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Rethinking affective polarization and sharing of emotions in digital platform ecosystems. Theories and research practices

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this introduction is to set a useful frame for reading this thematic section. The key concepts of digital platforms, affective polarization, sharing of emotions are explored. The articles contained in this thematic section, which combine different research disciplines and techniques, provide to identify the different fields of communication within which the mediatization of emotions, the generation of affective cultures can prove to be a bearer of social, political cultural; and to outline methods and techniques for the analysis of emotions within digital platforms.

The term 'platform' is currently a dominant concept, which has entered the journalistic and user vulgate (Gillespie, 2010) as much as in the scientific use of digital media research. With 'platform' we define the mutation of the global market created by tech companies, which deal with giving shape to participation and sociality through social media (such as Twitter, Facebook, etc.) or promote the disintermediation of sectoral markets (such as Amazon, Uber, etc.).

Usually, 'platform' refers to some type of construction that allows multiplying the possibilities for carrying out a human activity: speaking to a crowd, carrying out work at a different height than normal, leaving for another destination, receiving shipments, or making exchanges. Technological evolution has expanded the concept of platform by expanding it to the digital world, thus including in its semantics the construction, management and control of communication networks by companies that, we could even say, 'parasitize' these networks to obtain benefits (Peirano, 2019). It is also essential to underline that digital platforms do not exist in a vacuum, indeed, without infrastructure and without people they would not exist. Internet requires physical infrastructures – built in cement, metal, glass fibers and fiber-optic cables – with high energy consumption and data center are located in Europe, Africa or US. Engineers, data scientists and other staff inhabit the physical and digital spaces of the networks; and people – as users – are the building blocks of digital platforms: it is human interaction that provides the differential factor in digital platforms, with their game of choices and decisions. The

social networks transplanted to the digital world find a new place to develop (Dans, 2010).

Today we need to consider platforms as the new ‘custodians of the Internet’ (Gillespie, 2018), since they are social subjects that have become hegemony in the Internet space, and they are both technological structures and environments that host economic and social relations, shaping a new information, communication, and consumption ecosystem. Thus, platforms mediate between those who produce content and services and those who want to consume them, intertwining different operational levels. Following the approach social shaping of technology (SST) we can interface three distinct levels of operations:

- (1) technological tools, employed by users (including journalists, advertisers, politicians, etc. as well as news organizations, brands, parties, etc.) to fulfill specific goals;
- (2) social platforms or spaces where ‘networked publics’ participate in processes of both public and private communication and information exchange;
- (3) commercial organizations that make money from advertising and the commodification of users data (Paulussen et al., 2017, p. 429).

This transformation places us in front of a process of ‘platformization’ (Helmond, 2015) that has saturated every area of the web and in which institutional and non-institutional actors move, carrying out a new intermediation function (Boccia Artieri & Marinelli, 2018); it is this new intermediation that structures the information and commercial flow through the use of users’ behavioral data, subjecting them to the logic of algorithms.

What we are witnessing is, on the one hand, the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructure and economic model of the web and, on the other, the convergence with social media, as platforms, in building an increasingly integrated ecosystem. To enable this process, the tech companies have operated on dynamics relating to decentralization in data production and re-centralization of data collection, aiming at:

- (a) making the external data ‘platform ready’, i.e. suitable for operation in the platform model – for example, with the use of the Facebook ‘Like’ button for content on the web;
- (b) making internal data useful for third-party development – for example, with the increasingly regulated use of API (Application Programming Interface), which allow you to access a portion of the platform data for your own purposes.

