

Platformization of Society
Power, Participation, and
Social Transformation

17|
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SEPT | 2026



Platform ization

PhD Conference Program



INSTITUTE FOR
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ABOUT

The international PhD conference *Platformization of Society: Power, Participation and Social Transformation* addresses the growing influence of digital platforms as central actors in shaping social, economic, cultural, and political processes and norms. From mobility and communication to intimate relationships and knowledge production, platforms are deeply embedded in everyday social life.

The conference focuses on how platformization – as an institutional transformation process – reshapes social infrastructures, practices, and inequality dynamics. The two-day event takes place at the Institute for Advanced Studies Vienna and features multiple panel sessions where doctoral researchers can present and discuss their work and connect with colleagues.

ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

The PhD conference is organized by the junior research group *Digitalization and Social Transformation* at the Institute for Advanced Studies Vienna. The group examines how digital platforms shape societal power structures, labor relations, and social practices, as well as how they influence norms, participation, and inequality.



Laura Wiesböck

Head of Junior Research Group



Pauline Reitzer

Junior Researcher



Irina Bănoiu

Junior Researcher



Nuoyi Wang

Junior Researcher

THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES

The Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS) creates empirically based knowledge on significant economic and social challenges of our time. It focuses on applied basic research and impartial scientific policy advice, combining economic and social science perspectives. IHS promotes the development of young scientists for positions in academia and practice, provides platforms for international academic exchange, and plays a key role in transferring the findings of advanced economic and social research into public discourse in Austria. The research institute is located in the historic Palais Strozzi in the city center of Vienna



DISCOVER THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Sights

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Parlament
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Museumsquartier
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Food & Drink

Café Eiles
Cafe The Province
Gastwirtschaft Blauensteiner
Nguyen's Pho House
Il Sestante

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS



Anne Helmond

Anne Helmond is Associate Professor of Media, Data, and Society at Utrecht University and co-director of the research focus area “Governing the Digital Society”. Her research focuses on platformization, a term she coined to analyze how platforms expand across the web and mobile ecosystem, and more recently across AI and various societal domains. She is (co-)author/editor of “Platforms: A Critical Introduction” (Polity, 2026) and “Governing the Digital Society” (Amsterdam University Press, 2025).



Fernando van der Vlist

Fernando van der Vlist is Assistant Professor of Critical Data and AI at the University of Amsterdam. He is PI of the NWO-funded project “AI Power: A Critical Platform Analysis” and co-director of the App Studies Initiative. His research examines digital platforms and apps, their ecosystems, data, and AI in culture and society. He is (co-)author/editor of “Platforms: A Critical Introduction” (Polity, 2026) and “Governing the Digital Society” (Amsterdam University Press, 2025).



Taina Bucher

Taina Bucher is Professor of Media and Communication at the University of Oslo and currently PI of the project “HumAI: A Humanities Hub for the Reimagination of AI”. Her work explores the social and political dimensions of algorithms, focusing on how users experience and interpret algorithmic power. She is the author of “Facebook” (Polity, 2021) and “IF...THEN: Algorithmic Power and Politics” (Oxford University Press, 2018).

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Platformization of Society

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**PROGRAM
OVERVIEW**

SEPTEMBER 17TH, 2026

10:00 – 10:30

Registration and Coffee

10:30 – 11:00

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Dr. Laura Wiesböck, Head of Junior Research Group DigiTrans, IHS Vienna

Prof. Dr. Holger Bonin, Scientific Director, IHS Vienna

Representative from Chamber of Labour Vienna

11:00 – 12:30

Keynote “The Platformisation of AI: Platforms, Dependency, and Power in the Digital Ecosystem”

Dr. Fernando van der Vlist, University of Amsterdam

Dr. Anne Helmond, Utrecht University

12:30 – 13:30

Lunch Break

13:30 – 15:00

Panel A – Infrastructure & Ecosystems

Panel B – Working Practices & Institutions

15:00 – 15:30

Coffee Break

15:30 – 17:00

Panel C – Content Creation & (In)Visibility

Panel D – Health & Accessibility

17:30

Guided Tour of the Historic Palais Strozzi

SEPTEMBER 18TH, 2026

09:00 – 10:30

Keynote “Splitting the Platform: Towards an Anarchitecture of the Digital”

Prof. Dr. Taina Bucher, University of Oslo

10:30 – 11:00

Coffee Break

11:00 – 12:30

Panel E – AI Futures & Resistance

Panel F – Labor & Precarity

12:30 – 13:30

Lunch Break

13:30 – 15:00

Panel G – Affect & Intimacy

Panel H – Polarization & Disinformation

15:30 – 16:00

Coffee Break

16:00 – 16:45

Closing Session

18:00

Conference Dinner

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Platformization of Society

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PANELS

PANEL A – INFRASTRUCTURE & ECOSYSTEMS

13:30 – 15:00, SEPTEMBER 17TH, 2026

Chair: Dr. Fernando van der Vlist, University of Amsterdam

Mapping the Urban Platform: A Postcolonial Network Analysis

Nasha Virata, Rutgers University

Beyond Platforms as infrastructures: GitHub as the meta-organisation of the open-source software industry

Sol Martinez Demarco, Harz University of Applied Sciences

System Prompts as Chatbot Moderation: Stable Identities of non-stable Objects?

Bastian August, University of Paderborn

Vibe Agent: The Interface Politics of “Democratized” Agent Building

Nuoyi Wang, University of Amsterdam; IHS Vienna

PANEL B – WORKING PRACTICES & INSTITUTIONS

13:30 – 15:00, SEPTEMBER 17TH, 2026

Chair: Dr. Anne Helmond, Utrecht University

From Media Logic to Platform Logic? – The Case of Journalism in the Platform Age

Nina Abrahams, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich

Creating communicative practices with AI – Prompting as a strategy of appropriation in the newsroom

Frieda Pauline Reitzer, University of Vienna; IHS Vienna

From Tools to Territories: Investigating Infrastructural Governance and Creative Agency in Game Engines

Camilla Rinciari, Politecnico di Milano

Prison by Numbers: Data-driven Management of Safety, Security and Rehabilitation

Marion Neunkirchner, University of Applied Sciences St. Pölten; Bertha von Suttner Private University

PANEL C – CONTENT CREATION & (IN)VISIBILITY

15:30-17:00, SEPTEMBER 17TH, 2026

Chair: Dr. Elisabeth Lechner, University of Vienna

The Art of Becoming Visible: Anti-caste aesthetics and the double bind of dissent in the platform economy

Tejas Harad, University of Pennsylvania

Monetization Logics

Adriann Anderson, University of Illinois at Chicago

Platformized Visibility: The Case of Romanian QueerTok

Irina Bănoiu, University of Vienna; IHS Vienna

PANEL D – HEALTH & ACCESSIBILITY

15:30-17:00, SEPTEMBER 17TH, 2026

Chair: Dr. Laura Wiesböck, Institute for Advanced Studies Vienna

The “Liebscher & Bracht”-Controversy: Examining YouTube Health and its Construction of Epistemic Authority

Marius Liedtke, University of Salzburg

Becoming Legible in the Shadow of AI: Older Adults’ Encounters with Platformized Healthcare in China

Chenquanyou Fang, Durham University

One TikTok to Cure Them All: Believe, and You Shall Not Be Protected

Margje Camps, Utrecht University

When pl@tform pr3carity becomes pl-symbol-form pr-three-carity: How TikTok content moderation and algospeak precaritize screen reader users

erynn young, University of Amsterdam

PANEL E – AI FUTURES & RESISTANCE

11:00 – 12:30, SEPTEMBER 18TH, 2026

Chair: Prof. Dr. Taina Bucher, University of Oslo

Absurd Behaviours in the Age of Platformization across English, German, and Russian Speculative Fiction

Vera Yakupova, Trinity College Dublin

After the X-odus: Networked connections of AI critical and skeptical users on Bluesky

Rahel Winter, University of Bremen

The Prosperity Promise of AI Platforms

Sara Reinis, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania

PANEL F – LABOR & PRECARITY

11:00 – 12:30, SEPTEMBER 18TH, 2026

Chair: Dr. Barbara Haas, Vienna University of Economics and Business

Platformisation of Journalism in Serbia: Institutional Transformation and Professional Challenges

Snežana Bajčeta, University of Belgrade Faculty of Political Sciences

Negotiating Participation: The EU AI Act, Worker Participation and its Discontents

Gwendolin Barnard, University of Graz

Workforce structure, self-presentation strategies and wage demands on the cleaning platform Putzperle. An analysis in the context of migration and gender.

Anna Kühn, Hannah Rossmann, Leonie Schweikert, Jakob zur Heide, University of Hamburg

PANEL G – AFFECT & INTIMACY

13:30 – 15:00, SEPTEMBER 18TH, 2026

Chair: Prof. Dr Alexander Schmölz, University of Applied Sciences BFI Vienna

Configuring Companionship: Multimodality, Infrastructures, and the Platformization of Human-AI Relations

Marvin Waibel, University of Vienna

Beyond Technical Functionality: The Platform Logic of Doubao

Wanting Zhang, University of Vienna

More-Than-Human Feelings: Algorithmic Intimacy and Emotional Structures of Human-AI Relationships

Anastasiia Osipova, University of Milan

Zeros, Ones, and Emotions: Can Algorithms Possess Emotional Power?

