Platformed Publics: Algorithms, Affordances, and the Recomposition of Authority

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Abstract

This introduction provides an overview of the fifteen papers accepted to the Communication, Digital Conversation, and Media Technologies minitrack of HICSS 2026. The minitrack acceptance rate this year was 40.5%. Together, the papers chart how platforms, publics, and producers co-create contemporary communication. Studies span automated visual framing, immersive and short-form news, tagging and disaffordances, recommendation pathways, and marketplace curation. In all, they trace how design organizes visibility, credibility, and community, producing new forms of gatekeeping while enabling prosocial discovery. Audience judgments hinge on heuristics, identity, and emotional dynamics—contagion, incongruity, and polarization—shaping engagement from Instagram to TikTok. Ethnographic and comparative cases reveal cultural heritage and national images being reauthored through platform logics, while creator-audience interactions vary with gendered address. Finally, meta-analytic evidence revises assumptions about media richness and experience. Taken together, these papers present opportunities for taking stock of contemporary communication and technology in a new light: diagnosing risks and guiding design and policy toward resilient, equitable participation and accountability.

Keywords: affordances, algorithms, communication, digital platforms, social media

1. Introduction

Digital media systems are increasingly understood as ecosystems where design choices, sociocultural contexts, and algorithmic mediation co-produce public life. The fifteen papers in this minitrack collectively map that terrain with unusual breadth: from news and political communication across platforms, to platform affordances and disaffordances, to emotion and inspiration dynamics, to gendered participation in live streaming, to the fast-emerging implications of large vision–language models (LVLMs). Read together, they clarify how people make sense of information—and of one another, amid infrastructures that are at once engineered, imagined, and improvised.

Notably, too, this is a strong set of papers: 15 out of 37 submissions were accepted after a rigorous review process, resulting in an acceptance rate of 40.5%.

2. Overview of This Year's Papers

In "Evaluating Large Vision-Language Models for Visual Framing Analysis in News Imagery: A Theory-Driven Benchmark," the authors evaluate multiple large vision-language models for automatically analyzing visual framing in news images. They compare model outputs to human-coded framings (conflict, peace, solidarity) using standard prompts and increasingly detailed chain-of-thought prompts, assessing performance with F1-scores and Cohen's kappa. Results show that chain-of-thought prompting, especially expert-level prompts, improves alignment with human annotations, particularly for complex cues like solidarity. Among the models tested, InternVL3-38B performs best. This work provides a scalable, theory-driven framework for applying vision-language models to visual content analysis in social science.

In "'Is This News?': How Audiences Recognize, Expect, and Evaluate Emerging News Genres in Short-Form Video Social Media," the authors examine how audiences perceive news content on short-form video platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels. Through in-depth interviews with viewers using adapted news videos, the study finds that while people have clear expectations for video form and function shaped by personalized algorithms, they rarely recognize "news" as a distinct genre on these platforms, treating it instead as part of a broader informational category. Personal preferences heavily influence whether a video is deemed an example of news. The findings inform newsroom strategies for producing short-form video content.

In "Machine Heuristic at Work: User Evaluations and Folk Theories of Weather News in 'Immersive Mixed Reality' Video," the authors examine audience perceptions of immersive mixed-reality (IMR) weather

URI: https://hdl.handle.net/10125/111710
978-0-9981331-9-5

news compared to traditional text-based reports. Using a mixed-methods approach, they study how credibility judgments and individuals' "machine heuristic" (tendency to trust algorithmic output) influence evaluations of these formats. They find that IMR videos make news feel more novel and personally relevant than text, and that a strong machine heuristic amplifies this effect. Participants with high machine heuristic view the technology's data-driven approach positively, whereas those with low machine heuristic develop folk theories emphasizing AI's role. The study discusses implications for using immersive technology in news reporting.

In "You can't really 'untag': The material addressability of X and the undermining of journalistic authority," the authors examine how tagging features on X (formerly Twitter) enable subtle yet persistent harassment of journalists. Because the platform does not allow individuals to remove themselves from others' mentions, journalists like BBC's Laura Kuenssberg become targets of repeated public questioning (for example, incessantly asking if she attended the "Partygate" gatherings), which undermines their authority. Analyzing networks of hashtags and @-mentions, the study shows how tagging practices assemble a community of critics and embed seemingly benign queries within a wider ecology of distrust, vitriol, and misogyny. The findings suggest that X's rudimentary tagging controls leave journalists vulnerable to coordinated critique and harassment.

