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# Cross-Platform Comparisons

## Introduction

### Platforms in the Age of Technical Reproduction

In mid-November 2020, the official Twitter account publishes a tweet announcing the creation of Twitter Fleets, a feature designed to communicate “that thing you didn’t Tweet but wanted to but didn’t but got so close but then were like nah.”<sup>1</sup> The publication is quickly followed by thousands of tweets from around the world that take the announcement as a source of humor, mostly in the form of memes.<sup>2</sup> The humor, which blends mockery, frustration, and amusement, foregrounds the clear similarity between Fleets and a feature already present in platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook: stories. Both Fleets and stories offer a brief audiovisual format, also ephemeral by default, which invites users to share the here and now of their lives.

It turns out that in the current instantiation of our age of digital reproduction (Shifman 2007; Knobel and Lankshear 2008), imitation—paraphrasing Oscar Wilde—might be the sincerest but not the most appreciated “form of flattery that mediocrity can pay to greatness.” Users do not hide their disappointment at what appears

to be an almost unbearable loss of Twitter's aura. *Aura*, in Walter Benjamin's (1936) terms, refers to the uniqueness and permanence of original works of art, two features challenged by mass reproduction and copying.<sup>3</sup> Twitter users, seemingly upset, describe in a cynical key the fatigue of finding the same functionality replicated time and again across the social media landscape. Moreover, the audiovisual aesthetics of Fleets seem to transgress the spontaneous and, above all, written culture that audiences usually attribute to Twitter (Burgess and Baym 2020).

One of the complaints most circulated on social media in the aftermath of Twitter's presumed imitation paradoxically links to another imitation. It takes up the internet meme "will now have stories,"<sup>4</sup> which emerged a few years ago as a reaction to Facebook's 2017 decision to include stories on its platform. The capability had already been added to WhatsApp that year, and to Instagram during 2016, as a way of competing with the popularity of the feature deployed by Snapchat in 2013.<sup>5</sup> The "will now have stories" meme superimposes images emulating stories on various everyday objects—from a banana to a pregnancy test, and from a calculator to a McDonald's menu—in order to mock the seeming lack of originality of the social media realm. In November 2020 the meme is resurrected to allude to the new wave of cross-platform copying, this time led by Twitter. One of the jokes, posted by a Twitter user, includes the "pointing gun meme," where the characters of the television series *The Office* point to one another, and states, "Tik Tok copied Vine, one of Twitter's biggest failures. Instagram copied Tik Tok, by making Reels. Twitter copied Instagram, by introducing Stories, which Instagram stole from Snapchat."<sup>6</sup> The user adds a Twitter thread, "ME, realizing that if all of these apps cannibalize themselves and make terrible product updates that make us want to use them less, we might all get our freedom back."<sup>7</sup> Less than a year after the announcement of its launch, Twitter closed down Fleets with the following announcement: "we're

removing Fleets on August 3, working on some new stuff we're sorry or you're welcome."<sup>8</sup>

### Lowest Common Denominator

On March 15, 2019, a terrorist attack is perpetrated in two mosques located in Christchurch, New Zealand. A white supremacist and conspiracist murders fifty-one people and injures forty more innocents. Before doing so, he sends an online manifesto via email to thirty recipients and posts links to it on Twitter and 8chan, with the aim of making the impending massacre go viral. The horror is magnified when the killer decides to broadcast the first shooting on Facebook Live for seventeen minutes; the video then remaining on his profile.<sup>9</sup> On platforms whose core offer has to do with content moderation, as argued by Tarleton Gillespie (2018), the transmission of the attack momentarily dodges the human and algorithmic controls that Facebook enforces around the globe. A *New Yorker* article explains that before Facebook's specialized team removed the content, the video had already been viewed by 4,000 people and not even one had reported it until 29 minutes after the start of the live transmission.<sup>10</sup>