Bahaeddin Umur Yildirim, Hacettepe University

PANEL H – POLARIZATION & DISINFORMATION

13:30 – 15:00, SEPTEMBER 18TH, 2026

Chair: Dr. Linda Coufal, University of Vienna

The Polarizing Dynamics on Social Media

Georg Sator, University of Nottingham

All Extremes Point to the Norm: Femonationalist Convergence on Dutch Twitter

Sarah Burkhardt, University of Amsterdam

Disinformation under Surveillance Capitalism: A Critical Appraisal of the Digital Services Act Anti-Disinformation Framework

Clément Maertens, UCLouvain

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ABSTRACTS

ABSTRACTS PANEL A – INFRASTRUCTURE & ECOSYSTEMS

13:30 – 15:00, SEPTEMBER 17TH, 2026

Mapping the Urban Platform: A Postcolonial Network Analysis

Nasha Virata, Rutgers University

Much of the research on platform urbanism has looked at its specific and extremely local manifestations in or between cities (Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018; Leszczynski 2020; Bissell, 2020), with less attention paid to the ways in which platform companies create and embed global networks and products. While platforms reference the "urban" and the "local", the financial and corporate entities that underpin them show the existence of a much more neoliberal and globalized network.

Drawing on theories of variegated capitalism and postcolonial thinking from the South, this paper examines how digital food delivery platforms mediate economic and spatial relations in postcolonial contexts. Through an analysis of Foodpanda's operations in Makati, Philippines, and its parent company DeliveryHero, the findings demonstrate how platform technologies simultaneously leverage historical patterns of economic development while creating new forms of spatial organization. We investigate two interconnected questions: First, how did Makati's transformation into a global outsourcing hub in the early 2000s establish technological infrastructure and economic patterns that contemporary platform companies now utilize? Second, how does DeliveryHero—which brands itself as the "UN of food delivery"—deploy digital technologies to reproduce spatial hierarchies and power geometries reminiscent of colonial economic models?

The research presented combines archival research and web scraping to critically analyze platform urbanism through the on-demand food delivery app, Foodpanda, its day-to-day operations in Manila, its corporate and financial links to Singapore and Berlin via its parent company DeliveryHero, and its technological roots in the United States. Through a mixed-methods approach combining network analysis of investment flows, qualitative interviews with key stakeholders, and spatial mapping of platform operations, we reveal how Foodpanda exemplifies the "social constructions and institutionalized patterns" (Peck, 2023) that characterize platform capitalism's techno-economic regime. Our findings demonstrate how contemporary technological systems—including mobile applications, algorithmic management tools, and digital payment infrastructure—mediate economic relations in ways that both transform and perpetuate historical patterns of spatial organization.

This analysis advances understanding of how economic technologies shape urban spaces by revealing that platform capitalism's digital innovations operate through, rather than transcend, established patterns of uneven development. These findings contribute to broader theoretical discussions about the role of technology in mediating economic geographies and spatial relations in the Global South.

Beyond Platforms as infrastructures: GitHub as the meta-organisation of the open-source software industry

Sol Martinez Demarco, Harz University of Applied Sciences

GitHub is a source-code hosting platform launched in 2008 to facilitate and expedite collaboration among developers, which, at that time, was considered slow and cumbersome. Although back then there were several similar web-based code repositories available, a number of characteristics, as well as historical and contextual conditions contributed to the domination of the software industry. Among them, one particularly important has been the version control system selected to support collaboration. The platform is based on the distributed version control system 'Git' created by Linus Torvald in 2005 to support the joint development of the Linux kernel. Furthermore, the connection that GitHub's creators had with the Ruby (a programming language) community, on the peak of its popularity at the time, attracted many users. Finally, providing a user-friendly interface that combines social media-like functionalities and project-based collaboration tools, GitHub quickly became the main source forge to go for developers, particularly those contributing to free, libre and open source software (FLOSS) projects.

Features such as activity feeds, profiles, badges and stars, as well as code repositories, bug tracking, feature requests, task management, wikis and project pages, were aspects progressively added to the platform that brought ever more interest and the participation of new developers. In parallel, these and other specific features were also built to support the needs of companies and their private repositories. However, in spite of all the positives that GitHub brings to the FLOSS ecosystem, its detractors emphasise how this platform present several problems for the same communities. This contribution addresses some of them, including questions related to FLOSS values (such as control over the hosted source code), asymmetrical power relations, code production standards, and security concerns. In particular, it draws on a range of secondary materials from personal and organisations' blog posts, companies' publications, FLOSS collectives' reports, podcasts episodes to presentations at technical conferences. First, it introduces the reasoning behind understanding source code hosting platforms as infrastructures for software development, and in particular for FLOSS. It then discusses how the ecosystem formed around GitHub constitutes the platform as the core of the software development ecosystem, that is, a meta-organisation. As such, the term emphasises the informal nature of the organising in the absence of formal authority as well as collaboration, competition and interdependence of participants. Then, it presents the methodology, the qualitative data gathered and the analysis conducted. Subsequently, it describes how as a meta-organisation GitHub has pre-configured coding practices and development workflows, and also set expectations in term of maintainers availability, pull requests quality, and dependence on specific tools provided free of charge. Finally, it covers how the exercise of this asymmetric power has affected and effected on developers' identity, pushing for a 'solo' and 'heroic' coder as well as leveraging the symbiotic relation between programmer and platform to introduce AI coding tools which further reduce the control, autonomy and knowledge required to develop software.

System Prompts as Chatbot Moderation: Stable Identities of non-stable Objects?

Bastian August, University of Paderborn

While chatbots are being integrated into various spheres of life, ranging from simple search requests to social media platforms, the public service sector, and even research practices, how they operate is often treated as a black box. One particularly underexamined layer is the system prompt, a key characteristic that constructs LLM-based chatbots such as ChatGPT as we know them. This research therefore focuses on system prompts of GenAI chatbots not merely as behavioral instructions, but as a process of inscribing identity into the chatbot itself. Although system prompts of most GenAI chatbots remain hidden from users, they constitute the initial set of instructions given to the underlying LLM, predefining and reframing the purpose and operation of the system. This includes not only the framing of context, but also guidelines for how the chatbot should and should not act toward users, thereby shaping subsequent interactions. As system prompts precede any user input, they establish a cascading logic that structures all further engagements with a given chatbot.

A qualitative study of a selected number of dominant chatbot models and their accessible or retrieved system prompts is used to support this critical inquiry. System prompts thus predefine, direct, and moderate user interactions and, consequently, the generated outputs. By conceptualizing system prompts as a means of crafting a chatbot's identity, this study frames them as: (a) a form of active content moderation; (b) a practice of inscribing a stable identity into a system that is otherwise presented as a creative and dynamic entity; (c) a mechanism that, through the withholding of information about their existence and content, amplifies a lack of transparency alongside the embedding of normative values that shape user interaction and knowledge production; and (d) a process that, through tone and voice, contributes to the imagined personification and humanization of AI, particularly chatbots. Since system prompts operate at the level of foundation models, specifically LLMs, they can be understood as a means of taming and stabilizing the latent space by excluding certain outputs through the selective limitation of themes and their connections. Ultimately, system prompts construct a stable and bounded chatbot identity, often characterized by a humanoid and compliant persona. This identity operates within the limits of predominantly Western normative frameworks, while simultaneously ensuring constant interaction, enabling data extraction for corporate profit, and minimizing potential legal risks concerning harmful content production similar to those of social media platforms.

Vibe Agent: The Interface Politics of “Democratized” Agent Building

Nuoyi Wang, University of Amsterdam; IHS Vienna

Against the backdrop of intensifying geopolitical tension in the US-China AI race, AI agents emerge as a renewed site of technological investment, industrial hype, and platform expansion, sensationalized as another rivalry frenzy - “AI agent arms race” among Big Tech. Accompanying this dynamic is a burgeoning narrative around “vibe coding” and the “democratization of AI”, where leading tech companies proactively promote customer-facing agent offerings that enable ordinary users to “build” AI agents without formal programming expertise. While such offerings appear to decentralize AI production and empower end-users, they are inherently inseparable from the current centralized political economy of AI.

Drawing on science and technology studies, critical political economy, and critical interface studies, this article unfolds the interface politics of user-facing agent building. It critically interrogates how major tech corporations materially construct and organize this “democratized” agent production through interface design and surrounding ecologies, and what political-economic dynamics are embedded within them. In doing so, it builds timely critical inquiry into not merely this renewed discursive AI hype, but also the socio-material arrangements through which broader AI uptake is operationalized.

Employing an adapted “app walkthrough” method combined with a “technographic” approach, the study examines a range of agent-building products released by OpenAI and ByteDance to encompass leading firms both in the US and China, and to include varying types of no-code and low-code offerings targeting users of different levels. The analysis focuses on foundational elements (e.g. profile, instruction, context, tools, skills, etc.), interface structures (e.g. create, configure, preview), interface typologies (meta-interface, graphic user interface, and command line interface) and broader ecologies including marketplaces and third-party integrations.

