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SPECIALTY SECTION
This article was submitted to
Politics of Technology,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Political Science

RECEIVED 01 November 2022
ACCEPTED 07 November 2022
PUBLISHED 21 November 2022

CITATION
Radu R (2022) Editorial: The politics of
digital media: From COVID-19
disinformation to online extremism.
Front. Polit. Sci. 4:1086599.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2022.1086599

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Editorial: The politics of digital media: From COVID-19 disinformation to online extremism

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KEYWORDS

disinformation, information technology, platform governance, artificial intelligence, health code, algorithmic governance, digital politics

Editorial on the Research Topic The politics of digital media

We can no longer conceive of our world without digital media. Increasing numbers of citizens worldwide get their news from digital sources, conduct their work online, participate in political and social life using virtual tools. Accelerating this transition, the COVID-19 pandemic made the use of digital platforms indispensable for billions of people, moving more educational, governmental and health services online. The pandemic has been accompanied by an infodemic [World Health Organization (WHO), 2020] or a digital outbreak of false information, undermining trust in science and verified sources at a time of high uncertainty (Radu, 2020). The pervasiveness of information specifically created to deceive and misguide large groups of citizens (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017) led to unprecedentedly low levels of public trust. Health-related disinformation has permeated and changed the digital ecosystem, putting additional strains on the protection of fundamental rights.

The extent of online harm becomes even more visible at times of ideological polarization and far-reaching propaganda. From the manipulation of electoral processes to amplification of hate speech, the global reverberations of online harms abound, continuously testing digital resilience and democratic values (Terzis et al., 2020). Increasingly, digital tools are used to monitor, surveil and repress (Eubanks, 2018; Zuboff, 2019), blurring the lines between the public and the private control of technology and data.

We are now at a crossroads in governing the digital world, as the politics of digital media become ever more contested. The 1990s laissez-faire approach to digital markets is giving way to a stronger public intervention in the governance of digital platforms (Radu, 2019; De Gregorio and Radu, 2022). But the quickly changing terrain of digital media is troubled by geopolitical tensions, power imbalances, and the growing use of artificial intelligence tools to maximize engagement, micro-target advertising, moderate content, and surveil populations.

With insights from the COVID-19 global pandemic and the first months of war in Ukraine, the influence of digital media starts to be better understood. This Research Topic (co-edited with Prof Leslie Paul Thiele) brings together – in a multidisciplinary

fashion – key contributions to the current debates on the ways in which digital media reshapes our societies. It presents empirical evidence gathered from experts, stakeholders and users of digital platforms using qualitative and computational methods and covering diverse geographies, from Europe to China.

Christodoulou and Jordanou discuss the specific challenges faced by policy-makers dealing with digital media in the era of big data and artificial intelligence. Drawing on focus group discussions in the European Union, they conclude that making emerging technologies more ethical and more democratic requires engagement with heterogeneous moral perspectives, overcoming the “checklist” approach, critical engagement with engineers and designers of tools, user education, as well as regulation. As they point out, the health crisis adds another layer of complexity, as does the rise of populism across Europe.

Two contributions focus on China. Cong discusses pandemic control tools and zooms in on the Health Code in China, to understand its development, deployment, and normalization during the first phase of the pandemic. She argues that this technology rules “the population, rather than the virus as such”, revealing complex struggles in data-driven governance. On the one hand, the heavy reliance on Alibaba and Tencent allowed these companies to become further entrenched in people’s lives. On the other hand, the patchwork of local initiatives meant the Health Code was not a nationally uniform system in China, demonstrating “variegated and multi-layered” state power.

Using mixed methods, Wang and Xu analyse the Chinese landscape of COVID-19 mis- and dis-information and the algorithmic solutions proposed to fight the infodemic. They examine three dominant forms of algorithms (collaborative filtering recommendation, content-based recommendation, and knowledge-based recommendation) to understand the effect they might have on the propagation of information within and across communities of users. They discuss the role of influential platforms and of China’s Illegal and Harmful Information Reporting Center in information prevention and control and look at audience perception.

The users are the focus of the contribution authored by Suter et al. on pandemic-induced misinformation on YouTube. The authors analyse 3.5 M English language comments posted on four YouTube channels (WHO, CNN, Fox News and The Epoch Times) in relation to videos about COVID-19. They find that

up to 25% of comments and up to 19% of the replies contain misinformation, concluding that “fake comments receive more attention and attract more fake replies than factual comments”.

Last but not least, Leahy et al. examine how Russian information sources feed into online extremist communities, against the background of the war in Ukraine. Their study across multiple platforms reveals that the global online ecology of hate remains “a largely organic system with many authentic actors” on the regulated platforms. Where the Russian propaganda appears to make a real difference is on platforms that practice free speech absolutism. The authors suggest monitoring the cross-platform dynamics of coordinated inauthentic behavior for susceptibility to foreign influence, in addition to systemic approaches to tackling real-world hate speech root causes.

The articles included in this collection demonstrate that the impact of information technology on communities and communication processes around the world are varied and quickly changing. The evidence provided here is key to understanding how the politics of digital media play out at the local, national and international levels.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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