In the wake of the events, various officers of the New Zealand government, including Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, and other world leaders, such as French President Emmanuel Macron, urge companies—especially American ones that run platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and YouTube—to show accountability for their policies of moderating violent and hateful content.<sup>11</sup> Two months later, a meeting of heads of state overseen by Ardern and Macron is held in Paris “to respond swiftly and effectively in the event of a terrorist attack and/or of viral terrorist content online.”<sup>12</sup> The objective is both normative and ethical. It is posited that a common, international standard of transparent policies to counter hate crimes could help prevent them in the future. It also explains that clear moderation policies, as well as honoring the right to be forgotten,

would protect the memory of victims whose images were still circulating on platforms days after the event. A report entitled “Anti-social media,” produced by New Zealand think tank The Helen Clark Foundation, recommends that “The Government meet with social media companies operating in New Zealand to agree on an interim Code of Conduct, which outlines key commitments from social media companies on what actions they will take now to ensure the spread of terrorist and other harmful content is caught quickly and its further dissemination is cut short in the future. Limiting access to the livestream feature is one consideration, if harmful content can genuinely not be detected.”<sup>13</sup>

In the news about the aftermath of the attack, different traditional media organizations, from *Le Monde* to *Vice*, begin to cover how each platform proposes to solve ad hoc moderation issues.<sup>14</sup> This ends up revealing that it is probably not correct to assume that all platforms share a common denominator when it comes to moderating violent and hateful content. Certain idiosyncrasies in the moderation of platforms that are usually kept out of the limelight become suddenly exposed. The similarities and differences between them turn into a truly significant issue for the public and the polity at large.

### **How Comparisons across Platforms Matter**

The contrast between the two preceding cases is striking. On the one hand, we describe developments around a relatively minor technical capability and the satirical reactions it triggered. On the other hand, we revisit a tragic event of major gravity and the stern international reaction that followed. In spite of their evident differences, both cases share an issue that constitutes the central node of this chapter: the descriptive, explanatory, and interpretive gains that arise from comparisons of practices and discourses across platforms. This epistemic operation exposes, in the case of the failed Twitter Fleets and its successful Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook predecessors,

a growing technical homogeneity across seemingly divergent platforms. As we saw, this homogeneity is quickly picked up by users who complain and express themselves sometimes humorously against what they see as a lack of originality across platforms. They thus argue for a clear distinction in the imagined and inhabited cultures that populate the social media landscape. In contrast, the events following the Christchurch mosque shootings make visible the heterogeneity that also exists across platforms in other dimensions. When numerous government authorities, on behalf of their respective citizenries, call for common standards and international mechanisms to control hateful and violent content, a lack of homogeneity and standardization of regulatory practices across social media is exposed.

As different as they are, both stories point to a shared matter, that is, they can be best understood through a comparative lens. Users view a given platform's decision to adopt a feature as either innovative or not, depending on their knowledge about decisions made by other platforms. Governments and citizens demand explanations from platforms about their preventive measures and moderation mechanisms regarding hateful and violent content because they assume that they are likely to have different responses or, at least, that their infrastructures do not necessarily respect a common—let alone international—standard.

Comparing across platforms is grounded in our everyday experiences. As noted in chapter 1, worldwide the average social media user has an account on more than seven platforms (often using more than one concurrently and relationally) with different sociodemographic groups adopting different platforms and/or combinations of them (Hargittai 2007; Hargittai and Hsieh 2010; Horvát and Hargittai 2021; Matassi, Mitchelstein, and Boczkowski 2022). People often sense that certain ways of communication and self-presentation are socially acceptable on some platforms and not on others (van Dijck 2013; DeVito, Birnholtz, and Hancock 2017; Scolere, Pruchniewska, and Duffy 2018; Duffy and Chan 2019). They also perceive

that certain posting frequencies or criteria for reacting to content are more appropriate on some platforms but not all (Kaun and Stiernstedt 2014; Bayer et al. 2016; French and Bazarova 2017; Boczkowski, Matassi, and Mitchelstein 2018). Twitter users' reaction to the incorporation of Fleets indicated that something did not feel right: The functionality broke a certain implicit, but nonetheless powerful, norm about the types of content suitable for it. Making sense of these situations invites comparisons that interrogate both obvious cross-platform practices as well as practices that do not take place in one or more of them because of usually unstated yet highly consequential social conventions.

In the following pages we will present eight studies that deal with key issues in cross-platform comparative research. As with the previous two chapters, we will organize them according to topics, approaches, methods, and interpretations. Finally, we will conclude with an analysis of how comparative work allows us to unpack the concept of social media into its main constituents instead of treating it as a homogeneous whole. Inspired by traditions of inquiry that propose relational and holistic views, we will argue that when we speak of platforms it is important that we imagine and study them in their interconnected plurality. If, as Lisa Gitelman has argued, traditional “*media are*” (2006, 2; emphasis added), then it is reasonable to expect that social media also should be understood as plural entities.