Preliminary findings identify three interrelated strategies: (1) discursive neoliberalization through professionalized “democratization”, which frames users as empowered creators while normalizing the outsourcing of professional labor; (2) illusional empowerment through “agent agent”, where users appear to exercise control while core configurations automated by system-level agents remain opaque and uncontrolled; (3) human domestication through recursive workflows of “trial-and-error”, which effectively normalizes uncertainty in endless experiments and refinement. It argues that these interface-mediated production environments reorganize agent building into forms of platform-compatible user participation. This is manifested in (1) insatiable data extraction from customizable knowledge to integrated third-party data, (2) distributed user labor under “data flywheels”, and (3) governed cost structure through absorbed token consumption. In doing so, rather than decentralizing AI, this alleged “democratized” agent building may further consolidate the infrastructural and economic dominance of major AI platforms.

ABSTRACTS PANEL B – WORKING PRACTICES & INSTITUTIONS

13:30 – 15:00, SEPTEMBER 17TH, 2026

From Media Logic to Platform Logic? – The Case of Journalism in the Platform Age

Nina Abrahams, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich

As providers of key infrastructure for digital communication, social media platforms not only determine access but also structure and regulate—through algorithmic mechanisms (Mousavi et al., 2024, p. 1110)—the communicative space of the user groups on their platforms (Dolata, 2015, p. 507), taking on an increasingly relevant position for journalistic actors in particular. In the context of the waning dominance of traditional mass media (Nielsen et al., 2016), platforms like Instagram exert a greater influence on the production, distribution, and reception of journalistic content online. Like mass media once did, it seems, social media platforms are now increasingly able to spread their logic beyond the boundaries of their platforms, as changes in news access and consumption like a declining gatekeeping function (Vos & Russell, 2019, p. 2343) and the need to adapt editorial practices to new environments (Nieborg & Poell, 2019, p. 89) are profoundly transforming the journalistic sector (Hendrickx, 2023, p. 229–230).

In this vein, the once formulated statement of a “media logic” by communication theorists of the 70s renders passé as mass media seemingly no longer occupy a dominant position in society (Altheide & Snow, 1979, p. 236) where they are able to shape the communicative strategies of other actors, such as politics (Eide, 2007, pp. 22–23). Instead, developments like the acceleration of social media have given rise to a new set of “technological, economic, and socio-cultural mechanisms” (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 5) which, ultimately, form a ‘platform’ or ‘social media logic’ (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 5). Platformization scholars like van Dijck and Poell point out the significant potential for a theoretical update in this realm, stating that „media logic has remained under-theorized in communication and media studies” (2013, S. 5). With major limitations and critiques (e.g., Chadwick et al., 2016; Couldry, 2008; Hepp, 2012) of the original concept, which attributed great power to formal media organizations and assumed a singular media logic, the current media environment is far more “polycentric, requiring a more comprehensive understanding of hybrid media logics” (Chadwick et al., 2016, p. 10). Assuming that platform logic has started to complement and partially undermine media logic (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 11), to what extent can we now speak of hybrid media logics, plural in nature?

Using the case of journalistic actors on the platforms Instagram and TikTok, the dissertation project aims to examine how platform logics and following practices manifest themselves as additions to existing media logics and what elements they include. Consequently, the goal is to update and build mediatization and media logic theory by auditing the existing concept and developing a model of hybrid media logics based on that. The methodological approach, as the dissertation is in its draft phase, consists of a multimodal analysis as an empirical challenge and is planned to include a content analysis of journalistic accounts on Instagram and TikTok to identify possible elements of a platform-specific logic.

Creating communicative practices with AI – Prompting as a strategy of appropriation in the newsroom

Frieda Pauline Reitzer, University of Vienna; IHS Vienna

Developments in AI-based synthetic media generation technologies increasingly automate news production. Text, image and video generation, as well as AI-driven data analysis and research tools enable journalists to machine-drivenly brainstorm, generate, edit, or research information. Consequently, journalistic work gets entangled with machine generated content and journalistic routines with machine workflows. Rather than mediating work processes, as researched for previous technological systems in the news industry, communicative AI technologies participate in the communicative practices through which journalistic knowledge is produced and negotiated in newsrooms (Hepp et al., 2023).

One form of communicative AI in news production processes emerges from the deployment of AI-editing systems holding generative and conversational capacities in newsrooms. Those systems are commonly characterized by integrating third-party services such as AI models, as well as existing newsroom technologies, under one interface layer. Importantly, such systems do not exist “off the shelf” for newsrooms, which is reflecting the complexity and context-dependency of how AI systems can be integrated into the communicative processes of knowledge work. Instead, AI-editing systems require organizational investment to design both their technical integration as well as epistemic configuration. This is typically done through in-house architecture, enabling their embedding in the industry-, and organization-specific communicative processes.

For this aim, developers and journalists of news organizations collaboratively configure AI-editing systems to the situated communicative practices present in the newsroom. By translating professional experience, tacit knowledge and editorial values for the system and inscribing into its architecture, journalists play a central role in, what recent literature calls, the bidirectional appropriation of communicative AI (Wiebke et al., 2026[1]). In this process, communicative AI simultaneously adapts and adopts journalistic knowledge(s) and simultaneously becomes embedded as a communicative actor within newsroom practices. Prompting, as a communication channel between journalists and machine, emerges as a key appropriation strategy in which this mutual shaping is recorded and can be empirically traced.

Therefore, by analyzing prompting and how it comes into being in newsrooms deploying an AI-editing system, this paper aims to contribute to the question on how communicative AI systems become embedded in journalistic practice and emerge as communicative actors in the knowledge creation processes in news production.

From Tools to Territories: Investigating Infrastructural Governance and Creative Agency in Game Engines

Camilla Rinciari, Politecnico di Milano

In the contemporary landscape of digital cultural production, creative software tools are becoming a technology increasingly essential. No longer confined to niche technical tasks, these tools have been democratized, becoming more affordable and accessible. This has led them to proliferate and become the underlying architecture for a large portion of creation in today's digital landscape. Game engines represent a great example of this shift: originally designed only for game development, they now have evolved into versatile technologies used for a variety of digital projects, including virtual filmmaking, the creation of "digital twins" for urban planning, and prototyping or testing different scenarios.

As their capability and diffusion expand, these tools have undergone a substantial evolution, shifting from independent creation tools to wide, "inhabited" platforms. Driven by the logic of platformization, these new infrastructures are progressively integrating third-party services and implementing lock-in mechanisms to expand and keep a user base that now embodies in large part both the roles of participants and creators. This contribution investigates the transition from software tools to "platform" tools by comparing two major models of the era: Unity and Roblox Studio. The former is understood as an open ecosystem software that unifies services for creating and publishing digital items across several platforms. The latter is examined as part of a closed ecosystem, a platformized tool directly created by Roblox Co. that centralizes the whole creative workflow within a single, proprietary platform.

This contribution aims to understand how the interface logic and technical affordances of these engines direct the creators' efforts toward a "path of least resistance" that prioritizes platform-specific data extraction or commodification over creative autonomy. Drawing on Science and Technology Studies (STS) and an ongoing auto-ethnography of digital production, this study involves mapping how the software prescribes and favors specific creative behaviors from the very first interaction by documenting and analyzing the "onboarding" process, including installation, usage guidelines, and initial tutorials. Focusing on the entry path proposed by both companies, this study argues that game engines are increasingly serving as governance infrastructures. It examines how these platforms claim to democratize game development while implementing profoundly different governance models and creation logics that reshapes the agency of creators. This process fosters potentially new ways of precarious labor and helps to transform cultural production into a continuous service governed by algorithmic logic. Through this lens, the research contributes to the debate on platform power by shifting the analytical focus from content consumption to the infrastructural and algorithmic constraints of cultural production.

Prison by Numbers: Data-driven Management of Safety, Security and Rehabilitation

Marion Neunkirchner, University of Applied Sciences St. Pölten; Bertha von Suttner Private University

Public administrations, including prison systems, are increasingly confronted with a widely shared “deficit diagnosis” captured under the label of bureaucracy criticism. This critique, rarely questioned in public or political discourse, positions bureaucratic organizations as inefficient, rigid, and in need of reform. As a consequence, prisons, like other public institutions, face significant pressure to innovate and to demonstrate measurable improvements in their operations (cf. Männle and Witt, 2023). One response to this pressure has been the introduction and integration of a digital management tool as part of the justice platform.

In the case of the Austrian prison administration, digitalization initiatives have been closely tied to the pursuit of organizational goals such as enhancing effectiveness, ensuring security, facilitating rehabilitation, and legitimizing the allocation of public resources. These goals can be understood as the organization's own interpretation of external expectations emanating from the political sphere, the public, and administrative reforms associated with New Public Management (NPM).

However, conceptions of what a public administration should be and how it should act vary considerably within its organizational environment. The process of defining objectives and measuring outcomes represents not merely a technical procedure but an interpretative act that reveals a deeper tension. Therefore, my PhD project observes how “management by objectives” operates in Austrian prisons under these conditions of digitalization and reform. It explores which aspects of organizational restructuring become visible and how resistance emerges among different actor groups in response to interpreted environmental demands.