In "Thanking the Algorithm: Discovering Prosocial Communities Through YouTube Music Recommendation Pathways," the author investigates how YouTube's music recommendation pathways can lead users to discover prosocial communities in comment sections. In an exploratory study, four simulated user personas each began with a different genre seed query and followed ten layers of algorithmic recommendations. The findings suggest that users with unpredictable or non-conformist listening patterns are more likely to encounter these supportive communities. Within these communities, commenters often display awareness of the recommendation algorithm and even express gratitude toward it. This work demonstrates how users and algorithms co-construct musical communities, offers methodological insights for studying algorithmic experiences, and reflects on the fleeting nature of prosocial groups on opaque platforms.

In "Inspiration Contagion Effects: Elevated Thoughts and Transcendent Emotions," the authors investigate how inspirational posts on Reddit's GetMotivated trigger similarly inspirational responses in comments. They differentiate contagion of ideas (thought contagion) from contagion of feelings (emotional contagion), focusing on self-transcendent emotions (e.g., admiration, gratitude) and motivation-related feelings (e.g., curiosity). Using topic modeling and mixed-effects analysis, the study finds strong evidence for both types of contagion. Comments are most likely to mirror an original post's theme when the post narrates overcoming struggles and finding motivation. Among emotions, gratitude shows the clearest direct contagion effect. While motivation-related emotions did not transfer directly, posts expressing curiosity often elicited admiration in replies. These findings clarify distinct mechanisms by which inspiration spreads in online communities.

In "When Image Emotion Outpaces Text: The Role of Emotional Intensity Incongruity in Driving Engagement on Instagram," the authors examine how differences in emotional intensity between an Instagram post's image and its caption affect user engagement. Analyzing a large sample of posts, they find that when an image conveys much stronger emotion than its text, the post attracts more comments. This suggests engagement rises not just with emotional intensity, but especially when the visual is more emotionally charged than the caption. However, if the image-text intensity gap grows too large, the engagement boost fades and even reverses, aligning with cognitive dissonance theory. The study highlights the importance of balancing emotional cues between visuals and text to sustain social media engagement.

In "Exploring the Association between Livestreamers' Self-identified Gender and Their Viewers' Linguistic Behavior," the authors study how a Twitch streamer's self-identified gender relates to the language used by their audience in the chat. Focusing on polite language versus profanity, they analyzed over 8,000 chat messages collected from eight streamers of diverse genders who streamed the same video game. They found that viewers of men streamers used more swear words on average, whereas viewers of women streamers used more polite words. Language patterns also differed between audiences of cisgender and non-binary streamers. These findings underscore the importance of accounting for streamers' self-identified gender in research on online communication.

In "The Emotional Rift: Evaluating Affective Polarization on TikTok during the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election," the authors examine how TikTok's comment culture reflects partisan emotional polarization during the 2024 U.S. presidential race. Using Social Identity Theory and a mixed-methods approach, they analyze 10,000 comments from the TikTok accounts of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump collected shortly before the election. The analysis reveals three categories of affectively polarized discourse on TikTok: (1) explicit affective polarization (overt hostile sentiment between groups), (2) positive in-group affirmation, and (3) inferred affective

polarization (indirect cues of division). These insights contribute to developing automated detection models and strategies to mitigate negative effects of affective polarization, with the goal of fostering more cohesive engagement on social media.

In "Reframing China in Digital Discourse: U.S. Representations across Platforms after the TikTok Ban," the author examines how China's image is framed in U.S. discourse across news media, tech blogs, and TikTok content after the TikTok ban. Using qualitative framing analysis, they compare coverage in elite newspapers, tech blogs, and TikTok user videos. The study identifies six main frames: newspapers stress state-centric threats; tech blogs present reflexive, platform-focused critiques; and TikTok users offer emotionally resonant, culturally connective, and often satirical perspectives that broaden China's image. The results suggest that constructing a national image is increasingly decentralized across platforms. The author argues that China's public diplomacy should adapt by engaging emotionally and incorporating diverse grassroots narratives.