Therefore, the effect of platformization takes on *de facto* a political nature, since in making external data suitable for the platform, it gains greater control over how the contents appear when they are shared. The power and politics of platforms also extend beyond them, favoring certain protocol logics that adapt external contents to their own internal language (and priorities). Ultimately, we are faced with what Anne Helmond (2015) defines as the ‘double logic of platformization’:

This double logic is operationalized through platform-native objects such as APIs, social plugins, and the Open Graph, which connect the infrastructural model of the platform to

its economic aims. These elements serve as prime devices for social media platforms to expand into the web and to create data channels—data pours—for collecting and formatting external web data to fit the underlying logic of the platform. (Helmond, 2015, p. 8)

In practice, the platforms provide a technological framework on which others are led to operate and the data produced by others becomes readable by the platforms that can use them in a useful way for their own economic model. It is in this context that platform studies have taken a more critical view in recent years, as in the book *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World* (2018), in which the authors José van Dijck, Thomas Poell and Martijn de Waal claim that:

Platforms, in our view, do not *cause* a revolution; instead, they are gradually infiltrating in, and, converging with, the (offline, legacy) institutions and practices through which democratic societies are organized. That is why we prefer the term “platform society” – a term that emphasizes the inextricable relation between online platforms and societal structures. Platforms do not reflect the social: they *produce* the social structures we live in it. (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 24)

They therefore intervene on the way of defining social bonds through forms of connection that mix social norms and sociotechnical norms typical of online environments (van Dijck, 2013), creating a symbolic field and digital cultural practices that delimit specific ways of relating – often distinct from those offline – and which preside over new processes of signification of being together (Boccia Artieri & Farci, 2020).

It is within this socio-technical environment that are to be read the participatory practices of connected audiences and the development of social network sites, which have introduced, in the last ten years, additional elements of complexity to the transformation process underway. Connective media (van Dijck, 2013) have become an almost uninterrupted presence in daily routines: they absorb a significant part of identity processes and social relationships; they give life to a common heritage of cultural and symbolic practices, rules, behavioral practices that contribute to settling ‘an accepted version of reality’ and intersubjectively shared within the same communicative environment (Boccia Artieri et al., 2017).

The online platforms now preside over the socio-technical system within which all the actors move themselves, carrying out an absolutely new intermediation function, which structures the information flow through logic – unnoticed at an experiential level and not transparent to all stakeholders – of the visualization algorithms on user timelines (Bucher, 2017; Gillespie, 2014).

Networked publics (boyd, 2010) usually operate in a mixture between public and private, in which the exchange of information (commenting, sharing, production of contents such as memes, etc.) finds space within a flow of uninterrupted and non-segmentable communication. We can believe that, in some cases, the exchange of information occurs almost unnoticed: by contagion or by the desire to emulate what happens in other spheres of communication. However, there is no doubt that socially and politically significant effects are produced in the overall information ecosystem, because social media platforms tend to be articulated as networked public spheres, such as ‘spaces for audiences to share, discuss and contribute to the news’ (Hermida et al., 2012, p. 817). At the heart of the platforms lies a structural contradiction: these are environments in which, on the one hand, we experience the maximum visibility of social behaviors and

communication processes of users, companies, and institutions, and on the other, we have to deal with the invisibility of dynamics of operation regulated by the algorithms that govern them and with the lack of transparency of the company policies. In practice, what is visible depends on a non-transparent technological structure that produces consequences at a relational and socio-cultural level (Boccia Artieri & Marinelli, 2019).

Within these operating mechanisms of the platforms there are two objects of interest: the sharing of emotions and the creation of affective polarization. Phenomena that emerge within the Big Five – or FAMGA: Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet (i.e. Google) and Amazon – which function as an online gatekeeper, managing, processing, channeling and archiving the flow of data circulating on the network; they are the most obvious examples of the typology of computational-platforms as proprietary infrastructure (van Dijck et al., 2018). They facilitate the translation of social behavior into data. Let's think about how Facebook has modulated the reactions to posts over time by introducing the variables 'Love', 'Haha', 'Wow', 'Sad', 'Angry' and 'Hug' next to the 'Like' in order to better measure emotions of users and be able to profile them. Furthermore, they make relationships easier by translating them into codified behaviors, such as 'follow', 'share', 'tag', 'retweet' and so on. In practice, the platforms tend not only to the collection but to a pre-structuring of the data, in order to allow a standardization that is useful for the processing and automation of the signals provided by the user.