Drawing on the methodological approach of artifact analysis (Froschauer and Lueger 2016, 2020), the meanings and effects of the digital management tool are interpreted by combining the organizational macro and micro perspectives. In addition to analyzing components of the artifact, such as screenshots and the technical infrastructure, interviews were conducted with both managerial and operational staff. The study finally reconstructs the diverse interpretations and practices surrounding datafication. Preliminary empirical findings indicate that while the formal organization is being reconfigured around data-driven management logics, operational staff partly perform acts of resistance. In line with Garfinkel's (2000, p. 116) observations on informal practices, these actors develop locally situated solutions and workarounds that enable the organization to function despite, or even because of, the limitations of formalized management instruments.

Following Liebling's (2005) work on prison performance, the analysis suggests that the implemented digitalized management tool may inadvertently intensify monitoring and measurement activities and reinforce data-based control, while failing to enhance the core goals of security and rehabilitation. The study finally wants to explore how digitalization and management by objectives reshape not only the formal structures of public institutions but also their normative foundations and everyday practices.

ABSTRACTS PANEL C – CONTENT CREATION & (IN)VISIBILITY

15:30-17:00, SEPTEMBER 17TH, 2026

The Art of Becoming Visible: Anti-caste aesthetics and the double bind of dissent in the platform economy

Tejas Harad, University of Pennsylvania

This study examines how Instagram's sociotechnical framework — specifically its algorithm-driven architecture — shapes activist practices of political artists on the platform. Based on interviews with 11 anti-caste visual artists in India conducted in 2024, I show that political artists modify their artistic production and social media behavior in response to how Instagram sorts and ranks content as well as the audience engagement. Political artists, like other content creators, feel frustrated with Instagram's periodic policy and algorithm changes, which creates an atmosphere of constant uncertainty. Additionally, their advocacy work attracts criticism, abuse and harassment from a wide section of users. Political artists take up social media practices that they perceive to draw more content visibility for two primary reasons: one, it brings attention to the cause they are espousing (caste); and, two, it brings attention to their own art practice, leading to more career opportunities. However, the increased visibility also brings with it abuse and harassment, especially when the content reaches the section of users hostile to the political cause championed by these artists.

The media studies scholarship has so far focused on the entrepreneurial pressures felt by content creators to increase views, engagement and follower count in order to maximize monetization opportunities. But there is less focus on the abuse and policing this visibility inevitably leads to. In the paper, I argue that for anti-caste visual artists, the risks of visibility are heightened due to their lower caste status as well as the political nature of their work. This study contributes to media studies scholarship on platformization of political participation while challenging the view that digital activism is low-cost, low-risk by examining the various kinds of labor that go into producing social media content, figuring out best user practices for attaining increased visibility and dealing with abuse, malicious flagging and in some cases police cases.

Monetization Logics

Adriann Anderson, University of Illinois at Chicago

With the development of the creator economy has also come growth of a range of social media platforms which facilitate the relationships between creators and audiences according to individual platform styles and technical architectures. Ad-funded algorithmic distribution platforms that sort and serve creators' content to users are being countered by subscription-based models for both content distribution and monetization, which platforms claim will offer more direct connection and control for creators. Through a discourse analysis of the policies and related media of three subscription platforms—Patreon, Substack, and OnlyFans—the project examines the logics invoked by these platforms for maintaining, stabilizing, and transforming networked social practices, showing how the platforms discursively shift their technological infrastructures into platform imaginaries.

The use of all social media platforms is governed by platform Terms of Service, documents that are rarely read (Obar & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Robinson & Zhu, 2020) but which broadly define the rules of engagement online. The project begins with an analysis of the economic structures and relationships offered by subscription-based platforms for monetized content, as described by platforms through their Terms of Use policies. The research objectives include developing understandings of how Patreon, Substack, and OnlyFans differentiate themselves from other types of content distribution and monetization systems; what types of content and/or creator actions are promoted and incentivized by their platform policies and infrastructures; and finally, how the platform policies problematize or reinforce the existing power structures between platforms and users. Through these objectives, the project addresses the functional and cultural role platforms themselves play in content creation and cultural production processes. This project understands platforms through an assemblage framework following Deleuze and Guattari, taking the political economy of platforms—including their governance documents—as constitutive elements of the dynamic relationships between technologies and users. In a similar way, critical discourse analysis focuses on the ways social actors use language and texts to navigate conditions of sociality (Fairclough, 1993). The study operationalizes these ideas using a "logics" approach for policy analysis (Remling, 2018).

Results of the discourse analysis show the kinds of worlds both assumed and suggested by platforms in relation to content producers and the media itself, identifying logics employed by platforms for building and reinforcing specific worldviews. These include the ways platforms activate social logics of ownership and offer users specific tools and strategies for developing audience relationships. Through the political logics of their policy, information, and help center pages, platforms fantasmatically naturalize their own roles and decisions to shape and encourage specific creator behaviors, making platforms seem like appealing and natural parts of media ecosystems. This shows how thinking through the logics of platform monetization and distribution systems can provide a starting point for understanding the different ways social media platforms shape creator behaviors, and thus media and culture more generally, even when they would rather be seen as operating as neutral and unbiased technical infrastructures, with future work needed to contextualize these findings by considering user views and beliefs about their platform relationships.

Platformized Visibility: The Case of Romanian QueerTok

Irina Bănoiu, University of Vienna; IHS Vienna

Digital platforms have become central infrastructures of contemporary public spheres, shaping social interaction, cultural representation, and political participation. While social media offers new opportunities for visibility, particularly for minoritized groups, it does not operate as a neutral space. Instead, visibility is structured through socio-technical logics such as algorithmic selection, popularity metrics, and platform governance, with significant implications for queer users navigating recognition, safety, and self-expression.

This paper examines how Romanian-speaking queer TikTok creators negotiate their self-presentation within the intersecting constraints of platformized visibility regimes and heteronormative social norms. Focusing on a non-Western European context marked by limited offline spaces for queer expression, TikTok emerges as a counterpublic arena that is simultaneously enabling and restrictive.

The study employs a qualitative approach, combining non-participatory observation with multimodal content analysis. Drawing on a dataset of 882 videos, three highly visible creator accounts were selected for in-depth analysis. The study analyzes visual, textual, and performative elements of content, paying particular attention to trends, platform affordances, and communicative strategies. Sandoval's (2000) feminist modes of resistance are used as sensitizing concepts to interpret patterns of self-presentation. Preliminary findings suggest that creators engage in various strategies of visibility and of queer expression, to balance recognition, safety, and platform demands. These practices, conceptualized as visibility labour, reflect ongoing negotiation with both algorithmic governance and societal normativity.

The paper contributes to debates on platform power, queer visibility, and digital public spheres by conceptualizing queer self-presentation on TikTok as a situated and adaptive form of resistance under platformized conditions.

ABSTRACTS PANEL D – HEALTH & ACCESSIBILITY

15:30-17:00, SEPTEMBER 17TH, 2026

The “Liebscher & Bracht”-Controversy: Examining YouTube Health and its Construction of Epistemic Authority

Marius Liedtke, University of Salzburg

This contribution takes the public controversy surrounding the admission of German YouTube-channel “Liebscher & Bracht” into the designated “Health”-program of the platform as a case study to explore negotiations and (re-)constructions of health-related expertise and epistemic authority in the platform society (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Video-based social media platforms have become increasingly popular as a source of health information, with 49,2% of Germans using YouTube in this manner (Baumann et al., 2021). At the same time, serious concerns have been raised about the quality and reliability of health information on social media (Wang et al., 2019). Not least in reaction to criticism YouTube received for its role in spreading harmful information during the COVID-19 pandemic, the platform established a new department in 2022 called YouTube Health, with the expressed mission to increase availability of high-quality health information from reliable sources (Graham, 2022).

Accordingly, channels providing videos on health-related subjects can apply since then to be integrated into new health features launched by YouTube Health. Adherence to a set of standards („science-based“, „objective“, „transparent and accountable“), defined by the National Academy of Medicine (NAM) in the US and ratified by the WHO for global application, was publicly determined as decisive for this (Kington et al., 2021). If admitted, the channel's videos not only gain preferential algorithmic treatment within search results but are also highlighted with a visible YouTube Health seal, labeling the channel as an authoritative source. When the new health features were launched in the German-speaking market in February 2023, the self-described “pain-specialists” of Liebscher & Bracht were among the first batch of channels announced as part of it. Soon after the announcement, however, major legacy media outlets, expert organizations and consumer protection agencies voiced concern over this prominent admission, stating the channel would spread medically unsound advice with exaggerated therapeutic promises (Feldwisch-Drentrup, 2023; Kreienbrink, 2023).

This contribution examines the strategic communication YouTube engaged in during the initiation and launch of the Health program as well as in the context of the specific controversy to reconstruct a) how it positions itself as a legitimate arbiter of health expertise, and b) validates Liebscher & Bracht as a reliable health authority. As part of a broader Digital Ethnography (Pink et al., 2016), I analysed a variety of documents, including publicly available protocols and press reports from YouTube’s collaboration with the NAM and WHO, as well as public statements made by representatives of the platform in the context of podcast appearances and during stakeholder conferences. Based on this, I further discuss whether YouTube’s Health seal can still be seen as a trustworthy signal for user orientation despite this individual case, or whether it is fundamentally flawed and may even need to be viewed as a form of “governance-washing” (Tarvin & Stanfill, 2022).