In "Digitizing Intangible Cultural Heritage: An Ethnographic Exploration of Dabenqu's Transformation into Online Engagement in Dali, China," the authors examine how a traditional Bai folk singing practice, Dabenqu, is being transformed through digital media. Focusing on the Zhao family—custodians of this cultural heritage—the study traces Dabenqu's journey from local village performances to digital platforms like WeChat, Kuaishou, and Douyin via videos, recorded ceremonies, and live streams. The findings show that while online platforms create new opportunities to sustain and share Dabenqu with wider audiences, they also pose challenges for maintaining cultural integrity. The research offers insight into how digital technology can both preserve and reshape intangible cultural heritage.

In "Acceptability of Chatbot Support for Older Adolescents Involved in Cyberbullying," the authors explore whether adolescents would find a chatbot helpful for dealing with cyberbullying. They ran 12 focus groups with U.S. teens (ages 15–18) discussing a hypothetical support chatbot. Using a theoretical acceptability framework, they found that participants generally viewed the concept positively—expecting such a tool to aid both victims and perpetrators and make seeking help easier. However, teens also voiced ethical reservations, such as doubts about whether developers would prioritize their well-being over profit. Overall, adolescents deemed a cyberbullying support chatbot acceptable if it clearly prioritizes the users' well-being.

In "Gatekeepers in an Open Market? The Case of Contemporary NFT Marketplaces," the authors show that, despite the promise that NFTs would remove intermediaries, NFT marketplaces have themselves become new intermediaries. A variety of marketplace platforms have emerged, each with distinct features, user bases, and governance strategies (such as curation and gatekeeping) to steer creativity and interactions. By analyzing these strategies and creators' motivations, the study constructs a typology of four marketplace "ideal types": Avant-garde, Canonical, Mass Culture, and Coterie, each representing a different model of curation. The findings offer practical insights for artists and collectors in choosing among NFT marketplaces.

In "Hidden by Design: Disaffordances and User Communication on WeChat," the authors examine how WeChat's deliberate omission of certain features constrains user communication. Using data from 31 in-depth interviews (plus observations and surveys), they identify seven intentional design omissions ("disaffordances"). Examples include the lack of visible online status, of read receipts, of an option to reject group invites, of mutual contact deletion, of post-editing, of comment deletion, as well as hiding a text-only post feature. The study discusses why these limitations are designed and how users adapt or push back. It highlights power dynamics between platform design, cultural norms, and user agency, contributing to affordance theory and offering insights for social media design.

In "Channel Expansion Theory: A Comprehensive Meta-analysis, Literature Review, and Examination of Boundary Conditions," the authors revisit Channel Expansion Theory (CET), which posits that users' experience with a communication medium can increase its perceived richness, even if the medium is initially "lean." They provide a comprehensive literature review and meta-analysis of 31 studies testing CET. The analysis clarifies how different forms of user experience enhance perceived media richness and impact attitudes and usage. It also identifies key moderators—such as media synchronicity, communication context, and cultural power distance—that help explain prior inconsistent findings. Overall, the study advances understanding of CET, reconciles earlier empirical discrepancies, and offers practical implications for media selection, platform design, and future research.

3. Concluding Remarks

In sum, the fifteen papers assembled here push the field forward on at least three fronts. Conceptually, they sharpen the notion that platform design, including what is withheld, distributes power and shapes publicness. Empirically, they provide granular evidence across venues, regions, and modalities. Methodologically, they prototype ways of "studying through" systems:

repurposing platform traces, modeling multimodal emotion, walking the recommendation graph as a user would, and probing the imaginative frames of AI. This minitrack invites scholars and practitioners to treat the informational environment as an intertwined system of features, feelings, and frames—and to build interventions that are attuned to those entanglements.

4. AI Disclosure

The authors used ChatGPT-5 (Thinking and Deep Research modes) to assist in summarizing the papers for this minitrack. The final version of this introductory essay was reviewed and approved by the authors.