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Collecting rich data from afar

Inserting the digital into ethnographic research in conflict (-affected) settings

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Abstract

As ethnographers, we plan our fieldwork thoroughly in advance, but circumstances on the ground sometimes force us to abandon our plans. Especially in conflict(-affected) settings, access to the field is not always guaranteed and circumstances can rapidly change. In this paper, we discuss how digital ethnography can be integrated into ethnographic projects, when researchers find themselves unable to travel or return to the field. We argue that embracing the digital, both as a tool and as a space, is a viable avenue to continue ethnographic fieldwork under such circumstances. We discuss the opportunities and challenges that such an approach offers, by discussing existing research and by drawing from our own experiences in Lebanon, Kosovo and Medellín (Colombia). The discussion encompasses the two focal components of ethnography: participant observation and interviews. In the part on participant observation, we make a distinction between two different approaches of using the digital for ethnography. The first is approach is grounded in digital ethnographic work, where the digital spaces are considered as field sites. The second approach uses digital tools for collecting data from physical spaces. The objective of the paper is to provide methodological tools to ethnographers who are not trained in digital methods, and to offer practical yet sound and rigorous tools. Our focus is on ethnography in conflict(-affected) settings, which presents rather specific challenges.

Keywords: fieldwork; digital ethnography; conflict research

1. Introduction

It is the spring of 2019 when most of the world comes to a sudden halt because of the COVID-19 global pandemic. At that time, Marije is in Kosovo, conducting ethnographic fieldwork for her doctoral research. Health concerns, physical distancing, and curfews come to describe most of everyday life and she is forced to abandon her fieldwork, including a subsequent fieldwork trip to Colombia the following year. Fast forward to the fall of 2023. Esther is working on her PhD dissertation in Lebanon. On October 7th, Palestinian groups in Gaza commit a major attack on Israel. Israel retaliates with a campaign of unprecedented genocidal violence against the population of Gaza. On October 8th, Hezbollah enters the conflict from Lebanon, by shooting rockets at Israeli territory. As Esther is preparing for a fourth round

of fieldwork, Lebanon is dragged into the war. It is unclear if and when Esther might be able to return for fieldwork.

In both instances, the authors of this article were forced to rapidly pivot and adapt to the circumstances at their field sites by finding alternative ways of continuing research. Faced with funding deadlines and finite contracts, waiting out the crises was not on the list of viable options. We both found a solution in moving the remainder of our ethnographies online. For Esther, this was a matter of adjusting her methodological framework, which already included digital ethnography and consisted of a combination of on- and offline fieldwork. Marije integrated digital methods into her existing methodology as the project was already in motion. The situations are indicative of doing research in conflict(-affected) settings, where access to the field is not always guaranteed. As researchers, we may plan our fieldwork thoroughly in advance, but changing circumstances on the ground sometimes force us to abandon our plans. This might be because we need to heed our own safety and/or because we feel constrained by ethical considerations towards our interlocutors (Krause 2021). Digital methods can provide opportunities in these situations, as moving aspects of the planned fieldwork online can be a way to continue the work. Following this, this paper draws on knowledge from the field of digital ethnography in order to provide strategies and tools for researchers working in conflict-affected settings who wish to adopt digital ethnographic methods and collect data from afar. We contend that digital ethnography offers ways of meaningfully connecting to interlocutors, even while the researcher is at a physical distance. Making strategic use of digital tools, in other words, can provide access to people's intimate lives and to the places in which they live. At the same time, the successful use of such tools depends on their methodologically sound and rigorous implementation. In this paper we draw from the field of digital ethnography and from our own experiences doing digital ethnographic research. The objective of this paper is to make our insights accessible to researchers from various disciplines working in conflict settings, including political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists and others. Although we are both outsiders to the community conducting research in geographically distant locations, our approach may also be useful when the field is closeby yet inaccessible, and to researchers who are part of the groups they study.

This text is divided into three sections. The first section addresses how digital transformations have changed ethnography throughout the last decades, both looking at the internet as a tool in the hands of researchers and as a part of life that is radically altering the social life of people everywhere. The other two sections discuss the two main methods associated with ethnographic research: participant observation and interviewing. In each instance we pay attention to the specific opportunities and challenges that the methods pose. In the section on participant observation we highlight two different approaches of digital ethnography: the first approach is grounded in digital ethnographic work, where the digital spaces are considered as field sites. The second approach focuses on using the digital as a tool for collecting data about physical geographical spaces. For both approaches we emphasise the importance of thoroughly selecting the fieldsite, the available tools for data collection and the challenges that come with conducting digital ethnography. The section on online interviewing presents various interview methods, the challenge of building rapport, and strategies to realise data reliability. Throughout the text we take into account how online research presents both new questions and challenges around key issues like reflexivity, ethics and building rapport. To ensure that this text is helpful to researchers working on a broad range of subjects and in different contexts, whilst also remaining relatable and concrete, we use vignettes that draw on our own work in Colombia, Kosovo and Lebanon to bring to life the various methods.