Becoming Legible in the Shadow of AI: Older Adults' Encounters with Platformized Healthcare in China

Chenquanyou Fang, Durham University

Healthcare practices are increasingly enveloped by algorithms. AI-driven medical decision-making platforms, offering round-the-clock, low-cost consultation, are framed as solutions to healthcare inequalities, promising to expand access to medical services for underserved populations, particularly ageing people in resource-constrained regions. However, rather than constituting a predetermined outcome, the effects of such platforms as infrastructures are not designed to unfold in a linear or inevitable manner. Instead, they are continuously produced through situated interactions between platforms and users, making their outcomes inherently uncertain. As technologies-in-practice, such platforms do, nevertheless, generate new forms of labour—particularly data work oriented towards machine readability which is often rendered invisible, even as it remains indispensable to the ongoing maintenance of these platforms. Therefore, a focus on situated human-technology interactions, especially data work produced by technologies, is crucial for critically reconfiguring benefits of platforms as infrastructures in everyday life.

This paper examines Ant AFu, an AI-driven healthcare consultation platform developed by Ant Group, as a case of healthcare platformization in China. Unlike earlier online healthcare platforms centred on doctors or pharmaceutical services, Ant AFu operates as an AI-driven decision-making system that mediates users' access to medical knowledge and care. Rapidly scaling to tens of millions of users, the platform reflects a broader shift in which AI is positioned as a solution to longstanding challenges in China's healthcare system, including uneven resource distribution, ageing populations, and inefficiencies in care access.

Drawing on insights from STS and symbolic interactionism, it conceptualises platform use as an ongoing, situated interaction between users and platforms as infrastructures. The paper further highlights the emergence of invisible work that sustains these interactions, including preparatory efforts, learning strategies, and the mobilisation of social support. Together, these practices reveal how platformized healthcare reconfigures not only access to care, but also the distribution of responsibility and labour within medical encounters.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a comparative qualitative design, focusing on older adults in regions with differing levels of healthcare provision in China. Case selection is informed by regional disparities in healthcare resources, measured through indicators such as the number of physicians, nurses and hospital beds per 1000 population. Empirical materials will be generated through a combination of ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews, supplemented by screen-recorded observations of older adults' real-time interactions with the platform. By capturing both narrated experiences and situated practices, the study examines how users formulate queries, interpret responses, and navigate interface demands in everyday consulting situations.

One TikTok to Cure Them All: Believe, and You Shall Not Be Protected

Margje Camps, Utrecht University

Social media users interested in improving their fitness level, getting their skin to look smoother, or looking for weight loss tips find their 'for you' page flooded with advertisements rife with exaggerated claims from health and beauty influencers. Influencers promote sleeping gummies that are 'literally like a drug' and diet supplements 'clinically proven to reduce belly fat by an amazing 13.8cm in just 3 months' Research on consumer psychology shows that due to desperation, consumers' thinking can be seen as impaired, leaving them more susceptible to 'sales of fraudulent remedies for terminal illnesses and excess weight.' Under the Unfair Consumer Protection Directive (hereafter: UCPD), such consumers desperate for a cure or relief can be categorised as vulnerable consumers.

Article 5.3 UCPD reads, 'exaggerated statements or statements which are not meant to be taken literally' are legally allowed commercial practices (also known as puffery) against which vulnerable consumers do not have to be protected. The European Commission included this clause with 'the idea that, for instance, a national measure prohibiting claims that might deceive only a very credulous, naive or cursory consumer (e.g. 'puffery') would be disproportionate and create an unjustified barrier to trade.[6] This explanation is remarkable, as consumers who could be considered vulnerable due to their credulity should be better protected by the UCPD, while at the same time, exaggerated statements should not be prohibited because they are only believed by 'very credulous' consumers. This shows that there is a dichotomy between the level of protection of a credulous consumer when faced with a potentially misleading advertisement due to an exaggerated statement.

The research question this paper answers is: 'How should the practice of puffery be interpreted in cases of vulnerable online consumers in the health and beauty industry?' The research will consist of legal doctrinal research of the UCPD, as well as case-law analysis of the Court of Justice of the European Union and, where useful, regulation and case law from EU Member States. The historical analysis of the legal defence of puffery will substantially focus upon the United Kingdom, as this is where the concept of puffery is most developed in law. To analyse misleading commercial practices on social media in the health and beauty industry, influencer content on TikTok is analysed.

Preliminary findings indicate that the development of the practice of puffery has always had close ties to the health and beauty industry, but influencer practices highlight the need to clarify the dichotomy of credulity to separate puffery from misleading commercial practices as defined under Article 6 UCPD.

When pl@tform pr3carity becomes pl-symbol-form pr-three-carity: How TikTok content moderation and algospeak precaritize screen reader users

erynn young, University of Amsterdam

This research applies a critical disability lens to the multimodal communicative phenomenon emerging on platforms like TikTok called algospeak (e.g. 'kill' becomes unalive), whereby users manipulate their communication to evade algorithmic content moderation and censorship. Multimodal(ity) here refers to visual/video, written/textual, speech/audio modalities through which TikTok users communicate and interact thanks to TikTok's platform architecture.

This case study considers the reverberative effects of algospeak necessity on screen reader users (users of a type of assistive technology software that reads visually relayed, digital text data) navigating this heightened digital precarity. TikTok scroll-along sessions were conducted with recruited screen reader users, during which participants scrolled through TikTok content, reflected on the algospeak communication therein, and detailed their processes of algospeak meaning-making. Preliminary findings show that screen reader users exploit a repertoire of algospeak disambiguation strategies to supplement that which is not directly understood and/or that which is not sufficiently mediated by their screen readers. For example, some users replay content multiple times or manipulate the playback speed of their screen readers to understand the audio algospeak content being conveyed. Some users rely on communal disambiguation through accessing peer comments to textually mediate visual content that cannot be adequately perceived. Moreover, factors including (but not limited to) reliance on screen readers, sighted capabilities, existing familiarity with algospeak and popular algospeak tokens, and information processing load reduction are considered by screen reader users when it comes to algospeak processing and production.

This research is part of a larger doctoral research project that critically engages with algospeak's multimodality across users' possible modality constraints. This research integrates critical disability scholarship as a necessary framework through which to assess issues of access—impacting communication on TikTok for marginalized users that may rely on or benefit from the sociality and accessibility of digital platform-mediated community to facilitate peer interactions, discourse participation, education, digital activism, and leisure and entertainment. Understanding how users perceive and respond to digital precarity through strategic, multimodal communication is necessary to understanding how some vulnerable positionalities survive online within communication-mediated spaces, as well as how content moderation practices reinforce systems of disproportionate access and visibility, and social desirability.

ABSTRACTS PANEL E – AI FUTURES & RESISTANCE

11:00 – 12:30, SEPTEMBER 18TH, 2026

Absurd Behaviours in the Age of Platformization across English, German, and Russian Speculative Fiction

Vera Yakupova, Trinity College Dublin

The rapid societal shifts reinforced by generative AI models are not without precedent in the cultural imagination; for over a century, speculative fiction has anticipated the implications of digitisation on human behaviour, and it points to a common paradox: on the one hand, digital tools simply provide new modes for the manifestation of established social patterns and behaviours. On the other hand, speculative narratives often explore the ontological shifts triggered by digitisation, suggesting that technology fundamentally changes social structures, mental health, and interpersonal dynamics. For example, while bullying has existed before social media, cyberbullying introduces a change in scale, as it uses the reach and anonymity of platforms to change the speed, visibility, and lasting impact of the behaviour.

As our social infrastructures transition into algorithmic platforms, science fiction often discusses a manifestation of "extreme" human behaviours, often caused by a reduction of the human to data points. These texts satirise how platformisation and the conceptualisation of the human in data points reshapes social infrastructures—interpersonal relationships, dating, consumer behaviour, and health—by pushing "optimisation" to its illogical, often ridiculous, and terrifying extreme. My PhD project focuses on how speculative fiction in English, German, and Russian uses satire to depict human behaviour in face of mass data collection and the creation of "data doubles" (Marks, *Imagining Surveillance*, 2015), and, as the main focus for this conference presentation, how they ridicule and critique the "platformization of everything". By conceptualising this literary analysis through the lens of sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff and Kim, *Dreamscapes of Modernity*, 2015), this research argues that our understanding of current behaviour on platforms is deeply rooted in the history of the surveillance novel and the idea of "feeling watched" by a gaze, e.g. the public eye, and how we modify our behaviour in face of that gaze, as described in dystopian narratives of the previous century like Zamyatin's *We*, Kafka's *The Castle*, and Orwell's *1984*. The contemporary "platform novel" reflects a shift toward horizontal, liquid (Baumann and Lyon, 2015), and participatory surveillance and the commercialisation of the self. My PhD thesis argues literary works do more than just mirror reality; they can also act as a form of cultural resistance. By ridiculing the "algorithmic self," 21st century literary works expose the gap between the promised efficiency of platforms and the inconsistent and nuanced reality of human emotions and identity.

