

The platformation and transformation of the digital public sphere: An introduction

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Abstract

This article introduces the complex landscape of social media platforms and their evolving integration within social and political contexts. Focusing on the concept of platform society, this article discusses the emergence and growth of new platforms as well as the localization trends of mobile communication. This article examines the interplay between technological structures and social, cultural, and political dimensions of mobile communication, focusing on issues such as privacy policies, data protection, and profit-seeking motives of platform owner companies. In addition, this article introduces the six papers chosen for this special issue. The diverse viewpoints presented in this special issue contribute to a deeper understanding of digital communication's role in advancing democracy, encouraging citizen participation, and transforming public spheres.

Keywords

Public sphere, social media, special issue

Mobile app-based communication has developed and evolved drastically in the world. The proliferation and diversity of social media platforms has prompted new studies regarding the integration of social media platforms and sociopolitical contexts. Nowadays, people commonly utilize multiple social media platforms to meet different needs in different situations. The concept of platform society describes the platformation of society all over the world (van Dijck & Poell, 2015). Notably, TikTok and Instagram have emerged as the fastest-growing platforms. On one hand, global platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), and WhatsApp have achieved worldwide popularity as widely used social media platforms. On the other hand, there has been a trend of localization in mobile communication. WeChat dominates

among the majority of Chinese users, while LINE is popular in Japan and Taiwan, and KakaoTalk has a substantial following in South Korea. In addition, new apps have emerged in other countries, such as Indonesia's Gojek, the Philippines' Chikka, and Vietnam's Zalo.

The platformation and localization of social media reflect the social, cultural, economic, and political implications of mobile communication. "The systems, arrangements, and values in which

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platforms are immersed shape platform logics and effects” (Sherman & Siravo, 2020, p. 1). For example, the platform’s policy of privacy, user data, and information protection are associated with state regulations and cultural norms. Moreover, the operation and management of social media platforms might prioritize the owner companies’ profit-seeking purpose. Jin’s (2013) analysis revealed that the most used internet platforms were operated by for-profit companies and relied on the targeted advertising capital business model. In addition, the divergent social affordances of those platforms may facilitate different modes and infrastructures of communication and thus have distinct implications for the public sphere.

The proliferation of diverse social media platforms has significantly influenced the development of civil society and the public sphere by creating “sustainable channels for public dialogue with the state and other opportunities to influence the policy in urgent areas” (Fedorenko & Sun, 2016, p. 2099). Specific examples from different countries with different political institutions and contexts have experienced success in social media campaigns, such as the Arab Springs, Egypt’s Tahrir Square Protests, Iceland’s Kitchenware Revolution, Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution, and online movements Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and Stop Asian Hate. These events have provided valuable insights into the creation of public spheres on different social media platforms, fostering critical discourse and facilitating political and social change.

Questions are raised regarding (a) how the various characteristics of social media platforms shape alternative structures of public spheres? (b) Whether and how social media platforms create alternative structures of public spheres by encouraging broader participation in various social and political contexts? Therefore, this special issue recognizes the contextual uniqueness of sociopolitical factors and integrates a comparative perspective to promote context-specific understanding regarding the impact of social media platforms on the public sphere. We invited scholars to explore the diversity of social media platforms and their transformative effect on the public sphere across various contexts.

Social media platforms in various contexts

Digital structure, including elements like network structure, functionality, algorithmic filtering, and datafication, significantly influences social media communication (Bossetta, 2018). The articles within this special issue underscore the continued dominance of Twitter and Facebook in many countries. For example, the study of Abu-Ayyash found that Palestinian politicians used Facebook to disseminate messages to domestic Arabic-speaking follower, while using X to address international audiences in English. The prevalence of platform dominance is evident.

The term “super app” characterizes platforms that offer a wide range of services and functionalities for various aspects of a user’s life. Nam’s article centers on Kakao, the super app in South Korea, and discusses how platform monopoly was legitimized and shaped by political, economic, and discursive forces. Baquero (2021) outlined the advantages of super apps, which include reduced costs of customer acquisition, data-sharing capabilities between mini-programs, a unique single sign-on feature, a wide array of services, a consistent and individual user experience, and memory storage on the user’s device. However, controversies and debates regarding issues such as users’ privacy and the power concentration of big social media companies continue to persist. Nam’s research, exemplified by the event of the Kakao blackout in 2022, illustrates the substantial impact a single social media platform can exert on individuals and society at large. Furthermore, Nam argues that platform monopolies do not serve to foster a democratic public sphere and democracy and thus necessitate dismantlement and reformation.

With the potential for reformation and transformation, some alternative social media platforms have emerged. The open-source social media platform Mastodon, established in 2016, gained significant traction in 2022, partly attributed to Elon Musk’s takeover of Twitter. In contrast to social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, which are controlled and operated by single entities, Mastodon adopts a decentralized approach with multiple independent instances (servers). These

servers can be hosted by individuals, organizations, or communities, each defining its own rules and policies. Also, Mastodon is open-source, allowing anyone to view, modify, and contribute to its source code. Platforms similar to Mastodon include Diaspora, Friendica, Hubzilla, and PixelFed. Rahko et al. suggest that exploring whether Mastodon and other emerging alternatives can challenge the existing digital infrastructure and the dominance of social media giants like Twitter and Facebook is a worthwhile pursuit. In addition, it is necessary to investigate whether the decentralized approach can foster democratic participation and foster “a true public sphere” where every citizen can engage in discussions about public affairs and formulate collective solutions for societal issues (Johannessen et al., 2016, p. 233).