2. Ethnography transformed: The fieldsite, the digital, the interdisciplinary

Ethnography has always derived its strength from an extended engagement with the field, which allows ethnographers to become privy to the intimate and informal aspects of their interlocutors' lives by 'being there'. The core methods of ethnography are participant observation and qualitative interviews: both allow for informal and repeated interaction with the same interlocutors, predicated on an intimate

understanding of everyday life in a certain location (Bernard 2011; DeWalt and DeWalt 2011; Howlett 2021; O'Reilly 2005). This provides an immersive engagement with the field and helps with untangling the complex social life to develop an intimate understanding. It is through participating in mundane activities and interactions of everyday life, that aspects not easily communicated through words can be analyzed and that the researcher is able to center the interlocutor's perspective. These characteristics make ethnography unique vis-a-vis other methodologies, which do not offer the same depth of insight into social and cultural life. Traditional ethnographies are based on months, if not years, spent living with interlocutors.

Much has however changed in the field of anthropology in the last decades. Funding schemes have made it more difficult to spend long periods of time abroad for fieldwork; integral concepts like insider/outsider have been questioned, blurring the distinction between being in and out of the field; and recognition has grown for the need to make ethnography compatible with the demands of everyday life, in order to make it a more inclusive science (Günel, Varma and Watanabe 2020). Moreover, the growth of interdisciplinarity across the sciences also allowed for ethnography to be embraced by researchers in other disciplines. Their engagement with the method transformed and opened up ethnographic practices in the process, in many cases because they implemented ethnographic methods in line with the expectations and possibilities of their own disciplines. While no one would deny the great value of spending a long time in the field, these transformations demonstrated that it is also possible to collect sound ethnographic data over a shorter timespan. This has made ethnography a more approachable methodology, which is no longer exclusive to anthropologists, but practiced by researchers across the social sciences and the humanities.

Alongside these developments in anthropology, radical digital transformations have presented both opportunities and challenges to ethnographers, particularly since the turn of the century. Digital ethnography - also popularized under other names such as 'netnography' and 'virtual ethnography' - has been developed in order to study social life on the internet, operating at the intersection of anthropology and media studies (Hine 2015; Kozinets 2021; Miller 2018; Pink et al. 2016; Hjorth 2017). The insights of such work is becoming ever more relevant, as the lives of people across the world now takes place partly via digital mediation. Most ethnographers today will encounter that their interlocutors live digital lives in one way or another and ethnography is in the process of becoming a practice that integrates embedded online research (Miller 2018). At the same time, digital affordances are also tools in the hands of researchers, as we are now able to access our field sites across geographical space, for example by (video-)calling interlocutors, walking the streets on digital maps, and attending live meetings via conference calls.

The COVID-19 pandemic sped up acceptance of using such methods, as researchers everywhere were suddenly restricted from leaving home. As many researchers had to deal with deadlines and time restrictions by funding schemes, they found a solution in using digital methods to conduct their ethnographies (Eggeling 2023; Forberg and Schilt 2023; Howlett 2022; Kozinets 2020). Yet, further methodological reflections on the integration of digital methods did not take place and broadly speaking, the academic community quickly returned to the status quo in the aftermath of the pandemic. We – the authors - had many discussions about this, arriving at the conclusion that in fact, the need to integrate digital methods into ethnographic work extends beyond the pandemic and benefits researchers in other situations, such as those working in warzones or otherwise conflict affected contexts. In this article we therefore ask ourselves how we can integrate the digital into ethnography in a way that helps generate meaningful, rigorous, and ethically sound research. As such, we are embracing the notion that in a digital age, 'being there' is not per definition limited to a geographical location; and that while being physically present cannot be substituted, digital tools allow us to enrich our research especially in situations where we cannot access the field.

3. Participant observation when mediated by the digital

In this section we differentiate between two approaches to participant observation that integrate the digital into this quintessential ethnographic method. A first approach takes digital spaces themselves as field sites and aims at participating in and observing social life on social media, forums, games and the like. This approach is grounded in digital ethnographic work, which takes the online world as a realm of social life in itself (Hine 2015; Hjorth et. al 2017; Kozinets and Gambetti 2021; Pink et. al 2016). A second approach focuses on gathering data of physical spaces, but uses digital tools - such as online mapping tools and video calling - to do so. Whereas the former centers on *the online field site*, the latter is mostly concerned with *the digital as a tool for collecting data* about the analogue world. Creating a sense of 'being there', the main objective of ethnographic research, is for each approach the objective of adopting participant observation as a method.

