

# *Mediating the Social: The Excesses of Racial Representation within (Trans)formative Digital Space*

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## **Abstract**

In this essay, I explore what Gray (2015) calls “the excesses of representation” that reproduce race and gender across proliferating digital platforms. I traverse the digital in tracking and tracing viral inequality, data surveillance, and moderation. Does the term “social media,” as a redundant term, accurately describe the processes of algorithmic amplification by which representational excesses get diffused and made legible? That is to say, do “social media” constitute formative spaces that produce social affect, or do they constitute transparent spaces that mediate affect? This entails addressing how digital socialization of amplified racial and gendered performances occupies a different ethical ground than the ostensibly neutral ethics that mediatization might claim. The claim of media neutrality therefore makes room for the “excessive” reproduction of “objective” racial and gendered caste categories that allow for possible objections to taking responsibility for the global restructuring of social affect. This article addresses these questions, with a particular focus on how and why large social media companies claim the social as platforms not as publishers while denying their de facto identities as Fifth Estate media institutions subsuming and eclipsing Fourth Estate Power.

I situate engagement with Herman Gray and Sarah T. Roberts’s texts to interrogate ideas of transparency, moderation, and digital subjectivity, and their much-deserved denouements, to examine whether the mediated spaces of social media constitute transparent, objective sites for communicating social affect, or in fact actively produce reproduce social affect. Ultimately, I argue that the excesses of representation show the latter to be true: social media are not transparent spaces, but actively reproduce social affect. Despite premature declarations heralding their respective epochal demises, history, race, and truth remain contested sites of durable significance.

## **Keywords:**

Media, social media, digital culture

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## **Social Media as Formative Space**

This article attempts to answer the question of whether social media constitute formative spaces that then produce social affect, or if they constitute transparent spaces that then mediate effect. I argue that social media produces social affect as opposed to offering a transparent platform. Earlier in internet history, as previously indicated, social media was once a digital space for connection, exploration, and even online performance. Yet in the past decade, it has increasingly become a space requiring moderation and layers of technology that both filter and mediate. Transparent space is not something available unless you create it for yourself or within the confines of a specific community and outside of capitalist structures. However, these transparent spaces are not readily available: consider how the divide between

offline and online becomes porous in the sense that the majority of what we experience in our daily lives somehow becomes enmeshed with our digital lives. From geolocation tools that mark our destinations to the spectrum of platforms that require you to check-in for some incentive-based purpose, the re-tooling of applications enters the domain of how a body becomes a subject.

For social media to be a transparent space, the behaviour of user generated content (UGC) needs to be predicated on the individual and collective will of users to acknowledge their intrinsic responsibility to what social media might begin to offer, not only as a formative space, but as a transformative one. The production of social affect is based on the idea of democratized space and free speech. Yet what is at stake is a shared understanding of the consequences of free speech that cause overt harm through the dissemination of media that is xenophobic, racist, ableist, and misogynistic, thus perpetuating the cycle of disinformation. Social media has enabled insidious self-deputization to occur if not altogether embedded in its contemporary use. Returning to traditional journalism for a moment, consider the issue of objectivity in relation to transparency. While the goal of journalistic practices relies on the concept of objectivity, social media becomes a container for subjectivity. Although seemingly transparent with millions of users contributing to what feels like a bottomless pool of UGC.

Individual subjective dissemination of thought and cultural observations leads to a formative space that Gray (2013, p. 781) describes as a “crucial site where different sectors of disenfranchised populations and communities continue to seek (and in some cases achieved) recognition and greater visibility as a measure of cultural justice and social equality.” Social affect, then, is created by these different sectors that serve as a constitutive element of how people act and position themselves offline. A double or even triple seeing starts to happen that informs the ways in which users start to subject themselves and others towards a path of recognition (Gray, 2013).

This multi-faceted seeing, in which users are engaged when actively using social media, is tied to several techniques of regulating specific users on large scale platforms. Shadow banning, for instance, has been defined as a way of prohibiting one's profile and content from being seen publicly thereby allowing a user deemed as troublesome to sit in a digital space of disquiet in the hopes that this will squelch disruptive or offensive behaviour (Ortutay, 2018). This form of user regulation on platforms such as Twitter or Instagram raises the question of whether transparency has the potential to exist where people with dissenting views can possibly learn and form ways to be in productive, generative conflict. Wherein transparency is possible, how does it positively alter social affect towards a civil digital society and culture? While I do not examine this topic here, it's worth noting Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity and the right to be obscured or unseen. What does that mean for certain communities to have the agency to exercise this right versus Othered communities forced into obscurity? Formative space happens when content supplements knowledge and research and users are prompted to engage in co-creating and co-authoring knowledge for a great good and purpose. What ceases to have an online presence is equally, if not just as telling as what is being popularised and easily perceptible.

