers, these technologies facilitate online communities, forging direct connections among themselves and networks that generate audiences and markets (Parnell, 2021; Taddeo, 2019).

From marketing to book publishing, cultural production enabled by these kinds of creator communities as well as established social media platforms continues to reorganize the capital relations underpinning the culture industry (Miège 2019; Villegas-Simón, Anglada-Pujol, Lloveras, & Oliva, 2023).

The phenomenon of influencers has gone on to redefine public relations, branding, and sponsorship arrangements as "partnering with influencers has become one of the most emerging strategies for brands and marketers" (Yesiloglu & Costello, 2021, p. 12). The flow of influence from "bottom up" opinion leaders like influencers who can attract major brands wanting to enlist their support has reversed established patterns in the culture industry that sees platform-enabled creators establishing unparalleled levels of cultural capital (Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

Cultural industries criticism and traditions from political economy critique informs communications and media scholarship and understanding the implications that online connectivity is having on socioeconomic and cultural production. Reframing and understanding how cultural industries criticism has developed since the 1970s is the subject of Christoph Magis', "A 'French Touch' to the Political Economy of Communication? A Critical Epistemology of the 'Cultural Industries' School." Magis argues that despite traditions of Francophone theory originating many of the critical perspectives that gave rise to political economy frameworks like the "cultural industries," the political economy of communication (PEC) has been largely overlooked outside countries in the French language diaspora.

Providing a comprehensive account of French cultural theory, Magis outlines how cultural particularities are shown to have played a role in separating Anglo and Francophone media studies beginning with the impact from different models of media ownership. It was not until the 1980s and 1990 with deregulation of the French media sector that its broadcasting structures became commensurate with those in the United States. Posing significant national differences, the way media industries were comprised from state and private interests partly accounts for why French political economy analysis of cultural industries remained confined to the French media sector. In addition, early research in media and communication in the 1970s and 1980s in France effectively operated under a government mandate in the service of "modernizing the state" with research that was more instrumental in its aims than explorative of critiques of the commodification of cultural production (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1986). In the absence of wider circulation of French cultural industries criticism, the Frankfurt School and work by leading theorists Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer occupied central positions in theories of cultural industries and routinely applied to global media and communication sectors.

To reinstate the significance of a political economy of communication, Magis turns to a central figure in Francophone cultural industries criticism, Bernard Miège. Despite the hegemony of his work on PECs in Francophone countries, Miège is not widely recognized outside of the French-speaking world of PEC. By exploring the history and theoretical arguments stemming from French PEC, Magis contends Francophone criticism developed early socioeconomic models that "have a theoretical richness capable of producing a refined critical analysis of the complexity of today's media landscape." Demonstrating how socioeconomic

modeling offers interdisciplinary opportunities for communication studies, Magis conducts analysis of the music publishing industry and employs a political economy lens to its online transformation. For Magis, "socioeconomic models remain a powerful tool for a critical project which aims at under-standing the media industries as concrete totalities." By historicizing traditions in Francophone cultural industries theory, Magis provides a thoroughgoing context to support reappraisal of critical epistemologies that sheds light on contemporary shifts in media industries.

The pace of technological advancements on Web-based communication and media alters participatory culture and the daily operations of network society at constant and incremental levels through new apps, services, and "must-have" ubiquitous devices. Periodically, new technologies like artificial intelligence and the adoption of accessible machine learning have paradigm shifting impacts. Meanwhile, how users respond to new technologies often depends on how pliable they are alongside existing affordances that users have embraced. In this turbulent environment, however, the predictive models so eagerly pursued by the goliaths of Silicon Valley do not always get it right. From Apple's Vision Pro, to the metaverse and countless apps, new technologies continue to come and go. And despite their best efforts, platforms also continue to rise and fall (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). Patterns of user engagements that see platform logics co-opted and adapted by users for their own purposes or those of a broader community, however, remains a constant and is fundamental to how online culture continues to operate.

Digital affordances that accompany variations and shifts within system requirements and their exigencies continue to be approached through a combination of user compliance and innovative adaptation. Online connectivity shapes communication and information manifesting for purposes of individual media consumption of news and entertainment, the distribution of products and services, and the creation of user-generated content. Interests from individual users all the way up to how national and international relations are conducted have become equally dependent on global connectivity. As such, all domains of social, cultural, political, and economic activity are at one time or another confronted with the ways in which platforms and processes of platformization enable privately owned tech entities to wield unchecked power. From data harvesting to deplatforming, the sovereign governance practices of platforms reveal the scale of the asymmetries of control exerted by self-administered corporations that organize contemporary communication.

Through decades of unlegislated norms that organize flows of information and direct communication, Web-based media technologies and platforms have combined into an all-encompassing, global ICT infrastructure exerting command through systems control. At the same time, the recent corollary of an expansive age of communications is the disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation contagions that threaten democratic institutions and undermine informed citizenship. Intersecting with these historical cross currents are online users who negotiate the asymmetries of online communication as part of everyday life often in novel and unanticipated ways. The fundamental interests of these everyday users and the potential of online communities should serve as a constant reminder of what is at stake in the global media ecosystem. By bringing together these 7 articles, this Special Section aims to contribute understandings to the ways in which emerging technologies and user behaviors coalesce through participatory culture in response to the multiple challenges posed by the platforming of everything.

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