In this mixture of platform-structure and participation a transmutation of affective life takes place – marking the passage from the private to the public dimension, with a consequent tendency towards the standardization of offers and emotional responses – which leads to the formation of precise rules of feeling, and these have assumed an increasingly dominant role within social media. This is the construction and management of social relations that pass through the platforms, and which is not defined by a simple transfer of pre-existing dynamics into the technological spaces, but is shaped by the architectures and affordances of the platforms themselves, which circumscribe the possibilities and forms of relationship between people. It generates what Jodi Dean (2010) defines as an 'injunction to enjoy', where social media provides 'opportunities for new ways for me to imagine myself, a variety of lifestyles that I can try and try on' (Dean, 2010, p. 78), creating a process within which 'participation becomes indistinguishable from personalization, the continued cultivation of one's person. Leave your mark' (Dean, 2010, p. 82). This mechanism would not work, however, if it were not fueled by an affective drive, that is, if the mechanisms of visibility and participation in the communication process, promoted by algorithmic logic, were not driven by people's desire to be able to obtain a small gratification such as a like, a sharing. Digital media offer a way of engaging with social reality that has the characteristic of being of an affective type; that is, they encourage forms of shared emotional alignment and amplification that can mark the polarity of a specific collective group, even simply through a supportive comment, a share or a like. In these cases, should we discuss new emotions, cultural practices (McCarthy, 1994), affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), digital affected culture (Giaxoglou & Döveling, 2018), or/and affective polarization?

Emotions are an emerging and dynamic process based on a purely subjective and individual evaluation of significant events (Scherer, 2009); within Twitter, for example, they can emerge as conversational practices, which increase their presence in conjunction with controversial events (Popescu & Pennacchiotti, 2010). To underline the role that

the affective and emotional dimension plays in the participatory processes of digitally connected audiences, Zizi Papacharissi introduces the term 'affective publics' (2015), which highlights how affective attunement can be both emotional and rational but, in any case, imposes a closeness to events and to those who experience them, regardless of whether they are experiences that we would feel close in another way. Through practices of sharing and commenting on information, production of visual and audiovisual content, such as memes and videos, the use of reactions to what is being read, etc. users tune into a theme, feel akin to it and place it within a particular structure of feelings. Our affective participation is therefore exercised under different forms, such as sharing content, joining the hashtags of celebration, commemoration or protest, the use of symbolic images of particular situations such as profile photos, the posting of flaming content against someone or something, contributing to the production of a public tale.

Inside social media, the polarization is represented by publics that express themselves by attacking, insulting, upsetting, or even just trolling their opponents. In this sense, the question is not if the platforms determine affective polarization through their own algorithmic logics, but if specific 'modes of feeling' *through* platforms become the social glue for the formation of emotionally cohesive groups. It is emotions that produce certain forms of shared alignments, that hold together or bind a collectivity. According to Sara Ahmed (2004), emotions are not internal psychological states, for they do not simply dwell inside the subject or object. The emotions concern something that people do; that is, they are the concrete result of relational scenarios, in which each participant adds his or her contribution to a collective emotional moment. The emotions function, therefore, as a real affective social capital which, by circulating, ends up materializing a distinction between us and them, and in which they are constituted as the cause of our feelings. In other words, emotions are ontoformative: they allow us to circumscribe the boundaries of an affective community, just as they allow us to define the subjects and objects that belong to it (Boccia Artieri & Farci, 2020). If the affective polarization does not close individuals within specific echo chambers, it still creates a form of emotional involvement and intimacy between the subjects and an imagined other. This imagined other not only becomes the peculiar object of emotional investments but activates that recruitment movement that serves to produce the emotional subject itself. In other words, affective polarization functions as a real managerial-emotional work tool, which allows individuals to keep in line with their anxieties and fears or guarantees them a form of social comfort and relief. In a sense, polarization offers individuals a set of implicit rules about 'what' and 'how' one should 'feel' and how one should express emotions in relation to certain issues (Kanai, 2019). It is starting from these considerations, which see the need to discuss the affective dimension of online platforms, that this special issue explores the emotional dimension and affective polarization in the society of the platform. To do this we will introduce our discussion through the conceptualizations of affection/emotion within social media, as they are analyzed in the articles of this issue. The analysis takes root along three-dimensionality: the context of public communication, political communication, private communication in digital open spaces.