Section 230 of the United States Communications Decency Act of 1996 overtly states a distinction between fourth and fifth estate media related to the U.S. first amendment of free speech. This section allows for platforms, primarily social media companies to create their own standards of monitoring and surveying of UGC (Roberts, 2020, p. 61). Yet with very little to no protections mandated at the federal level, the section has become contentious amongst scholars and legal experts wanting to qualify social media platforms akin to media outlets. I gesture to Roberts' research on this legislation as related to her extrapolation of artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies that are oftentimes perceived as crafting our online experiences. Content moderation by humans as opposed to filtering algorithms feeds into how media is consumed and thus reshared and propagated. Regarding the ways bodies are mediated and disseminated, especially in relationship to police brutality and xenophobia inflicted upon QTBIPOC and disabled people, Gray (2013) explains how social media produces what he has called the “excesses of representation.” He states:

In the United States the media are the primary site for the proliferation of more difference, not less, more visibility, grievance, and resentment: they produce and circulate difference, organizing, narrating, and assigning value to bodies, threats, politicians, weather, performances, and so on, in the process. The capacity of American broadcast, cable, and digital media to reach precise demographic targets based on marketable “differences” and to tailor content based on those differences articulates well to cultural discourses of market choice, public policies of privatization, and post racial social practices of diversity and multiculturalism (p. 783).

Through a global lens, current surveillance technologies such as facial, voice, and predictive technologies interface with the visual and auditory constructs that have been normalised in popular culture and mainstream media, which continue to hinder the capacity of social media to be a space that can transcend beyond formative and become transformative. Whether there can be a merging of fourth and fifth estate media thus becomes an urgent question. How might we collectively encourage and promote platforms (either print and/or digital) that enable communities to take on more holistic approaches to using media, constructing spaces that can support nuanced views and observations and thereby begin to challenge deep-seated, damaging stereotypes?

### **Social Media as Redundant Term**

‘Social media’ is a redundant term, as a name and as a function within the contemporary media landscape. Media, of any kind, are social, by nature in that they are an ecosystem of people that ensures their existence and propagation. This social ecosystem includes constitutive parts that create media that are both consumed and recycled through other platforms. Although media has not always had the word social precede it, social media was once a digital space of anonymity and performance (McNeil, 2020). The diversity of online platforms of the 1990s such as LatinoLink, CyberPowWow, Cafe Los Negros (McNeil, 2020), and more were digital spaces for communities to convene. They were devoid of advertisements and primarily based on textual exchange. Inevitably, the process of algorithmic amplification through the collection of user data has produced the representational excesses we see in contemporary social media. If the online bulletin boards of the past and other earlier permutations of social media created a venue for performance and avatar creation, the inevitable commodification and capitalisation of these identities and online behaviours would quickly turn users into consumers and producers. The Internet could not possibly be free and accessible within capitalism. We see the nature of the marketplace interspersed between user posts on widely used platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Each has become a container for an endless barrage of advertisements presented to users based on their activity, likes, and screen time.

The use of social media platforms has enabled the development of sophisticated algorithms and analytics to create a user experience that ensures the end user continues to scroll, react, and consume an endless bank of images and video content. To a certain extent, social media is a facade for capitalism to sell content and entertain. Thus, social media has become somewhat of a misnomer in terms of convincing users of its function to stay connected with loved ones and friends. The symbiotic nature of hashtags and instantaneous communication across fibre optic cables in a matter of seconds have transformed and siloed the way media function within a specific municipality or jurisdiction. As such, recognition has now become a contentious binary of both fame and infamy within the realm of social media production.

The desire for recognition comes at a cost. Sociologist Herman Gray writes about the quandary of “cultural politics of representation” when he states the “the digital divide is no longer a matter of being seen and having a presence for marginal communities but involves the nature of participation, the separation between producers and consumers of content, and the use of these technological capacities

for the intergenerational transfer of cultural and social capital” (2013, p. 772). Yet this participation in turn participates in a system of media surveillance and so participation is oftentimes dispersed without context or attribution. Gray’s prescient views have taken shape and have come to fruition especially within the past year with the murders of Black Americans such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Philando Castile, Nina Pop, Tony McDade, and countless others. The narratives of Queer, Trans, Black, Brown, Indigenous, People of Colour (QTBIPOC), Asian American, Pacific Islanders, and disabled people become subjects of hypervisibility, and are thus central to the power dynamics that simultaneously threaten the livelihood and safety of these communities. Social media becomes a fertile ground for both representation and mis/disinformation. The internet has become a place where epistemologies of the body, selfhood, and self-determination unknowingly become a part of a seemingly limitless digital archive saved in perpetuity. Gray expounds on the cost at which this type of visibility becomes both diffused and legible through the shifting of racial difference to multiculturalism to colour blindness (Gray, 2013). Yet the hypervisibility of Black Americans became an overt form of racial capitalism the summer of 2020. Across the U.S., there was a significant uptick in #BlackLivesMatter messaging among large conglomerate, retail corporations amidst an already spiralling economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Among all these events, the 2020 U.S. presidential election demonstrated social media’s irreversible slippage into fourth estate media, particularly apparent with the banning of former President Donald J. Trump from Twitter and Facebook.