3.1 The online fieldsite

Is it possible to employ a method which is defined by informal and everyday encounters with interlocutors, without physically being in the same place as they are? Digital ethnography is predicated on the notion that the internet is "embedded, embodied, and everyday" (Hine 2015). In a digital ethnography, participant observation is generally conducted in interactive, social spaces of the internet, such as social media, online games, and conference calls. Although these social interactions are decidedly different from physical encounters, this does not make them any less real or integral to the lives of our interlocutors. Moreover, like other social interactions, our online communication is highly complex, and often incoherent and contradictory. As such, digital life merits the ethnographer's attention. We need to be attuned to the fact that while our research may be situated in a certain geography, our respondents might be invested in social realities that exist beyond that location (Dong 2017, p. 221). People engage in digital relationships, consume culture and media produced elsewhere, and create and share ideas in online communities. None of this is new, however it has become amplified as digital media have become more and more a part of everyday life to so many people across the world. Taking part in these digital lives can therefore be an essential aspect to understanding the social realities of the people and phenomena we study. In order to do so well, we need to be equipped with the right tools

When conducting ethnography in digital spaces, we search for ways to take part in the everyday aspects of digital life, which generally entails 'hanging out' in digital spaces. The objective is to disentangle the meanings of what can be observed on the surface, what Clifford Geertz (1973) has famously called "thick description". The reasons for choosing participant observation as a method are therefore essentially no different online from when participant observation is employed in geographically situated locations. More specific to the objectives of this paper, the method lends itself well as an addition to on the ground fieldwork. To conduct participant observation in online spaces can help the researcher to stay up to date on developments in the field while they are elsewhere; it can provide an avenue for informal interaction with interlocutors via private messaging and other types of online engagement (such as 'liking', 'commenting', or 'sharing' information); and it provides a way of observing social interaction between interlocutors in (re)posts, comment sections, fora and so on. As such, it can provide an avenue to being there to witness and partake in everyday social interactions, while in fact being physically distant. This might be particularly advantageous when traveling to the fieldsite becomes restricted, but the researcher wants to maintain regular contact with interlocutors, as well as remain up to date about developments in their social environment.

A first step in conducting participant observation in online spaces is to determine the online fieldsite. The researcher needs to determine the space, generally a specific social media platform, as well as the people and/or groups (organizations, parties, etc.) to include. For researchers seeking to add digital tools to collect data, the selection might be relatively easy and center around the interlocutors and/or groups that are already included in their research. In this way, the online and physical field can inform one

another, as the researcher builds the network using existing knowledge and expands it by locating other potential interlocutors online. When the objective however is to conduct more extensive participant observation, which goes beyond an already familiar group of people and organizations, it is necessary to construct the fieldsite. This requires specific attention, because where traditional field sites (such as neighborhoods or cities) are defined by geography, online field sites require a purposeful construction. Instead of imagining the online fieldsite as a place, it is perhaps better visualized as a network. Drawing on the work of George Marcus about multi-sited ethnography, Jenna Burrell (2017) has set out an approach to constructing the online fieldsite as a network. In his work, Marcus described the field as "designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography" (1995, p. 105). Adopting this definition for online ethnography, Burrell argues that one needs to follow people, stories, objects, and/or metaphors to construct the fieldsite (Burrell 2017, p. 52). A first effective strategy is to ask gatekeepers and interlocutors about the online spaces in which they engage and who they follow on these platforms. For Esther, these gatekeepers were three interlocutors that she came in touch with early on in the research. Their thoughts on who were worthwhile accounts to follow and why, were Esther's starting point for the network. By continuing this process with more interlocutors, the network then continued to grow. Moreover, after identifying a small number of initial accounts to include, a network can be expanded by following hyperlinks and reposts to discover others. It is worthwhile to devote considerable time to constructing the fieldsite and developing a clear sense of the boundaries of the online community the ethnographer seeks to observe. Moreover, researchers need to keep in mind that whereas the boundaries of a geographical area are more or less stable (or at least generally so), the online fieldsite is continuously in motion. New accounts are created, old accounts might disappear or become inactive, and platforms might be abandoned for other spaces by whole communities of users.[1]

Whilst conducting participant observation, the researcher should take rigorous fieldnotes of their observations, noting down frequently recurring themes, particularly relevant content, as well as notes on the interaction between different interlocutors, and between interlocutors and the researcher themselves (Boelstorff et al. 2012, pp. 82-85; Emerson 2011). There are various ways of taking effective field notes, but given the high volume of data on social media, taking screenshots is one way of making data collection considerably less laborious. Qualitative data analysis software processors (such as Atlas.TI, nVivo and MAXQDA) can be helpful tools for labeling and ordering screenshots in a meaningful way. Yet, this should always be done in tandem with writing up reflections. Kozinets (2020)[2] stresses that it is imperative to write an overview of what the researcher encountered at a given time (without recording everything), including reflections on what was and what was not saved and the motivation behind it. This is what distinguishes this use of digital tools from content analysis of social media. As an example, Esther's fieldnotes consist of elaborate typed documents, which include screenshots (and their metadata) and written reflections. The latter include comments on why she found it important to record this data, what it signified, and general observations on social media activity of her interlocutors. At moments where events took place that were particularly relevant to the research, it proved important to write down general observations about the atmosphere on social media as well as her own affective relationship to them. Especially when intense violence occurred at the research site, the images shared on social media were overwhelming, both in volume and content. The reflections on how this impacted Esther personally proved important both as research data and as a means of dealing with the emotional load from a mental

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[1] Think for example of when social media platform Twitter was bought by tech-giant Elon Musk, who renamed it 'X'. Many users migrated to other digital spaces, such as Mastodon. Even more recently, changes in the policies of Meta (after the ascent of the new Trump administration in the USA), motivated many users to close their accounts on Instagram and Facebook. More in general, social media are susceptible to fads and it is not uncommon for users to stop using one, when another becomes more popular.