Ultimately, this research reveals that the past's "future visions" continue to influence how we perceive and respond to the platformisation of society today. By looking through the lens of satire, we can better understand the shifting norms of digital intimacy and the "social ratings" that define our modern social hierarchy. Through an interdisciplinary lens, this research shows how speculative fiction acts as a critical thought experiment. These literary scenarios enable us to question the power dynamics of global platforms, and envision the long-term behavioural shifts and 'digital futures' they create.

After the X-odus: Networked connections of AI critical and skeptical users on Bluesky

Rahel Winter, University of Bremen

Following Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter in 2021, some users decided to wait and see how his purchase would pan out. Others left the platform entirely (He et al., 2023; Mak et al., 2025). While exits prompted by "issues surrounding policy, design, and community" (Fiesler and Dym, 2020, p. 1) are not uncommon, the scale of user migration to comparable microblogging platforms such as Mastodon, Threads, Bluesky, and Truth Social (Cava et al., 2023; He et al., 2023; Jeong et al., 2024; Radivojevic et al., 2025; Tkacz and Gehl, 2025) was nonetheless staggering. As digital platforms continue to grow in importance for both public and private life (Poell et al., 2019), the erosion of Twitter, once a central site of digital public discourse, carries with it sizable ramifications beyond the digital sphere (Tkacz and Gehl, 2025).

Bluesky, in particular, provides former Twitter users a sense of familiarity in its interface and features. Its key functionalities mirror those of Twitter: a comparatively small character limit, an overview of trending topics, repost mechanisms, dedicated hashtag and search functionalities, as well as a primary focus on text content, rather than visual content (i.e. Instagram) (Burgess and Baym, 2020). It thus enables users to congregate around shared interests (McInroy & Craig, 2018; Winter et al., 2021), identities (Cho, 2018; Hare & Jones, 2023; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022; Walker, 2020), or affect (Clark-Parsons, 2021; Papacharissi, 2014, 2016).

As the backlash to Bluesky's proposed (non-generative) AI tool Attie exemplified (Chedraoui, 2026), many of Bluesky's users had also deliberately chosen to join the platform due to its lack of AI features. The widespread incorporation of generative artificial intelligence on social media platforms and daily life had by that point already given rise to increased concerns and resistance to its implementation (Nichols et al., 2025; Tang and Liu, 2025). Criticism ranging from AI's ecological footprint and resource costs (Li et al., 2025; Siddik et al., 2021; Valdivia, 2025), to implications for data privacy (Lee et al., 2024), and harm towards marginalized groups (Ji, 2025; Mergen et al., 2025), would eventually culminate in explicit decisions to abstain from using these tools and consuming content created with them altogether (Morosoli et al., 2025; Tang and Liu, 2025).

With the intention of exploring the connections formed by AI-skeptic users on microblogging platforms, this paper asks: Which types of networked connections are people who voice AI critical and skeptical positions forming on Bluesky? To answer this question, topics emphasized in posts criticizing AI (as defined by the inclusion of relevant keywords and hashtags) are analysed through transformer-based topic modeling with BERTopic. Subsequently, a network analysis involving the posts' authors and those interacting with them is carried out, alongside a qualitative analysis of the users through their profile-based self-identification. This paper thus aims to not only map and describe the networked connections of AI-opposed users, but also examine which forms of AI criticism they choose to highlight.

The Prosperity Promise of AI Platforms

Sara Reinis, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania

Across product landing pages, app store descriptions, and executive manifestos, AI platform companies promise abundance. Terms like "unlock" and "empower" proliferate alongside mystical signifiers such as "like magic" and the ever-present sparkle emoji, constructing AI features not as technical affordances but as transformative agents of personal prosperity that activate latent potential already residing in the user. This paper argues that this rhetoric of algorithmic abundance draws on a much longer American cultural history, and that the shared grammar between the two is not merely metaphorical but in part structural.

I introduce the concept of prosperity scripts to describe this formation: conditional promissory structures in which correct belief in a system is positioned as a key precondition for material, relational, and personal flourishing. The concept is rooted in what Albanese (2007) identifies as the American tradition of "metaphysical religion," in which correct inner alignment activates material reward, and what Bowler (2013) documents in the prosperity gospel, where failure is often attributable to insufficient faith rather than structural conditions. I argue this promissory structure has transmuted through therapeutic self-help and hustle culture to now saturate segments of corporate AI platform rhetoric, converting structural conditions into personal moral-spiritual success or failure and making participation in algorithmic systems feel like self-actualization. Crucially, while "AI alignment" conventionally refers to aligning algorithmic systems with human values, this paper examines the reverse: the implicit promissory logic of aligning humans to algorithmic platform values.

The paper employs Critical Discourse Analysis of a corpus of corporate AI platform discourse spanning 2022–2026, consisting of a purposive sample of executive-authored texts from figures including Sam Altman, Mark Zuckerberg, and Marc Andreessen, alongside business-to-consumer marketing materials from major consumer AI platforms. My analysis attends to implied promissory conditional structures, empowerment and self-actualization claims, magical and transcendent language, and the discursive construction of AI skepticism as deficiency or moral failure.

By introducing the prosperity script as a specific discursive mechanism, the paper situates contemporary AI platform rhetoric within the longer spiritual-economic formations that make it culturally legible and politically effective. Because the prosperity script locates the cause of precarity in the user's own insufficient alignment rather than in platform structures, it ultimately functions as what Berlant (2011) theorizes as cruel optimism: a promissory relation that binds platform users to the very conditions of precarity it claims to transcend.

ABSTRACTS PANEL F – LABOR & PRECARIITY

11:00 – 12:30, SEPTEMBER 18TH, 2026

Platformisation of Journalism in Serbia: Institutional Transformation and Professional Challenges

Snežana Bajčeta, University of Belgrade Faculty of Political Sciences

Platformisation has profoundly reshaped the journalistic ecosystem, unsettling long-established professional, economic, and normative arrangements. This paper conceptualises platformisation as a form of institutional change that restructures journalism's operating conditions through the penetration of platform infrastructures, monetisation logics, and governance mechanisms. Focusing on the Republic of Serbia, the paper examines how these transformations interact with a media system characterised by weak market sustainability, fragmented professional norms, and enduring political pressures. The central question is how the journalistic profession is transforming in platform society, and which structural factors and mechanisms shape this transformation in the Republic of Serbia, where platform-driven restructuring coincides with democratic backsliding and directly challenges journalism's role as a central institution of the public sphere.

In the professional dimension, platformisation entails the augmentation of actors involved in news production, the weakening of organisational structures, the erosion of professional autonomy in journalistic labour, and a shift in editorial practices towards profit-oriented logics. Correspondingly, these changes open the journalistic profession, foster organisational hybridisation, expose educational, professional, and technological unpreparedness, and ultimately contribute to a quality decline of journalistic work. In the economic dimension, platformisation restructures business models around platform-driven monetisation logics, destabilises socio-economic working conditions through discontinuous and insecure employment patterns, and disrupts the equilibrium of the journalistic ecosystem by introducing systemic asymmetries. As a result, journalism becomes increasingly unsustainable outside dominant platform logics, journalistic labour is normalised as precarity, and "winner-take-all" dynamics concentrate resources while marginalising smaller and especially local news organisations. In the normative dimension, platformisation triggers processes of internal renormativisation through self-regulation, legal renormativisation at the national level, and the "act-ification" of a new European regulatory framework addressing platform-related risks. These developments are marked by a lack of a shared normative foundation of journalism, inconsistent implementation of national regulation, and a growing normative distance and regulatory lag between Serbia and evolving EU governance standards.

Empirically, the paper draws on a mixed-method design combining a survey of journalists in Serbia (n = 121), in-depth interviews with journalists and news-related actors (n = 25), and a normative analysis of Serbia's legal and self-regulatory framework in relation to emerging European standards. The findings highlight how platformisation amplifies Serbia's pre-existing vulnerabilities and produces cumulative constraints on the journalistic profession, economic sustainability, and normative legitimacy.

Negotiating Participation: The EU AI Act, Worker Participation and its Discontents

Gwendolin Barnard, University of Graz

This doctoral dissertation investigates how EU regulation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) anticipates, frames and brings into being practices of participation of workers when it comes to the use of AI in work settings. It asks who is afforded the ability to determine how to live, work and be with AI in workplaces – and to what extent it is workers and their representatives who do so. Discussions on the regulation and governance of AI often emphasise the need for ‘workers to have a seat at the table’ when AI is deployed at work. How does this materialize in the law? How does the law establish AI as a regulatory and legal object? What and who does the law protect and support? In order to approach these questions, this thesis examines the ways in which the EU AI Act came to be and how participation was discursively negotiated across policy documents and position papers, consultation responses and statements from digital rights actors in the EU. The main empirical site, the EU AI Act, is a comprehensive piece of legislation regulating Artificial Intelligence horizontally across sectors and application domains. As its primary lens, the term participation (of workers) describes processes to that involve workers (or their representatives) in negotiations, collective agreements, or through information rights.

The governance of AI holds relevance for regulatory and scholarly discussions on digital platforms since digital platforms are often underpinned by AI functionalities. Digital platforms have significantly transformed labour relations through introducing logics of algorithmic management (Jarrahi et al., 2021) and the infrastructuring and outsourcing of labour to global south countries for the purpose of moderation or data cleaning (Miceli et al., 2024).