The first dimension is explored by Javier Serrano-Puche, who in his article analyzes the 'information disorder', that is, a constellation of media genres that includes disinformation, misinformation, fake news, propaganda, and hyper partisan news. Serrano-Puche shows how the rise in this type of information pollution is related to a crisis of

public communication where the public sphere in many countries has become divided and challenged by social and political tensions. On the other hand, the digital space emerges as a socio-technological environment configured around platforms that condition emotional expression through their affordances, favoring the appearance of affective publics.

The strategies that involve an intense use of emotions through digital media are further explored by Roberto Barbeito and Ángel Iglesias, who place them within the communicative dynamics of two Spanish populist parties: Podemos and Vox. Although they are two parties of different political orientation: the first Podemos of Eurocommunist tradition of the social democratic left; the second Vox, far right, both used two fundamental emotions for their strategies of political mobilization: fear and anger, taking advantage of a social context characterized by strong internal tensions.

The third dimension labeled as the communication of private emotions and feelings in shared public spaces is explored along three different lines with an empirical approach based on the analysis of reactions, comments, and tweets.

Ramona – Diana Leon proceeds with an analysis of the ‘how’ of the emotional dimension, focusing on describing how emotions are shared on private and public digital affect cultures. In other words, her aim is to: identify the relationships established among members; analyze the emotional content of the posts and comments; determine the type of emotions that are shared within the digital affect cultures; and analyze how the emotional flows cross the digital affect cultures. Since her focus is on answering to ‘how’ question, she employs a case study strategy. Thus, she is selected two case study units from private and public environments, namely: TripAdvisor and the Faculty of Management (SNSPA Bucharest). Further, the Facebook page of both units is analyzed, and data are collected using Netvizz.App.

In the analysis of the sharing of emotions on platforms and specifically on Twitter, is focused the work of Giovanni Boccia Artieri, Francesca Greco e Gevisa La Rocca. Their study takes into consideration the coronavirus hashtag and how within it the fears and hopes of Italians are collected when it appears – for the first time – the Sars-CoV-2 virus. With the aim of reconstructing the meanings of the hashtag and the content, in terms of sentiment and opinions, of the reactions of the Italians, they collected in a large size *corpus*, the hundred thousand Italian tweets containing the #coronavirus produced during the media hype period from the Twitter repository (24–28 February 2020). Media hype period was discovered by digging in the online articles of ‘la Repubblica’, based on the presence of the words: coronavirus and Italy. The media hype is 26 February. Their *corpus* underwent Emotional Text Mining (ETM), that is an unsupervised methodology, which allows social profiling based on communication.

In the latest study of this themed section, a topic is addressed that goes into the depths of the link between the creation of emotions in digital ecosystems and catastrophic events. This study is developed by Anu A. Harjua and Jukka Huhtamäki who focus on the first ever act of terrorist violence in New Zealand, that was live streamed on social media, making many social media users unwitting witnesses to the massacre on their devices. The Christchurch mosque attacks have become the manifestation of digital and emotional vulnerability embedded in the digital media infrastructure. The last words of the first victim soon transmorphed into #helloworld that, as a digital artefact, participated in shaping the emotional landscape. Academics to develop their analysis

combine real-time digital media ethnography on Twitter with data science and computational tools, their multi-method study has finalized two aims: first and foremost, to develop and apply new methodology for the study of unexpected, mediated events as they unfold in real time; second, to explore post-death digital artefacts through the concept of digital afterlife that we approach through two complementary perspectives, data afterlife (the technological) and data as afterlife (the emotional).

This themed section, considered in the set of articles it contains, achieves two objectives: to identify the different fields of communication within which the mediatization of emotions, the generation of affective cultures can prove to be a bearer of social, political cultural; and to outline methods and techniques for the analysis of emotions within digital platforms.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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