[2] See also Kozinets (2015) page 390-394 for a more elaborate discussion about taking fieldnotes of online observations.

health perspective. On a more general level, the need to record accurate fieldnotes is twofold. Firstly social media content is ephemeral, content disappears after a set amount of time, it is removed, or becomes otherwise difficult to find later on. While the internet gives many of us the sense that everything is archived and thus can be retrieved, data storage is dependent on the social media company with which the data are entrusted. We cannot trust that material we observe at a particular time can always be retrieved at a later moment. Secondly, it is the decisions that go into collecting certain information rather than others which inform critical reflection on validity and reliability during data analysis.

For researchers conducting digital ethnography it can be a challenge to build rapport and gain trust, two key components to conducting sound ethnographic work, as this requires different strategies than in face-to-face settings (Kim et al. 2023; Millar 2018; Kozinets 2015). A major step that builds the trustworthiness of the researcher is to have an active account, and to clearly communicate about their identity as a researcher (Kozinets 2015, p. 312). An account that contains information about the researcher and posts regularly is likely to be seen as real, rather than as a potential bot, troll, catfish, or even spy. This might be somewhat of an open door, nonetheless it should be noted that it takes effort on the part of the researcher to determine what information and tone they should adopt while participating actively in an online community. Preferably, the researcher creates a new account specifically for the project (see also the discussions on ethics and on algorithms below), meaning that they enter the research with an 'empty canvas'. They consequently need to decide how to use this account and what to reveal about themselves to their interlocutors on it. In some cases, such as when doing activist research or when the researcher is an insider to the community, finding a voice can be easier and the researcher might want to actively make their political stance or personal opinions be heard. In other situations, it may take some time to find out what is an appropriate way of presenting oneself vis-a-vis interlocutors.

> It is an icy cold morning in January 2024. A large crowd of protesters has gathered at the Hague's Peace Palace, and I am among them. We are there to express our support for the South African case against Israel at the International Court of Justice, accusing the Israeli state of committing genocide on Palestinians in Gaza. As we walk the street circling the palace we are chanting, holding up banners, and documenting the protest on our phones. I take ample photos and videos of what feels like a historic moment. While I am there, I decide to share some of my images on the Instagram account that I use for my research with Lebanese social media activists. Many of my interlocutors are preoccupied with the war on Gaza, since the start of the war they have actively spoken out against the atrocities taking place merely a few kilometres from Lebanon's southern borders. While the protest continues, responses to my photos start coming in. Some like my stories, others send a message to express support or to ask about the atmosphere, and one person asks if he can share my images on his own account. I agree, I am happy for the images to reach a bigger audience. The exchange brings about a different dynamic in my online communication with my interlocutors. I am now an active contributor to the production of information and images on social media, rather than an observer.

This situation took place about two-and-a-half years into Esther's research. During that time she has been following a little less than one-hundred Instagram on a near daily basis. While in Lebanon for fieldwork, she also interviewed many of the interlocutors that she followed using online participant observation. Nonetheless, Esther struggled to position herself online. Working with political activists, there was a necessity to be open about her own politics to gain trust. At the same time, as an outsider from another continent with an obvious distance to the struggles of her interlocutors, it was also a challenge to find where and how to do so. That morning in The Hague was one particular moment where Esther was not only able to share in the conversation, but also contribute original and authentic content (a much valued attribute on social media), allowing for a different way of connecting with her interlocutors. What the vignette demonstrates is the importance of continuously reevaluating your position as a researcher, and how it affects the way interlocutors engage with you throughout the research process. Of course, the best way of creating trust and rapport often remains meeting face-to-face. Speaking to interlocutors, via video call if the researcher is geographically far away, can provide an opportunity to develop a better

understanding of who is behind the screen. Participant observation and interviewing (discussed further below) thus mutually reinforce one another and allow for creating a robust data set.

Finally, these issues touch upon ethical considerations that factor into this type of data collection. Unfortunately, there still are few clear guidelines for this methodology, nor are most Institutional Review Boards equipped to address them either. This is even though researchers conducting this form of online participant observation are presented with rather particular ethical dilemmas around transparency and informed consent.[3] One of the major dilemmas revolves around determining what is public and what is private information (Markham 2005; Townsend and Wallace 2016). Spaces that require a user to pass through a gatekeeper to gain access, are regarded as private (legally and morally). The researcher should request permission from the manager(s) of such spaces or accounts to conduct participant observation on them. Even so, this leaves the members, which can sometimes be thousands of people, to whom it is difficult to obtain informed consent individually. This makes conducting research in, for example, WhatsApp groups ethically tricky territory. Also with publicly accessible content the question is not clear cut. Information might be publicly accessible, but users are not necessarily expecting to be observed by strangers (Townsend and Wallace 2016: 10). Again, there might not be a one-solution-fits-all kind of answer, but the researcher does need to tread carefully and prioritize the interest of their interlocutors, whenever possible in dialogue with them. This should be informed by an assessment of the expectations of interlocutors, their vulnerabilities, and the sensitivity of the information. Beninger (2022) furthermore suggests distinguishing between different online users: creators, sharers, and observers (4). This distinction can be used to inform the way in which the researcher treats the data obtained from these interlocutors and how they are informed about the research. When the researcher engages more actively with someone's online activities and also engages in private conversations with them, they need to inform them about the purpose and use of their information proactively and obtain consent (Kozinets 2015, pp. 308-315). When conducting research in conflict settings - where social media content often is highly contentious and closely monitored - additional measures should be taken to protect the person's anonymity. Two strategies to prevent information from being traced back to individuals include 1) refraining from using direct quotes (which can be traced back with the help of a search engine) (Townsend and Wallace 2016), and 2) critically reflecting on how the analysis can create new risks for interlocutors because it draws attention to their activities and presents them in a new light.