## Topics

Two topics recurrently addressed by cross-platform scholarship are the presentation of the self and the impact of social media on mental health.

Research on the ways in which people present their selves in private and public environments has a long tradition in microsociology (Blumer 1969; Knorr-Cetina 2009; Benzecry and Winchester 2017),

which has then permeated into communication studies, especially through the influence of Erving Goffman's work (1959, 1967). According to these traditions of inquiry, social interaction is a space in which intersubjective meaning is produced and social order is built. The presentation of the self is an important aspect of that process (Marshall 2010; Marwick and boyd 2011; Litt 2012; van Dijck 2013).

The selfie, which was named word of the year by *Oxford Dictionaries* in 2013,<sup>15</sup> has been one of the most prevalent genres of self-presentation in everyday uses of social media (Katz and Crocker 2015; Marwick 2015; Chua and Chang 2016). Interested in the "conversational capacity" of selfies, Stefanie Duguay (2016) compares model and actress Ruby Rose's self-presentation on Instagram and Vine. Using the walk-through method of analysis of the discourses surrounding these apps, the author seeks to understand the production and circulation of different forms of LGBTQ visibility in the selfies that Rose shares on both platforms. To Duguay, "the conversational capacity of LGBTQ people's selfies, as performances of sexual and gender identities . . . influences the potential for circulating counter-discourses and forming queer publics" (Duguay 2016, 3).

According to Duguay, while certain selfies tend to reproduce heteronormative gender stereotypes, others counter hegemonic discourses on gender and sexuality. Duguay focuses on three parameters: "range, the variety of discourses addressed within a selfie; reach, the circulation of selfies within and across publics; and salience, the strength and clarity of discourses communicated through a selfie" (2016, 2). She chooses to compare Instagram and Vine because they share an emphasis on visuality as well as other characteristics, including having been launched or bought by popular platform companies and presenting a similar set of technical functionalities. From a detailed analysis of the discourses surrounding the description of the applications in mobile applications stores, and of images shared by Rose, Duguay concludes that "Although Instagram provides many content generation tools, its aesthetic formula decreases the salience

of counterdiscourses in selfies, while Vine's scarcity of tools leaves room for users to increase the salience themselves. Without a layer of editing or filters, Viners' personal aspects become salient, making identity discourses prominent and available for conversations across publics" (2016, 9).

A second theme that appears frequently in cross-platform studies is the impact of social media on mental health. There has been significant public concern about the effects (generally seen as negative) that the adoption of platforms can produce (Twenge et al. 2018; Orben 2020; Vanden Abeele 2020). Within this context scholars inquire into whether platforms affect preexisting states, such as loneliness (Hunt et al. 2018); encourage *de novo* mental health conditions, such as eating disorders (Saunders and Eaton 2018); and/or whether certain individual characteristics, such as depression, lead to the use of the platforms in the first place (Ozimek and Bierhoff 2020).

Sonja Utz, Nicole Muscanell, and Cameran Khalid (2015) examine the experience of feelings of jealousy in the context of romantic relationships and their ties to the use of Facebook and Snapchat. The comparison between these two platforms is partly informed by the notion that Snapchat is used more for intimate communication among youth than other platforms due to the ephemerality of its content (Boczkowski 2021). Facebook, on the contrary, is usually associated with a more public communication culture, where posts often stay on the news feed and the boundaries among the different audiences of each user collapse more easily (Marwick and boyd 2011; Bayer et al. 2016; Litt and Hargittai 2016). Drawing from an online survey with participants in various European countries, the authors inquire into the motivations for using each one of these platforms as well as feelings of jealousy associated with their use.

Regarding the issue of motivations, Utz, Muscanell, and Khalid (2015) observe that even though "Snapchat use resembles Facebook use in many respects, . . . Snapchat was used somewhat more for flirting than Facebook" (2015, 144). Concerning the level of jealousy

experienced by users of both platforms, “although both media did not trigger extremely high levels of jealousy, Snapchat did elicit more jealousy than Facebook” (Utz, Muscanell, and Khalid 2015, 144). They explain, however, that “when it comes to receiving (vs. sending) a post from an unknown potential rival, jealousy was higher on Facebook. It seems that threats from third persons are perceived as more threatening when they are public” (145). To the authors, this reveals that “although social media can evoke jealousy, they do not make everyone highly jealous” (145).