This thesis offers critical analysis into the law-making process of the EU AI Act: it investigates the ways in which participation is mobilised in the making of regulation; the actors that are imagined to be involved in participation and the objectives that participation seems to solve or seek. Theoretically, this thesis is grounded in sensibilities from Post-/Actor-Network Theory (Law, 1994; Mol, 2010) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013) by looking at the ways in which actors, documents and institutions play a role in the work of making social order and to the extent regulation is a matter of socio-material ordering. In the case of the EU AI Act, the work of ordering, this thesis argues, constrains and contracts possibilities of participation through its ontological positioning of AI as a product.

Workforce structure, self-presentation strategies and wage demands on the cleaning platform Putzperle. An analysis in the context of migration and gender.

Anna Kühn, Hannah Rossmann, Leonie Schweikert, Jakob zur Heide,
University of Hamburg

Our research project aims to investigate the workforce structure of the German cleaning platform Putzperle, focusing on how the characteristics of gender and migration relate to wage demands and workers' self-presentation strategies regarding their motives and suitability for platform-based cleaning work. In this context, we conceptualize platform-mediated cleaning work as reproductive labor emerging in the context of an ongoing 'crisis of social reproduction'. This process is accompanied by the commodification of domestic reproductive labor, with digital platforms functioning as a purported 'care-fix'. Our analysis focuses on gender and migration to evaluate how the process of platformization may perpetuate historically rooted inequalities related to the division of (re-)productive labor along these characteristics.

We employ a mixed-method design, analyzing a self-collected dataset of 345 cleaning workers active in Berlin. The design includes: (1) OLS regressions to estimate differences in hourly wage demands by gender and migration; (2) content analysis to identify self-presentation strategies used in the workers self-descriptions on the platform; and (3) a k-prototype cluster analysis to develop a data-driven typology of platform workers. The findings of this study are as follows:

Firstly, the regression analyses demonstrate a significant negative effect of migration, reducing wage demands by an average of 4.1%. This supports evidence for a migrant-wage gap on cleaning platforms, suggesting the presence of preference-based biases as well as statistical discrimination. Additionally, women demand on average 5.1% higher wages than men.

Secondly, the content analysis of the self-descriptions shows that while men predominantly justify their suitability for performing cleaning work through specific skills and intrinsic motives, women rely primarily on cleaning experience and more frequently on biographical aspects which relate to their femininity, such as motherhood. Further, migrants also emphasize specific skills and intrinsic motives more often in their self-presentation compared with non-migrants.

Thirdly, using a k-prototype cluster analysis, we identify four worker types, structured primarily by the intersection of gender and migration characteristics. The worker type traditional housewives (a) affirms gender- and migration-specific stereotypes and demands comparatively low wages. In contrast, (professionalized) non-migrant-female high achievers (b) – who demand comparatively high wages –, precarious migrant-female early-career practitioners (c), and precarious migrant-male newcomers (d) employ alternative strategies, and in some cases, actively counteract these stereotypes.

Our findings highlight the importance of gender and migration in platform-based care work and provide new insights into workforce structures on cleaning platforms.

ABSTRACTS PANEL G – AFFECT & INTIMACY

13:30 – 15:00, SEPTEMBER 18TH, 2026

Configuring Companionship: Multimodality, Infrastructures, and the Platformization of Human-AI Relations

Marvin Waibel, University of Vienna

Digital platforms have for long created and structured social relationships and their success in architecting infrastructures for community-building, identity-formation and social connection now intersects with rapid spread of artificial interlocutors. While the influence of bots, algorithms, and platform affordances has already shown that social platforms were never purely “interpersonal,” recent advances in artificial intelligence are catalyzing new forms of sociality that extend ongoing processes of mediatization and platformization.

A prominent site of this shift is AI companion apps, which are specifically designed to establish long-term relationships with their users and offer new possibilities for companionship. Apps such as Replika, Paradot, or Nomi.AI are increasingly characterized by their multimodality, which includes visual representations of the companion alongside varying conversational capabilities and configurable personality traits, of which many are explicitly designed to imitate familiar social roles (friend, partner, mentor etc.). As a result, AI companion apps are transforming how and with whom we form and maintain through new sociocultural and sociotechnical forms of friendship, partnership, or intimacy. Grounded in a sociology of knowledge approach, this presentation conceptualizes the digital infrastructures and sign systems of companion apps as constitutive elements of communicative action. Interfaces function as communication technologies that choreograph multimodal interaction, binding together materiality, modality, and interactivity. Design choices and affordances communicate capabilities and imaginaries that prefigure possible relations. Emerging patterns of human-AI relations are interdependent with business models and the commodification of relationships. Consequently, human AI-relations rely on technological affordances as well as on companies that develop, govern and maintain these apps.

This presentation highlights that, to fully understand the evolving patterns of societal communication and human-AI relations, it is essential to analyze these developments within their digital environments and infrastructural embodiments. I aim to shed light on how design choices and multimodal capabilities seek to establish AI companions as a ‘communicative other’, opening new avenues to digital worlds. This presentation will deconstruct the multimodality of AI companions by drawing on digital ethnography and walkthrough analysis of the design, affordances and branding of multiple AI companion apps. I trace the evolving spectrum of AI companion apps - from dyadic relationships, through super-app configurations, to social AI networks. Besides inside into these empirical results, the presentation will also address the methodological critique that researchers’ (media) literacies highly influence their interpretations. The presentation will incorporate results from conducted walkthroughs with users of AI companions and methodologically reflect interpretive differences and meaning-making processes.

Beyond Technical Functionality: The Platform Logic of Doubao

Wanting Zhang, University of Vienna

While leading international AI assistants such as ChatGPT compete primarily on functional capability and technical performance, Doubao — ByteDance’s AI assistant and currently the dominant generative AI product in everyday life in China — has taken a different path. Rather than optimizing for tool-like efficiency, Doubao explicitly positions itself as an “AI friend,” foregrounding social value alongside functionality. Through an analysis of Doubao’s interface and related documents following the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018), this study investigates the platform logic underlying this differentiation strategy.

The analysis identifies three interconnected dimensions of Doubao’s platform logic. First, human–AI interactions that simulate affective social relationships function as a deliberately designed low-barrier entry point. Official documents from Doubao indicate that users tend to show greater tolerance toward imperfections in such a context. In contrast to task-oriented AI—where errors are readily perceived as functional failures—this tolerance is explicitly framed and strategically leveraged as a commercial advantage.

Second, Doubao’s AI agent ecology subjects AI to the established logic of social media platforms. Rather than operating as a functionally organized tool repository, it resembles a social directory—featuring English coaches, friends, study buddies, etc. —where agents function simultaneously as interactional partners and as digital objects that can be liked, commented on, and shared. Human–AI interaction here does not emerge as an entirely novel interactive form; instead, it simulates and combines interfaces already familiar from human–human interaction on social media. The social-mediatization of AI agents thus indicates a process of absorption, whereby the new technology is rendered legible by being embedded within established and recognizable platform formats.

Third, Doubao’s AI creation features—such as image and video generation tools—are tightly integrated into Douyin’s content ecosystem, while Douyin actively directs users to Doubao for content production. This reciprocal flow repositions users as active content producers rather than passive consumers. In doing so, it completes the absorption of generative AI into ByteDance’s pre-existing platform ecology, turning Doubao into a driver of participatory content production and sharing on Douyin.

Together, these three dimensions suggest that Doubao’s successful divergence from dominant AI assistants towards social and entertainment values does not simply result from the fierce competition over technical capabilities on the market but rather reflects a structurally distinct trajectory in which an AI assistant platform is strategically folded into a pre-existing platform ecology.

More-Than-Human Feelings: Algorithmic Intimacy and Emotional Structures of Human-AI Relationships

Anastasiia Osipova, University of Milan

As AI companions become increasingly embedded in everyday life, users are beginning to treat them as significant others — turning to them for emotional support, consolation, and a sense of being understood (Frenkenberg & Hochman, 2025). With that, emotions themselves are being largely digitalised, platformised, datafied (Zuboff, 2019), and, as a result, embedded in sociotechnical processes involving non-human agents, such as algorithmic systems that are trying to resonate with consumers by “tapping into their feelings, desires, and fears” (HT Media, 2024). And, as digital architecture becomes more sophisticated, algorithms not only learn to recognise emotions but also challenge the understanding of them, reconfiguring the structures of everyday life. This shift raises urgent sociological questions: what happens to intimacy, vulnerability, and emotional expression when one interlocutor is algorithmic? This research presents a theoretical framework and research design for investigating how emotional connections between humans and AI systems are reshaping contemporary emotional life within platformised environments.

The project situates itself at the intersection of classical sociology of emotions and critical platform studies. Drawing on Hochschild's concept of emotional labour and Goffman's dramaturgical framework, it approaches emotions as situated social accomplishments governed by feeling rules — and asks how these rules are reconfigured when AI systems enter the interactional scene. The research proposes the concept of algorithmic emotional labour to describe the computational processes through which AI systems recognise, interpret, and respond to human emotions while shaping affective experience through designed affordances and commercial logics.