3.2 Challenges specific to the online fieldsite

In addition to methodological considerations, researchers conducting digital ethnography must take into account several other challenges when collecting their data. In this section we discuss three key challenges that structure social life online and that are markedly distinct from physical environments. The first pertains to how algorithms affect what we observe (and cannot observe) online; the second to the particular aspects of online social behavior; and the third addresses how censorship and repression shape online environments.

Digital ethnographers cannot ignore the politics of the social media companies on which our interlocutors move. We become subjected to the same policies as them, meaning that we are targeted by advertisements and - crucially - algorithms. By now, most of us are under no illusions anymore about any progressive aspirations of companies in Silicon Valley and its counterparts elsewhere in the world. We know that social media companies are money making giants, whose currency is people's attention span. The spaces they have created do not resemble a Habermasian public sphere, but are commercialized echo chambers. Talk of "the algorithm" and its effects can sound intimidating to many researchers. Tech companies keep information about algorithms purposefully secretive, referring to it as a black box that even they do not fully comprehend (Cotter 2021). Yet, the direct implications for the digital ethnographer

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[3] For a more elaborate discussion of the ethics of conducting participant observation in online spaces, see for example Kozinet (2015), chapter 6 'ethics'.

are perhaps less complex than they seem, while no less important to consider. First of all, whether we are confronted with algorithms depends on the online environments in which we move. Closed groups are not subjected to it, and can generally be scrolled through chronologically. When observing the so-called 'timeline' or 'feed' however, its logic is structured by the algorithm, which now determines what we see first and most often, or in other words, what appears on the top of the feed. This is one reason why it is important to start a fresh account for a research project, as on a personal account the social media is already attuned to the researcher's private interests. It also means that a digital ethnographer needs to be aware that what they see is guided by algorithmic politics, and that in order to systematically follow certain accounts they need to make the conscious effort to manually visit them. If they do not appear in the feed, this does not always mean they are not active. Moreover, the behavior of the individual user determines what their feed looks like, meaning that the researcher should be aware that what they are seeing is unique to their account. In order to get a sense of what interlocutors might be seeing, they thus need to ask them about it, for example during an interview. Of course, the particularities of algorithmic maintenance differ across social media platforms and are also subject to frequent change.

Secondly, digital interactions are structured along their own internal social logics, determined both by people's online behaviors and by the economics and politics of digital platforms. The issue at stake here is that what we see on social media tells us less about reality than it does about what users want to share about that reality. It can be hard to tell if something represents what it says it does, or whether the people we follow are who they claim to be. Fiction and facts intertwine easily, as social media filters alter physical appearances, users construct carefully crafted presentations of the self, or hide the political agendas behind their online communication. These phenomena also bear increasing impact on social media interactions in conflict settings. Think, for example, of fighters posting videos of combat on their private social media accounts. Moreover, the development of artificial intelligence is rapidly making it more difficult to distinguish artificial from authentic. Recently, we have witnessed how AI-generated images of violence have quickly gone viral, as users unwittingly spread such imagery under the assumption that these are real photos or videos. In other instances, real images were taken out of their geographical or historical context and spread as if they were taken elsewhere. Major tasks of the digital ethnographer are therefore to assess content for truthfulness, as well as to make a concerted effort to grasp the perspective from which their interlocutors speak.

Digital authoritarian practices are also increasingly part of social media dynamics (Jones 2022; Kavanaugh and Maratea 2020; Michaelsen and Glasius 2018; Poell 2015). We are witnessing the rapid spread of new ways of repression and censorship online, as well as the intentional spreading of mis- and disinformation, all of which have become part and parcel of modern warfare. This poses additional challenges, because it demands recognition of fake news and propaganda, which requires contextualized knowledge of the situation. It is also not necessarily always discernible if an account is under attack by hackers or bots. In fact, Esther observed that her interlocutors were not even always aware when this happened to them. The reason being that social media companies implement so-called "shadow bans", putting restrictions on an account without notifying the user (Cotter 2021). Again, this indicates the need for digital ethnographers not to rely solely on their own observations and to engage in discussions with interlocutors about their online behaviors. Other useful sources of information about digital repression are digital rights organizations, which often conduct excellent monitoring research of digital rights breaches in particular locations.[4]

This paragraph only touched on three major challenges with the intention of drawing attention to them. The specifics of these challenges differ according to platforms, locations, and (sub)communities, and change continuously with the development of new technologies. As such, addressing them is always highly context specific.