In both topical examples examined in this section, cross-platform comparisons were key to illuminating the dynamics under study either by showing how the circulation of discourses around LGBTQ experiences can significantly differ according to the platform at stake (Duguay 2016), or by shedding light on the idea that not all platforms are similarly associated with certain psychological states (Utz, Muscanell, and Khalid 2015). None of the dynamics that apply to individual platforms would have been made visible without accounts that interrogated relationships with other platforms.

## Approaches

Two types of approaches dominate cross-platform scholarship—what we call linearity versus circularity. The first, and most common, contrasts the impact of either an independent variable on two or more platforms, or two or more platforms on a dependent variable. The second, although less frequent than the first, examines relationships across platforms.

A study by Sebastián Valenzuela, Teresa Correa, and Homero Gil de Zúñiga (2018) provides an illustration of the first approach. This work takes up discussions that have appeared in previous chapters concerning the relationship between political participation and social media use (Bennett 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela

2012; Boulianne 2015). Valenzuela, Correa, and Gil de Zúñiga's (2018) goal is to understand the connections that cut across political participation, political information consumption, and social media use for the cases of Twitter and Facebook. The more specific question that guides their inquiry is whether any of the affordances of these platforms—and the social relationships they activate, categorized in terms of the distinction between weak and strong ties—are conducive to specific forms of political participation. They examine this matter through the analysis of a survey of young Chileans conducted in 2014.

Valenzuela and colleagues identify important differences between both platforms. Whereas Facebook allows for a rather symmetrical and reciprocal connection between users, Twitter offers the possibility of relations that might be asymmetrical or unidirectional—with one party not having to necessarily accept the “follow” request from the other one. Thus, “both social media platforms have positive effects on mobilizing Chilean citizenry, and fostering political protest behaviors. However, these relationships emerge from distinct social network structures within these social media platforms. On the one hand, results indicate that on Facebook, strong-tie connections are conducive to further protest behavior, while exposure to weak ties conveys a much weaker influence on this type of political activity. Conversely, weak-tie connections in Twitter seem to lead people to engage in protest behavior; interactions with strong ties on this medium have no discernible impact” (Valenzuela, Correa, and Gil de Zúñiga 2018, 128–129).

The second type of approach, that of circularity, has concentrated on cross-platform relations. The Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2018 (Susser, Roessler, and Nissenbaum 2019; van Dijck 2020) revealed the existence of an ultra-targeted strategic communication apparatus based on an ecology of misinformation traveling from one country to another (Walker, Mercea, and Bastos 2019). Since then, many public and news media discussions have emerged around

issues of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. These topics are not new (Jaramillo 2006; Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2021; Seo and Faris 2021), but in recent years there has been an explosion of scholarship triggered by events such as the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the 2016 presidential election in the United States, to such an extent that the term “fake news” was named word of the year by *Collins Dictionary* for 2017.<sup>16</sup>

Josephine Lukito’s (2020) work seeks to shed light on the digital infrastructure behind the systematic plan to disseminate false information during the 2016 US presidential election. The author examines the disinformation campaign strategized and executed by the *Internet Research Agency* from 2015 to 2017; also known as IRA, this has been linked to actors with ties to the Russian government (Polyakova 2019). Lukito focuses on understanding the coordinated manner in which the campaign was deployed on Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter. She argues that the multiplatform logic of the campaign responds to the fact that a greater number of platforms operating in unison can potentially increase the frequency with which a user is exposed to fake news. She explains that “while previous studies have looked at the dynamics of this campaign on individual social media platforms (e.g., Broniatowski et al. 2018), none have empirically tested the possibility that multi-platform disinformation campaigns are internally coordinated” (Lukito 2020, 239).

In her analysis, Lukito (2020) distinguishes between paid content, which has to do with positioning a post through the purchase of advertisement, and organic content, which arises via word-of-mouth interactions and/or unpaid recommendations. She suggests that paid content via Facebook ads will happen on a different timeline than organic content on Twitter and Reddit. More importantly for the purpose of this chapter, Lukito hypothesizes that the dissemination of content on one platform might inform and influence the dissemination of content on the others. She undertakes a time-series analysis of the data that Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter

released to the public after the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke and its subsequent treatment in the US Congress.