The transformation of political communication

Social media are continuously used by both citizens and politicians and play a significant role in reshaping political communication, which aims to influence the public’s opinions, attitudes, and behaviors. According to Gainous et al. (2018), as social media becomes increasingly integrated into political communication, it can function as an equalizing force in political campaigns, diminishing the divide between campaign spending on social media and the resulting gains. Chun and Luna Reyes (2012) state that “social media use in government is considered a technological innovation and a transforming agent in generating citizen engagement from campaigns and grassroots activism to shared governance promoting democracy” (p. 442). Social media platforms provide politicians with the means to construct and disseminate narratives and hold the potential to enhance political participation by facilitating and encouraging political discussions (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Especially during events such as election campaigns, social media has been used to steer public opinions, engage constituents, and solicit community support. Examining the context of political polarization in the United States, Ding’s article explores how mayors use Twitter to communicate with constituents and share public opinion on policy

issues. This study reveals that U.S. mayors’ use of Twitter is influenced by factors such as the city’s population and income, highlighting the association between social media usage and socio-economic context.

In the Palestinian context, Abu-Ayyash investigates the dynamics of political communication and politicians’ social media message framing of the 2021 presidential decree on parliamentary and presidential elections. Fatah politicians, as part of the ruling party, supported the presidential decree and framed the elections as a democratic process and a means of achieving national unity. Also, the analysis of social media content identified a conflict-related frame that centered on the Israeli occupation and the national aspiration for independence. The study indicates that Palestinian politicians used social media to advocate for their positions and the cause of statehood. However, the full potential of social media for communicating with both social media followers and the international community was not fully realized. The currently ongoing conflict between Palestine and Israel, coupled with the indefinite postponement of the election since 2021, underscores the complexity and significance of this topic in Palestinian politics.

Publics, counterpublics, civil society, and democracy

The existing literature reveals that social media has served as a platform for marginalized and voiceless individuals to express their opinions, connect with others, and engage in political activities (Edingo, 2021). According to Halpern and Gibbs (2013), social media provides a deliberative space for political participation by integrating the various aspects of the population. The virtual public sphere, with its multifaceted nature, enables both the dominant public and counterpublics to use the multifaceted virtual public sphere to participate in and shape political dialogues. An illustrative example is the Twitter revolution, which, by facilitating communication and coordination, has proven to be a powerful tool for activism and social changes, particularly in totalitarian regimes. In Palestine, Abu-Ayyash’s research reveals how minority party members have utilized

social media to engage in political discourse. In addition, Rahko et al.'s comparative study investigates how the variety of choices and access to social media platforms affect and inform citizens to build digital counterpublics in times of crisis. This study compares the role of social media platforms in the distinct socio-political contexts of an advanced liberal democracy in the United States and an emerging liberal democracy in the Republic of Georgia.

In the nonprofit sector, many grassroots and community-based organizations are facing the challenges of limited capacity and resources, heightened scrutiny, and increased competition (Eimhjellen, 2014). Scholars have discussed the potential of information technology to address these challenges. Many nonprofit organizations are organized, express their ideas, and mobilize social resources through social media (Zhou & Han, 2019). Through integrating various stakeholders into the deliberate decision-making process, social media plays a role as the communication channel to create and maintain the public sphere. Scholars have explored eParticipation (Johannessen et al., 2016; Sæbø et al., 2011) and identified the function of information technology and social media to initiate dialogue and interaction between organizations and their constituents and therefore to foster openness, trustworthiness, and commitment (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Park & Reber, 2008; White & Raman, 1999). eParticipation is defined as "a set of technology-facilitated participatory processes, both deliberative and decision oriented where participation is understood as joining in some form of discussion, activity or decision making" (Johannessen et al., 2016, p. 213). Levine Daniel et al. examine nonprofit organizations' engagement in competitive philanthropy through social media and identify the specific types of social media messages that can effectively increase donations. Their research demonstrates how organizations can use social media to create two-way dialogues and motivate the active publics in a competitive environment.

Despite the various aspects that social media can foster a public sphere, the capacity of nonprofit organizations to fully use and take advantage of social media has been discussed. For example, in this special issue, Hoang investigates how nonprofit organizations work with communities during crises on social media. Although nonprofit organizations

played a pivotal role in the self-organized #TwitterFoodBank network, these organizations did not coordinate or collaborate to sustain the network because of the network's weak structure, a lack of emphasis on shared goals, and inadequate opportunities for deeper online interactions.

With the features of free and open access to everyone for information sharing, equal participation, and deliberate decision-making (Kruse et al., 2018; Loader & Mercea, 2011; Shirky, 2011), the proliferation of social media prompts a question regarding whether social media is able to revitalize Habermas' concept of the public sphere. Overall, the manuscripts of this special issue offer diverse viewpoints on digital communication's role in advancing democracy, encouraging citizen participation, and transforming public spheres. In countries such as Georgia and Palestine, social media serves as a means to engage international audiences and attract their attention. Kruse et al. (2018) suggested that the ongoing discussion on social media's potential to revitalize the public sphere remains largely theoretical and that the absence of prerequisites like civil and political discourses hinders its revitalization. However, specific examples from this special issue demonstrate the political influence of social media in altering human behaviors, fostering alliances, and promoting social and political changes. As such, the connection between social media and the public sphere, as well as its relationship with civil society, requires examination on a case-by-case basis, transcending standardized and quantitative metric analyses and message-level scrutiny.

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