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[4] i.e. SMEX for the MENA region, and 7amleh and Sada Social for Palestine.

3.3 The digital as a tool for collecting data

Having discussed how the online can function as a fieldsite for participant observation, the next section focuses on how to gather data of physical spaces while using digital tools - such as online mapping tools and video calling. Here, the digital becomes a tool for collecting data from the physical world. During the global pandemic of Covid-19, this form of data collection spread and became more widely accepted within academic communities - if only for a short while. We consider this a moment of innovation on which we would like to build, ensuring that the insights gained by researchers continuing their work from afar are capitalized on, rather than done away with in the pandemic's aftermath.

When collecting real-world data using digital tools, the objective is to obtain data that can only be retrieved by 'being there'; by participating in the mundane activities and interactions of everyday life (see for example Bernard 2011). A helpful way to understanding this approach to digital ethnography is presented by Kathleen and Billie de Walt (2011, pp. 23-24) who use the work of e.g., Adler and Adler (1987) and Spradley (1980) to explain the existence of varying degrees of participant observation. This can range from passive observation whereby the researcher is present but acts as a pure observer, to 'complete participation' when the researcher becomes a member of the group that's being studied. Spradley (1980) explains that the degree depends on the 'membership roles' that the researcher upholds, whereby a pure observer holds no membership to the community at all, while an active participation comes with 'active membership'. While the type of membership logically depends on various factors, and is not only up to the decision of the researcher, most physical fieldwork entail some form of active participation and active membership. This implies that researchers engage with interlocutors and are visible in the field, which helps with 'untangling the complex social life to develop an intimate understanding' as described above.

When using digital tools to conduct participant observation, the degree of participation is logically already limited by the physical distance between the ethnographer and the field. As Hine (2000, 23) indicates, being visible as a researcher in the field, allows for interaction and engagement with interlocutors. Yet, while there are certainly limits to this visibility when using digital tools, it is not impossible to adopt a more active form of participation. The effectiveness of using digital tools to collect data from analogue research contexts depends on the 'help' from interlocutors[5], which, next to the personality and general willingness of the interlocutors, depends for a large part on the successful creation of rapport. The creation of rapport when using digital tools, will be discussed more in depth in section 3.3. In the case of Marije's online fieldwork in Medellín, there were numerous interlocutors who were eager to help her 'be' in the city through the use of digital methods. The vignette below, which describes a situation in one of the most written about neighborhoods of the city, demonstrates this.

> When I call, Alejandro happily answers the phone. He is sitting in his shop at the entrance of Comuna 13. We have spoken a number of times before, but we finally managed to agree on a time to hold a walking interview, meaning he will show me the neighborhood. As he steps out on the street, showing me his view through the camera, people immediately start talking to him, asking him how he and his mom are doing. We find ourselves on a wide street, where, despite the pandemic, various taxis stop to drop off tourists. One side of the street contains a large wall, which is spray painted with colorful murals, and the other side is dotted with various houses and shops selling food and memorabilia. While walking it quickly becomes clear everyone knows Alejandro and he introduces me to various people, who I have short conversations with over the street noise which consists of chatter, blended with reggaeton and salsa music coming from the various stores and houses along the street. As we slowly reach higher ground a view of Medellín becomes visible. We continue to climb the hill, though only using the 'main road' because "the steep and small side streets can better be avoided still". As Alejandro shows me the entrance into one of the alleyways, he explains how much life has improved since the infamous 'Operacion Orion'[6] in 2002 and the construction of the main roads, which makes it possible to avoid the smaller alleyways where most

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[5] Another potential avenue is conducting research in cooperation with local researchers, who could provide on-the-ground data.

[6] Operation Orion (October 2002) was a military operation aimed to finish with the presence of various armed groups in Comuna 13, involved the use of helicopters, tanks, and automatic weapons; as a consequence various human rights abuses have been reported.

crime takes place. He gets slightly emotional when he explains how special it still feels to him, that he can safely show me these parts of the neighborhood and especially when visibly holding a phone in hand.

It was this situation particularly, that showed Marije the effectiveness of using digital tools to gather data from physical spaces. This became especially apparent when Marije was finally able to visit Medellín in December of 2022; she made an appointment to meet Alejandro and when arriving to Comuna 13, there was no need to check the map or wonder where his shop was, as the streets were already familiar to her and she knew where to go. It was a strange experience, having 'been there', without ever having been physically present. On top of that, it is an interesting exercise whereby the researcher can obtain insight into the ways in which their interlocutors view their environment; as a limited version of the street vision is available to the researcher when viewing it through the screen. As such, there is a form of agency of the participant that should be taken into account; in the example of Alejandro, he particularly showed the parts of streets of Comuna 13 that he found relevant to share. As such, this provided Marije with the valuable opportunity to observe the neighborhood through the eyes of Alejandro.