Lukito (2020) finds that paid Facebook ads had no temporal relationship with Reddit and Twitter content, and that the relationship between Reddit and Twitter was unidirectional in the sense that posts on the former influenced those on the latter. Her explanation is that Reddit might have been used to test the effectiveness of a piece of content before reinforcing it on Twitter. This platform, Lukito argues, may have been more relevant than Reddit because of its privileged place within journalistic practice (Hermida 2010; Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012; Barnard 2016). Lukito concludes that “strategic communicators—including the Internet Research Agency—use many platforms in tandem to spread and reinforce messages. It therefore behooves scholars to study political communication in a multi-platform context, rather than looking only at messages within one platform” (2020, 250–251).

In the two studies presented in this section, the comparative stance proved central for shedding light on the phenomena at hand. Whereas Valenzuela, Correa, and Gil de Zúñiga (2018) found through comparison of Facebook and Twitter that the relationship between social media use and political participation was significantly moderated by the social networks that the user activates, Lukito (2020) was able to show the circulation of content from one platform to another within a process of orchestrated disinformation. Had these two papers focused on one single platform isolated from the others, they might not have been able to properly identify significant variations or mechanisms in either political participation or flows of disinformation, respectively.

## Methods

Cross-platform research has often used quantitative techniques, such as online surveys and computational methods. To a lesser

extent, some studies have utilized mixed quantitative and qualitative methods, such as surveys with focus groups or interviews; others have engaged purely qualitative tools.

In 2015, at an Australian Football Association (AFL) game, Adam Goodes, a player of Adnyamathanha and Narungga origins and an activist against racism in Australia, performed a celebratory goal dance. It was a war dance, which triggered great controversy within Australian society. More precisely, it led to a wave of booing in person and digital harassing on social media—part of what Australian media named the “booing saga” against Goodes.<sup>17</sup> In that same year, not long after these events, Goodes retired from football and, in 2016, he deleted his Twitter account. This case is taken up by Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández to investigate what she calls “platformed racism,” a term with double meaning: “It (1) evokes platforms as tools for amplifying and manufacturing racist discourse both by means of users’ appropriations of their affordances and through their design and algorithmic shaping of sociability and (2) suggests a mode of governance that might be harmful for some communities, embodied in platforms’ vague policies, their moderation of content and their often arbitrary enforcement of rules” (2017, 931).

Using an issue mapping approach around the Goodes controversy on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, the author tracks the actors, issues, and objects involved. The three platforms, following Matamoros-Fernández, have very different moderation policies when it comes to hate speech—disguised, in many cases, under the form of humor. The author analyzes a corpus of 2,174 tweets with images, 405 Facebook links, and 529 YouTube links shared on Twitter between May 29 and September 16, 2015. In addition, to determine the role of algorithms in ranking contents, Matamoros-Fernández also creates ad hoc profiles on Facebook and YouTube and analyzes the first twenty-five pages suggested by the respective algorithms after deliberately liking pages associated with booing Goodes.

The author finds similarities and differences in how phenomena unfolded across the three platforms. First, on Twitter “attacks

towards Goodes were articulated by means of sharing memes” (Matamoros-Fernández 2017, 938), which were covered by users who used “sensitive media” filters. Second, on Facebook “humour tended to concentrate in compounded spaces, like meme pages, or in comments” (2017, 938). Third, on YouTube “parody was also located in the comment space rather than being mediated through videos uploaded specifically to make fun of Goodes” (Matamoros-Fernández 2017, 938). Regarding recommendations from algorithms, Matamoros-Fernández notes that recommendation systems reinforced racist content: “[B]y liking and watching racist content directed to Adam Goodes on Facebook and YouTube, the platforms’ recommendation algorithms generated similar content about controversial humor and the opinions of Australian public figures known for their racist remarks towards Aboriginal people” (Matamoros-Fernández 2017, 939).

An illustration of qualitative methodologies is Loes Bogers, Sabine Niederer, Federica Bardelli, and Carlo De Gaetano’s (2020) examination of the depiction of motherhood, in particular representations of pregnancy across the Web and six platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Reddit, Tumblr, and Twitter. The authors resort to two visualization methods, which they call image grids and composite images (Bogers et al. 2020, 1043). These methods help reflect the ways in which platform algorithms order the content they classify as more relevant, which, in turn, allows observing similarities and differences among the objects of comparison. The goal of Bogers and colleagues is to reveal and deconstruct gender stereotypes and biases that operate on representations of motherhood and that are generated at the intersection of the practices of users and the algorithms of platforms.