Scholar Sarah T. Roberts (2021) articulates, with precision, the contentious nature of social media platforms such as Facebook not overtly identifying as media outlets or fourth estate media when they so overtly have played an integral role in the dissemination of journalistic content in addition to or meshed within UGC. Roberts extrapolates the relationship between UGC and perceived artificial intelligence that has become a popular term amongst tech especially social media companies. UGC can no longer exist without intervention in contemporary social media. The market demands clickable content along with the ability to endlessly scroll to like and procure consumable content. Thus, an endless stream of advertisements, products, and endorsements by social media influencers have turned most digital platforms into a marketplace. Racial, gender, and class differences become content generating, and commodifiable, and subjected to a company’s algorithms. In 2008, researchers at the University of Texas at Austin, Terry Daugherty, Matthew S. Eastin, and Laura Bright (Daugherty et al., 2008) examined the relationship between the creation and distribution of UGC, capturing the activity of 325 subjects via an 82-item questionnaire. This study was conducted 13 years ago, and the demographics of its participants, socio-economic and otherwise, were somewhat insular: for example, an overwhelmingly large number of respondents (82.5%) identified as Caucasian (Daugherty et al., 2008). This skews the resultant data, indicating results not representative of the vast population and people producing and participating in digital culture.

Still, this research is usefully indicative of the attitudes, media consumption, and habits of the respondents as members of this demographic, as well as how content is mediated and how it is translated (i.e., inclination to “like” and/or interact with content through commenting and/or sharing, etc.). In 2021, UGC produces something beyond a mere social network. It becomes part of a larger corpus of data informing the algorithms for specific brands, trends, and news. The propagation of content and data can therefore be fruitfully understood using Gray’s idea of the “cultural politics of representation,” whereby social media ceases to be a place to share and exchange but has become a mechanism of neoliberal power and control.

### **Digital Socialization**

Digital socialization is best categorized through the concept of homophily: the tendency for people to be drawn into content, concepts, and ideas that carry a specific resonance. Homophily thereby constitutes a particular network of people within a designated framework. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton

coined the term in 1954 in their research on racial attitudes in a mixed-race housing project, Addison Terrace located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Kurgan et al., 2019). Essentially, Lazarsfeld and Merton wanted to study the core shared values and beliefs amongst residents to see how friendships were formed (Kurgan et al., 2019). This concept is useful as a starting point for understanding digital socialisation due to the correspondence between this and the history and cultural context of how physical communities were developed in the U.S. Although the report and findings by Lazarsfeld and Merton were never published, the concept has been referenced and cited as a method for understanding both physical and digital socialisation (Kurgan et al., 2019).

Homophily, as a concept, lends itself to social media effectively in that networks, both on and offline, inform social relation and formation. The most significant difference is the rhythm and duration of how this happens online as opposed to physical space and embodied social interaction. Lazarsfeld and Merton conducted a survey of 51% Black residents and 49% white residents, where 88% of the Black population and 34% of the white population identified as liberal (Kurgan et al., 2019). Liberals befriended other liberals and illiberals befriended other illiberals. However, beyond this basic tendency, their study reveals something about how networks are formed. Kurgan et al. (2019) explored the “triadic closure,” a concept within network science that illustrates homophily and social group formation based on “harmony and mutual connection”, in that “if person A is linked to both person B and person C, then person B and person C are also likely to be linked.” Now, the reason why this concept, from its beginnings in urban space, matters deeply is the fact that it shows how platforms may never reach a space of neutrality because they were never built to be a free and (trans)formative space for people who do not already share some connection. Algorithmic recommendation systems further complicate the space of digital socialisation by connecting people to objects, places, and people (or influencers), to what deeply resonates with them based on predictive analytics – a technical entrenchment of this homophilic tendency.

Contemporary social media is steeped in advertisements showing specific content targeted based on online interactions and general activity on a platform but continues to also be based on what one might enjoy or consume. The concept of “friends of friends” or “making friends” is thus heavily influenced through advertising, due to this interactive milieu. This activity not only reinforces how homophily works within a digital space, but how we are socialised to then use that space, and how we are kept within the space for longer periods of time to experience even further, the things we like. Instagram, for example, is a platform created to envelope its users by offering advertising based on our lifestyle and interactions, thereby keeping us active on the platform. Large corporate and retail companies have relied on social media to create communities of consumers that further strengthen a lifestyle or brand. Gray reminds us “with the digital technology of reproduction and circulation, this incitement to be seen and the capacity for the proliferation of identity means that we are both more inscribed and more invested in its visibility, intensity, resonance, reach, speed, and circulation” (2013, p. 790). Despite the idea that many people feel social media can level out the proverbial playing field, what it increasingly does is continuously reinscribe identity, race, class, and gender norms.