While the data obtained through this digital form of participant observation offered crucial research data, it is impossible to deny that certain details are missing, as not all senses can be used. For example, when physically being in Comuna 13, Marije noticed not only the sounds and colors, but also the smell of food that was sold along the street. Despite this, data obtained through these PO exercises is undeniably participant observational data, and not 'merely' interview data. When combined with a visit to the field, using digital tools to conduct PO can certainly bring an interesting addition to existing methods.

Our discussion of participant observation is not a complete overview, and does not address all opportunities and challenges the method offers. It does however provide an overview of some of the main aspects to be considered by researchers seeking to add participant observation to their existing research methods in order to collect data from afar. It is essential to reiterate the interconnection between the online and the offline, and to emphasise the opportunities that digital tools offer to continue the data collection process in research settings that are difficult to access, for example due to violent conflict. Without contextualizing online interactions, we miss out on how face-to-face relations intertwine with digital interactions, which individuals in the community engage in these online environments (and which do not), and how they are rooted in physical places and spaces. Both forms of online participant observation can therefore serve well to add to or strengthen fieldwork on the ground, but not to replace it. It is vital to keep in mind that online interactions take place between real people in real locations, whose lived environments shape and influence what they say and do online (Hine 2105). One way of building on participant observation is by conducting interviews (online or not), which is the main focus of the next section.

4. Interviews at a distance: Connecting across space and time

Interviews are another integral part of ethnographic research, as they provide the opportunity to ask in depth about our interlocutors' perspectives. As such, we focus specifically on finding interview methods that aid the sense of being present in far away places. This section is therefore divided into three parts, starting with various *interview methods*, followed by *building rapport,* and lastly a focus on *data reliability.*

4.1 Essentials: Finding the right techniques and building rapport at a distance

Over the course of the last decades, there has been an increasing availability of platforms offering video calling, which has made it significantly easier for interviewees to participate in interviews online (Deakin and Wakefield 2014; Howlett 2021). The use of video in online interviews is crucial, because it allows for interpreting body language. The availability of video conferencing, means that 'phone interviews' has

come to resemble onsite interviews closely (Hine 2015; O'Connor and Madge 2017). We have used a variety of platforms to conduct interviews throughout our research, the decision on which platform to use depends on two main factors. Firstly the preferences of interviewees, their level of comfort with using a particular platform, which tend to differ across places and for example generations. And second, the researcher must take into account the trustworthiness of a particular platform. Not all platforms are equally secure and therefore safe to use. This is a particular concern in contexts where there might be risk of governments tapping phone lines, but researchers must also be aware of whether companies gather and store activity on their platforms for commercial purposes.

After having agreed upon the use of the online platform, a decision needs to be made regarding the degree of *structuredness* of the interview. In other words, the level of control that the research and/or interlocutor has during the interview. As Kathleen deWalt and Billie deWalt (2011, p. 139) outline in their book, in structured interviews the interviewee has no control over the questions asked and a questionnaire is used, whereas in open interviews the researcher mostly follows the lead of the interviewee and merely uses a short interview plan. In ethnographic research the interviews are largely unstructured in nature, as it provides the best 'insight' into the lived experiences/thoughts of the interviewee (deWalt & deWalt 2011; Bernard 2011; Bernard & Gravlee 2015.). According to H. Russel Bernard, semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, are largely beneficial when it is clear that there will be only one interview opportunity (2011, p. 157). When conducting interviews through the internet the chance of a single interview opportunity increases, and as such the likelihood of conducting semi-structured interviews increases too. At the same time however, the borders between these interview *techniques* are not strict, and especially when conducting interviews online, knowing there is only one opportunity to speak to someone, it is beneficial to combine both unstructured and semi-structured interviews. Based on the experience of using digital ethnographic methods in Kosovo, Medellín and Lebanon, a good set-up is to start the interview with informal conversation and hence a low level of structure, and then move gradually towards a more semi-structured interview style. This allows for the creation of the crucial basis of rapport (which will discussed more in-depth in the next section), while at the same time making it possible to lead the interview in such a way that both sufficient data can be obtained and that there is space for unexpected discoveries when acquiring the 'interviewees' perspective.

Besides the more generally applicable decisions around setting up interviews, there are various promising interview methods and techniques particular to conducting interviews online. During research in Medellín three types of interviews proved particularly useful: *participatory mapping exercises*, *walking interviews* and *photo elicitation*. These methods helped to understand the structure of the interviewees' social environment (Kingsolver et al. 2017). More specifically, participatory mapping exercises are applied throughout various social sciences, and have become more integrated into ethnographic research at the start of the 20th century (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011; Kuznar & Werner 2001). Participatory mapping is, in the words of Cochrane and Corbett (2020, p. 706) a "mapmaking process that strives to make visible the relationship between a place and local communities through the use of cartography". To do so, the researcher works together with interlocutors to 'map' a neighborhood, community or institution, and to locate the locations/aspects that are important to them within this given context (see for example: Aspect Network, n.d.). Using such exercises help to better comprehend the research context, and as such this method can be used well as a digital method. For Marije, this method has proven especially useful during the online research in Medellín, as she would ask interlocutors to map their *barrio*, and the most important aspects within it. Doing so, especially multiple times with the people from the same area, provided her with a better understanding of the area.