Informed by critical feminist perspectives, the authors discuss the uniqueness of each platform in terms of “platform-specific *vernaculars*” (Bogers et al. 2020, 1038; emphasis in the original)—defined by Gibbs et al. (2015) as “the unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics” (257)—and find significant differences. After an analysis

of the 200 most relevant images associated with the keywords “pregnant” or “pregnancy” on each selected platform, the authors find, among other things, that “Facebook, for example, highlights the heteronormative family unit that is celebrated (and sometimes mocked), while Twitter offers a discourse of information sharing, more pluriform relations and support between women” (Bogers et al. 2020, 1054). Ultimately, the case “confirms the overall lack of various pregnant corporealities . . . and online absence of non-heteronormative ways of doing pregnancy” (Bogers et al. 2020, 1056). The authors argue that platform vernaculars play a role in the distribution of visibility and invisibility of different representations of pregnancy.

This section focused on two alternative methodologies used in cross-platform studies. Matamoros-Fernández (2017) showed the divergent ways in which users engaged platforms’ affordances to spread hateful content, reinforced by platforms’ algorithms; Bogers et al. (2020) demonstrated that various platforms, although sharing a reification of certain forms of pregnancy, also exhibited significant differences across them. In both cases, particularities regarding a single platform, and similarities and differences with others, would have remained opaque without a comparative approach.

## Interpretations

There are two central interpretations that cut across the findings generated by cross-platform research. On the one hand, some scholars posit that platforms have different affordances capable of producing divergent effects (Papacharissi 2009; Utz, Muscanell, and Khalid 2015; Duguay 2016; French and Bazarova 2017; Shane-Simpson et al. 2018). On the other hand, other scholars show that although some functionalities are similar across platforms, user practices contribute to producing divergent modes of appropriation (Larsson 2015; Karapanos, Teixeira, and Gouveia 2016; Zhao, Lampe, and Ellison

2016; Boczkowski, Matassi, and Mitchelstein 2018; Scolere, Pruchniewska, and Duffy 2018). These interpretive frames are descendants of older debates in the study of technology and society often seen through the prism of technological determinism versus that of social construction (Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch 1987; Grint and Woolgar 1992; Kling 1992; Marx and Smith 1994; Boczkowski and Lievrouw 2008).

A study by Matthew Pittman and Brandon Reich (2016) illustrates the first option. Interested in examining the impact of social media on feelings of loneliness in young adults, the authors compare five platforms: Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Yik Yak, and Facebook. Focusing on “which aspects of mediated communication confer experiential aspects that might lead to a genuine social presence of immediacy *and* intimacy” (2016, 157; emphasis in the original), Pittman and Reich propose a typology of platforms associated with whether their functionalities privilege images or text. In their words, “by focusing on the primary modality of each platform—text or image/video—we might begin to understand how they each mitigate or exacerbate loneliness” (Pittman and Reich 2016, 156).

According to their categorization, whereas Instagram and Snapchat fall on the image-based platform type, Twitter and Yik Yak fall on the text-based one and, having both image and text modalities, Facebook sits in the middle. Based on Shyam Sundar’s (2008) MAIN model (Modality, Agency, Interactivity, and Navigability), Pittman and Reich explain that images have a stronger capacity in emulating social presence, which might be associated with a decrease in feelings of loneliness. In order to test this, they conduct a mixed-methods, quasi-experimental survey with 253 college students. They find that “image-based platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram confer to their users a significant decrease in self-reported loneliness. . . . This ability to mitigate an undesirable psychological state and induce positives ones may be due to the ability of images

to facilitate social presence (Sundar 2008), or the sense that one is communicating with an actual person instead of an object” (Pittman and Reich 2016, 164).

A study by Pablo J. Boczkowski, Mora Matassi, and Eugenia Mitchelstein (2018) serves to illustrate the second type of interpretation. It seeks to understand how young adults in Argentina manage five social media platforms—Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and WhatsApp—in their everyday lives. They ask two questions: “First, what are the dominant constellations of meaning constructed around social media among young people in Argentina? Second, how do different constellations relate to the practices usually enacted on one particular platform in relation to other normally-accessed platforms?” (Boczkowski, Matassi, and Mitchelstein 2018, 246).