Theoretically, the project builds on Bucher's analysis of algorithmic power, Natale's concept of banal deception, and Papacharissi's notion of affective publics to examine what I term the platformisation of emotional life: the process through which platforms mediate, shape, and commodify emotions by creating technologically embedded affordances for feeling. Central to this analysis is the concept of artificial sociality (Natale & Depounti, 2024) — communicative AI technologies that create the impression of social behaviour — which becomes especially powerful in shaping, and extending, our understanding of emotions when users can no longer clearly distinguish algorithmic response from genuine human connection. Empirically, grounded in ethnomethodology inspired by Garfinkel, this study combines in-depth interviews, breaching-inspired interactional probes, and longitudinal AI usage diaries, with optional three-tier data donation. By deliberately testing emotional expectations — such as eliciting grief, anger, or affection — the project highlights the tacit rules structuring algorithmic intimacy.

The research argues that while scholarship often frames AI in technical or instrumental terms, users describe their AI interactions in profoundly relational language — comfort, connection, being understood — emotions traditionally reserved for human relationships. Sociology currently lacks adequate frameworks for theorising how emotions are co-constructed between humans and non-human agents.

Zeros, Ones, and Emotions: Can Algorithms Possess Emotional Power?

Bahaeddin Umut Yildirim, Hacettepe University

This study focuses on the positioning of emotions in users' encounters with algorithms. It aims to explore users' everyday experiences with social media platforms' algorithms and the emotions that arise from these interactions. By doing so, this study seeks to understand the role of emotions in the social power dynamics of algorithms, from both user and platform sides. The existing literature on algorithms often overlooks the emotional aspects, instead concentrating on their functional roles. Typically, algorithms are discussed in terms of their "black box" nature, emphasizing their surveillance capabilities. However, this approach has limitations, as it neglects the social and everyday dimensions of algorithmic interactions. In contrast, ethnographic studies on algorithms have provided valuable insights into users' experiences. By examining users' perceptions and interactions with algorithms, these studies have highlighted the significance of emotions in shaping algorithmic encounters.

This study draws on both ethnographic research on algorithms and the sociology of emotions. It explores how users grasp and interact with algorithms on social media platforms and the emotional dimensions of these interactions. In this context, a pilot study was conducted, involving in depth interviews with five "heavy users" who utilize Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube. The interviews were analyzed employing a qualitative approach, and the preliminary findings suggest that algorithms play a significant role in the construction of self. However, this role is often characterized by negative emotions, which arise from users' interactions with algorithms. Users' experiences reveal that algorithms are perceived not as invisible or neutral, but as an active element that openly influences the experience. It seems that negative emotions linked to interacting with algorithms have encouraged users to develop strategies for dealing with these platforms. Therefore, preliminary findings suggest that emotions may have a truly constructive capacity in the relationship between users and algorithms. However, considering the negativity of these emotions, it can be argued that they are closely related to the users' effort to escape domination.

Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the discussion on the social and emotional power of algorithms, and the findings are expected to shed light on the complex relationships between users, algorithms and emotions.

ABSTRACTS PANEL H – POLARIZATION & DISINFORMATION

13:30 – 15:00, SEPTEMBER 18TH, 2026

The Polarizing Dynamics on Social Media

Georg Sator, University of Nottingham

Polarised social media discourse is often read as evidence that Western societies are fundamentally divided. This study examines a behavioural alternative based on the idea that what appears online is a non-random, self-reinforcing product of who chooses to speak and when.

I distinguish (i) private opinions on contentious political topics, (ii) opinions expressed online, and (iii) inferred population sentiments. The study asks whether extreme views are disproportionately expressed, whether observers correct for selection into expression or instead exhibit selection neglect; and whether perceived hyperpolarisation can push subsequent opinions toward the extremes, potentially creating a spiral from distortion to real polarisation.

The experiment is guided by a formal model of dynamic opinion expression that characterises how the distribution of expressed opinions in online environments evolves over time. I derive necessary and sufficient conditions under which polarisation arises and persists in equilibrium and map these to experimentally observable expression patterns. Computer simulations complement the theory by illustrating the implied dynamics of opinion expression over time.

Evidence to date comes from preregistered pilot studies (N=200 per study). Across pilots, expressed views are substantially more polarized than underlying population sentiments, consistent with selective expression. Expression decisions also follow the model's predicted conditional patterns, and these estimates inform the simulation exercises. Taken together, the results suggest that hyperpolarised feeds can emerge from selective expression, leading observers to overestimate extremism and polarisation, and potentially weakening expectations that bipartisan consensus is possible.

All Extremes Point to the Norm: Femonationalist Convergence on Dutch Twitter

Sarah Burkhardt, University of Amsterdam

Across Europe, increasing concern has been raised about the mobilisation of emancipatory and feminist rhetoric by nationalist actors to agitate against immigrant and Muslim men. While primarily attributed to populist far-right parties, such discourse is not confined to political extremes but unfolds across broader public and media discourse, where progressive and racialised narratives intersect and draw on historically embedded orientalist and gendered frames. Sara Farris (2017) has conceptualised this paradoxical phenomenon as femonationalism, which stands for ‘femocrat and feminist nationalism’, and describes the convergence of far-right nationalist, neoliberal, and feminist actors by pitching women’s rights against Islam and immigration. Early observations of femonationalism coincided with the rise of social media platforms in the 2000s, suggesting that the development of femonationalism is closely intertwined with processes of platformisation that have fundamentally reconfigured public discourse. By networking interactions between heterogeneous audiences at scale and facilitating the rapid dissemination and recombination of content, platforms create conditions in which discursive convergences can emerge, stabilise, and gain visibility. At the same time, the opaque and algorithmically governed nature of corporate platforms makes it difficult to systematically examine how such racialised discourses unfold over time.

This paper investigates how femonationalist discourse emerges and develops on social media platforms by analysing over two million Dutch tweets on sexual misconduct between 2011 and 2022. Drawing on critical decolonial and feminist perspectives, the study situates contemporary discourse within longer histories of colonial, racialised, and gendered power relations. Methodologically, it develops a computational qualitative framework using large language models to identify latent femonationalist narratives and understudied counternarratives, which are analysed across engagement patterns, shared links, and thematic clusters. The findings show that femonationalism has developed into a persistent and popular discourse since 2015, accounting for nearly half of retweeted content by 2018. On Dutch Twitter, femonationalism operates primarily as a racist discourse, in which women’s rights are only one element among many, while anti-feminist narratives are expressed against anti-racist feminists. Counternarratives are primarily articulated through critical race frameworks but remain marginal. Instead of being driven by virality, femonationalist discourse is characterised by a continuous recombination of heterogeneous themes and intersecting mainstream frames that obfuscate from racialised dynamics.

Drawing on decolonial theory, the paper identifies and discusses two key mechanisms underpinning these dynamics: deep frames and convergence. These mechanisms systematically network deeply established but obscured racialised frames across topics and media, through which femonationalist discourse exposes rather than re-wires racialised norms. Social media platforms play a significant role in this dynamic. By facilitating the large-scale convergence of deep frames across diverse audiences and media outlets, Twitter strengthens and stabilises these meanings over time. Overall, the paper highlights the need to analyse social media platforms as infrastructures through which longstanding inequalities are reproduced, reconfigured, and exposed.

Disinformation under Surveillance Capitalism: A Critical Appraisal of the Digital Services Act Anti-Disinformation Framework

Clément Maertens, UCLouvain

The fight against disinformation has become a central priority of the EU digital and democratic policy agenda, particularly through recent instruments such as the Digital Services Act (DSA). My PhD research examines the conceptual and normative foundations of this regulatory framework and argues that its reliance on a risk-based approach limits its ability to address the structural drivers of disinformation.

Methodologically, my research adopts a critical approach of EU digital regulation grounded in political economy. It also relies on doctrinal legal analysis of the main EU regulatory instruments targeting disinformation, including the DSA, the AI Act, the Regulation on Political Advertising, and accompanying soft law documents.

The EU anti-disinformation legal framework adopts a risk-based approach. This regulatory model bears several legal patterns and political assumptions. The first step of my research therefore consists in the development of the risk-based model of disinformation regulation under EU law and an analysis of its legal patterns.

Building on this legal foundation, the project develops a theoretical critique of this regulatory model by drawing on Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism. Surveillance capitalism conceptualizes disinformation not as an external threat or as undesirable behavior, but as a structural byproduct of an economic system that extracts behavioral data, treats meaning as irrelevant, and amplifies high-engagement content regardless of veracity. Within this framework, the EU's risk-based model, by focusing on systemic risks rather than on underlying economic operations favorizing those risks, fails to challenge the structural dynamics that produce epistemic harm, partly due to its leniency toward actual digital capitalist powers.

Finally, my research explores an alternative legal framework for addressing disinformation, centered on epistemic rights. Such a model would begin by recognizing the forms of epistemic dispossession exercised by digital platforms. Addressing these asymmetries of power requires legal mechanisms that counterbalance the structural advantages platforms hold over users. An epistemic-rights-based approach would therefore aim not only to regulate content or mitigate systemic risks, but also to restore users' capacity to participate meaningfully and autonomously in the digital public sphere.



KEY INFO



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