In the context of widespread mediatisation, the perceived neutral ethics of social media as a ‘transparent space’ relies on the presumption of objectivity and on the mass dissemination of factual information to a receptive public. However, unconscious bias makes its way into how social media functions, especially in parallel to the 24-hour news cycle. Mediatisation is foundational in understanding how a content creator might amplify racial and gendered performances. Social media, historically, have not functioned in a way that questions the user. In part, this has led social media to become, for the user and the network they are connected to, a reactionary space. However, as of June 2020, Twitter instituted prompts to any user attempting to share content that they might not have read, in an attempt to encourage a type of objectivity and awareness prior to the dissemination of information [1]. This type of mediation of content asks, broadly, for users to reflect on whether the content they are about to share engages in a practice purporting to objectivity in journalistic content. This action is a small step to minimising the indifference many users have to content and preventing merely reading headlines.

In this context, new media and digital artists whose work explores mediatic possibilities not captured within these media landscapes can be an important counterpoint. By creating work that troubles and interrogates the ways in which we understand mediatisation, the challenge of neutrality, and objectivity, they can suggest possibilities for transforming how we conduct ourselves online and engage in a type of information stewardship. With media projects that gesture towards how fifth estate media might teach us about what is possible in creating not only formative, but transformative media landscapes. These are, of course, not solutions, but indicate how we might go beyond the social media platforms currently dominating the ways we connect and communicate.

Internet artist Darius Kazemi creates bots and generators of various kinds and has been deeply concerned with the state of social media and networks for years. One project of particular note is *runyourown.social*, which provides robust guides, open-source code, and writing on how running this type of infrastructure might promote community building (Kazemi 2022). At first, this project might seem steeped in homophily as opposed to something more heterogeneous. Yet Kazemi's research and work entails a provocation to build something on your own as opposed to relying on the large, well-oiled machines of big tech. The building of your own social, then, requires support, a desire to learn, and to co-create with other community members. Furthermore, it involves working to create with people you do not know, thus shifting the idea of 'users' into people (again) within smaller communities founded upon, not only a code of conduct, but an orientation towards how tech can become a tool for intentional activism and education.

Another project by artist Xin Xin called *TogetherNet* allows for people to meet and engage in a way that simulates real world situations, such as a serendipitous meeting. While *TogetherNet* is a messaging platform and not meant to be a full social media platform, the exercise of communicating through a game-like interface enables participants to explore the nuances of individual and collective conversation through consent (Xin Xin 2021). Having led a workshop using *TogetherNet*, I can attest to its ability to reinforce thoughtfulness with each interaction. For the duration of one hour of 'conversation' using the tool, participants felt it was not as easy because they had to bring their avatar close to others to fully participate in the dialogue. In addition, the entire group had to 'consent' for the conversation to be archived and saved as a file. If one participant did not consent, there was no archived file. Despite these challenges, the participants felt much more cognizant and aware of what they were communicating and how they communicated certain ideas. This experience of beta testing the *TogetherNet* affirmed that artistic and creative practices within open-source communities as a response and alternative to both fourth and fifth estate media for change to truly take place.

### **Conclusion: On Media Neutrality and the Excesses of Representation**

The concept of media neutrality akin to objectivity returns us back to the right to free speech as well as how this enables an excessive reproduction of spuriously objective racial and gendered caste categories. Because users not only produce but also share content, media participate in further perpetuating tropes in what Herman Gray calls the "excesses of representation." As previously mentioned, Gray's essay *Subject(ed) to Recognition* (2013) elucidates the paths by which subjection happens in media (from television to social media). But how these mediations can then be overproduced and proliferate becomes a hindrance to just representation, in that users are expected to consume, perceive, and somehow have a nuanced understanding of a wide spectrum of mediations. Since social media platforms structurally require the user to stay on the platform for a prolonged amount of time, representational priorities become less about mediatisation and objectivity and more about getting the user to consume at all costs. In addition to the proliferation and dissemination of these excesses, the intellectual and emotional exhaustion hinders nuanced reflection and observation. In this way, we can see how social media actively produces social affect, as opposed to offering a transparent platform by which affects are mediated objectively.

## Endnotes

1. Although my focus is not on the features that create a sense of objectivity in relation to mediatisation, I felt it necessary to include a reference to the post Twitter Support posted June 10, 2020 as a point of reference <https://twitter.com/TwitterSupport/status/1270783537667551233?s=20>

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