The authors find that even though these platforms share several key affordances, a distinct constellation of meaning emerges for each platform: “WhatsApp is a multifaceted communication domain; Facebook is a space for displaying the socially acceptable self; Instagram is an environment for stylized self-presentation; Twitter is a venue for information and informality; and Snapchat is a place for spontaneous and ludic connections” (Boczkowski, Matassi, and Mitchelstein 2018, 245). Furthermore, they contend that “people use one platform in ways related to how they use the others. Second, users’ perceptions and sense-making of each platform often include recursive references to other social media options” (Boczkowski, Matassi, and Mitchelstein 2018, 255).

This section presented two possible ways of interpreting the results emerging from cross-platform accounts. In both studies, it is evident that the comparative gaze was beneficial to elicit various phenomena tied to social media uptake and its broader implications. By contrasting two different types of platforms, Pittman and Reich (2016) emphasized how certain functionalities differently affected feelings of loneliness in young users. The research by Boczkowski,

Matassi, and Mitchelstein (2018) showed how platforms sharing similar functionalities could nonetheless be associated with significantly diverse social media cultures shaped by users.

## Conclusions

We opened this chapter with two radically different vignettes. The first centered on the concern of Twitter users about the apparent homogeneity and lack of originality across platforms that had become assumed after the announcement of Twitter Fleets. While seemingly banal, it portrayed a picture of high levels of similarity in the social media landscape, an issue that was not well-received by users, who created and circulated memes making fun of it. The second focused on Western political leaders' requests for social media companies to make visible and harmonize their moderation policies in order to prevent hateful and violent content in the wake of the Christchurch mosque shootings. This event, which represented a tragic moment in New Zealand's public life that affected and continues to affect the country's collective memory, and that also had ripple effects across the world, brought to light the heterogeneity across platforms that exists regarding their policies and practices of content moderation. From the banal to the tragic, both vignettes converge to signal the value of adopting a cross-platform lens to understand the appropriation of social media and their cultural and political consequences. Users, from ordinary citizens to heads of state, regularly engage in comparisons when they make sense of the role of platforms in everyday life, and so should scholars who study social media.

To this end, in this chapter we engaged with studies that examined a multiplicity of practices of use that included comparisons of eleven platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Reddit, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter, Vine, WhatsApp, Yik Yak, and YouTube. A cross-platform

comparative stance enables the analyst to unpack the monolithic notion of social media that has arisen from single-platform studies which assume that what happens on one platform might apply to the social media landscape as a whole, thus implying notions of a homogeneous and undifferentiated unity (Tufekci 2014; Bode and Vraga 2018; DeVito, Walker, and Birnholtz 2018). In contrast, the image that emerges from cross-platform accounts is that social media should not be treated as an a priori unified object of inquiry (Hall et al. 2018; Hargittai 2020; Yarchi, Baden, and Kligler-Vilenchik 2020). Platforms are by definition plural, and what might differentiate and/or unite them should be discovered instead of being taken for granted.

As we stated in chapter 1, these ideas draw from several theoretical developments in the field of communication studies that have fostered relational and ecological accounts of media use, such as niche theory, repertoires, and polymedia.

The theory of the niche (Dimmick 2003; Dimmick, Feaster, and Ramírez Jr. 2011; Ha and Fang 2012) explores how different media survive and grow in a changing environment. It was originally formulated to understand the competition between old and new media: “A new medium will compete with established media for consumer satisfaction, consumer time, and advertising dollars. If competition does exist, then the consequence for the older media consists of exclusion or replacement, or displacement, wherein the new medium takes over some of the roles played by the older medium” (Dimmick, Chen, and Li 2004, 22).

Although this focus brings us back to dynamics cutting across traditional and social media that were addressed in the previous chapter, niche theory can also be applied to explain relationships across platforms. The impetus for the imitation of the stories functionality originally developed by Snapchat and subsequently replicated by Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter in their attempt to remain current with their user base, especially its youth segment, and fend

off migration to Snapchat, provides a clear illustration of the potential of niche theory for comparative cross-platform accounts.

While niche theory stresses market dynamics, scholarship about media repertoires (Hasebrink and Popp 2006; Taneja et al. 2012; Hasebrink and Hepp 2017; Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017) examines phenomena from users' points of view. As we mentioned in chapter 1, this theoretical lens was originally conceived to understand decision making in the face of significant increases in programming options during the transition from terrestrial to cable television. In doing so, it allows us to understand how users assemble their own mix of content from multiple sources, thus forming a repertoire. In the words of Taneja et al. (2012), "Studies have consistently found that users do not divide their time consuming all available media (e.g., Heeter, 1985). They instead create subsets of all available options and consume content from this smaller set. These subsets are referred to as repertoires. Almost all early studies on repertoires were focused on repertoire formation in television viewing. These consistently found that, on average, viewers watched a fraction of television channels received by their household. Subsequent studies have expanded the concept of repertoires beyond television viewing, to interpret consumption patterns across multiple media" (953).

A number of social media studies conducted over the last decade have shown that the ways in which users appropriate platforms indicates that they do so building repertoires; they use multiple platforms but not all of them, for different purposes, sometimes strategically and others ritualistically, thus creating their own social media repertoires (Zhao, Lampe, and Ellison 2016; DeVito, Walker, and Birnholtz 2018; Boczkowski 2021).

Also introduced in chapter 1, the theory of polymedia, developed by Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller (2012) and subsequently adopted in a number of social media studies (Renninger 2015; Madianou 2015, 2016; Boczkowski, Matassi, and Mitchelstein 2018; Tandoc Jr., Lou, and Min 2019), adds a cultural and relational

sensibility to the market-centric approach of niches and the user-centric view of repertoires. Madianou and Miller argue that

polymedia is an emerging environment of communicative opportunities that functions as an “integrated structure” within which each individual medium is defined in relational terms in the context of all other media. In conditions of polymedia the emphasis shifts from a focus on the qualities of each particular medium as a discrete technology, to an understanding of new media as an environment of affordances. As a consequence the primary concern shifts from an emphasis on the constraints imposed by each medium (often cost-related, but also shaped by specific qualities) to an emphasis upon the social and emotional consequences of choosing between those different media. (2013, 170)

The theory of polymedia refers to interpersonal relationships and the focus shifts to examining the emotional and social factors that shape how users decide to integrate different platforms as part of their ongoing relationships, enacted within particular local contexts.

The aforementioned three theoretical frameworks provide us with a useful toolkit to tackle comparative work involving multiple platforms. Cutting across all of them is the idea that the unit of analysis of comparative research on social media platforms can be considered relationally (Hasebrink and Popp 2006). Put differently, in cross-platform comparative research the unit of analysis shifts from what happens within a given platform into the relationships across two or more of them. This, in turn, enables the analyst to figure out what is unique to a particular platform and what is shared with others. If, as Lisa Gitelman’s (2006) assertion that traditional media *are* also applies to their social media counterparts, then the pluralization of platform practices necessitates acknowledging their differences as something intrinsic to them. This does not mean that these differences will always matter or, if they do, that they will always matter in similar ways. But it means that from a comparative social media studies standpoint, scholarly accounts should inquire if, when, how, and why these cross-platform differences make a difference.

A by-product of this pluralization of our understanding of platforms is that it can act as an epistemic antidote to the deterministic tendencies that have dominated academic and popular discourses on social media in recent years. The Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the elections of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro as presidents of the United States and Brazil, respectively—among other recent political events in the world—revived explanations based on hypodermic needle tropes of social media altering the will of the people and the integrity of democratic processes. These explanations often elided any differences across platforms and overlooked the agency of their users. By design, cross-platform perspectives move these differences to the foreground. Because many of the key affordances that are credited with the presumed negative outcomes of social media on society are shared by the main platforms, variance in use across platforms cannot be attributed to the affordances themselves. This, in turn, invites us to switch the attention to the agency of users and the various kinds of possible interactions with the structuring power of technology.

Another important antidote to the deterministic tenor of currently dominant discourses on social media has to do with understanding their histories and how they relate to the histories of other media. It is to this matter that we turn next.

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/13999.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/13999.001.0001)

# To Know Is to Compare

## Studying Social Media across Nations, Media, and Platforms

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### Citation:

*To Know Is to Compare: Studying Social Media across Nations, Media, and Platforms*

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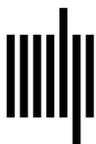
DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/13999.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262374972

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2023

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

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The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Stone Serif and Stone Sans by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Matassi, Mora, author. | Boczkowski, Pablo J., author.

Title: To know is to compare : studying social media across nations, media, and platforms / Mora Matassi and Pablo J. Boczkowski.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2023]. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022030583 (print) | LCCN 2022030584 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780262545938 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262374989 (epub) |

ISBN 9780262374972 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Online social networks—Study and teaching. |

Social media—Study and teaching.

Classification: LCC HM742 .M365 2023 (print) | LCC HM742 (ebook) |

DDC 302.231—dc23/eng/20220707

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022030583>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022030584>