A second method that is receiving growing attention, and which can be relevant when scoping the research context, is a walking interview (See for example: Kinney 2017; Evans & Jones 2011). Not surprisingly, a walking interview refers to conducting an interview while walking in an area of importance to the interlocutors, during which they indicate which places are of meaning to them and why. While it is of course not possible to physically accompany an interlocutor on a walk when doing online research, the

method can be very useful to explore the different research locations through the eyes of the interlocutors. Walking interviews can for example be held when the interlocutor presents their surroundings when video calling, or even when 'walking' simultaneously (researcher and interviewee) through Google Maps street view. There are of course situations in which the use of Google Maps, or overtly using a phone while walking the streets are not possible[7], and in such situations the use of photo elicitation could offer an interesting solution. With this method, the research uses photographs or images to solicit a conversation with, or prompt a reaction or insight from the interlocutor (See for example: Copes et al. 2018; Richarch & Lahman 2014). It is moreover also possible to use the photo voice-method, where the researcher gives the interlocutor the 'assignment' of taking photos of interesting places in their environment. This helps to better comprehend both the way in which the research population views their environment, and to obtain an understanding of the research context (especially when used in combination with for example walking interviews and/or mapping exercises). When not present in the research context, it can be very useful to ask interlocutors to share photos/videos of their environment, which can then be (anonymously!) used during other interviews to obtain more insight into the environment. When conducting research in Medellín, for example, a protest took place in the form of, after sunset, projecting politically activist slogans on the walls of large buildings in the city. Via her research network, Marije received various photos of these events, which she then shared (with consent) with others during later interviews. Doing so not only confirmed to other interlocutors that she is aware of current on-goings in the city, thereby obtaining credibility, but the pictures also helped with starting a conversation about often difficult topics.

Next to these varieties of interview methods, there are various techniques that can help to assure the validity of the findings and reliability of the data. Specifically when conducting interviews through the internet, it is crucial to assure the validity of the obtained data. There are various techniques that are of importance in this process, as for example the establishment of good rapport to reduce the potential of 'reactivity bias'[8] during the interviews (Bernard 2011, p. 354). It is impossible to fully eliminate (any kind of) bias, but the establishment of rapport plays an important role in reducing its impact. The importance of rapport will be further discussed in the next section. Two other techniques that can be of significant importance to secure the quality of your data are 'probing' and 'baiting'. Probing refers to for example remaining silent long enough, or portraying naivety, which can help to create space for the interlocutor to share crucial information. At the same time, through echoing an answer of an interlocutor, probing can be used to check the answers (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). Baiting means the interviewer acts as if they already know something, which often helps people to open up during a conversation (Bernard 2011, p. 165). These techniques function similarly when conducting interviews through a video conferencing platform, as the researcher can "access verbal and nonverbal cues, providing an equally authentic experience to in-person interviews" (Howlett 2021, p. 4; Sullivan 2012). While these methods and techniques have been discussed above as mostly separate, there is a great benefit in combining a number of these techniques within one interview session. Doing so helps to observe the context from various angles, and as such, are crucial when conducting ethnographic research at a distance.

It is however important to reiterate that within ethnographic research establishing *rapport* is crucial to obtain high-quality data. While there is not one accepted definition of rapport, there is a core understanding that rapport entails the creation of a relationship based on mutual trust and cooperation between the researcher and informant (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011; Jorgenson 1989). In the words of Musante (2014, p. 277): "We want our companions to forget, for a time at least, that we are outsiders", as this makes it possible for the researcher to observe information that only an 'insider' would know. There are various ways to establish rapport, of which informal conversation (either via phone or video calling or through a platform such as whatsapp) or 'being present' within a certain context are crucial.

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[7] This will be discussed more in-depth in the 'challenges' section

[8] Reactivity bias implies that people change their behavior as a consequence of being studied (See e.g., Bernard 2011, 265).

Hanging out simply refers to 'being present' in a certain context and informal conversation refers to a conversation on any kind of topic, most likely close to the interest of the interviewee.

Naturally, being present takes a different shape when using digital ethnographic methods. Mario Guimaraes (2005, p. 151) who argues that the creation of rapport in online settings is similar to offline settings, as there are enough opportunities to informally connect via various social media platforms. An indication of the establishment of rapport is a rapidly growing network, as there is a certain level of trust between the interlocutor and the researcher necessary before people share their network. In the research in Medellín, Marije solely used digital methods to establish rapport and the ability to have various informal conversations through all different types of social media platforms (i.e., instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, etc.) has been crucial to the fruitful establishment of rapport. There are, of course, various challenges and opportunities to the creation of rapport, which will be discussed below.

While there are various levels of rapport that can be achieved with interlocutors, it is crucial to establish a minimum level of rapport in each interview. When there is a feeling of mutual understanding, it creates a space in which the interlocutor feels more comfortable to share what is on their mind. In order to achieve this, it is important for a researcher to show genuine interest in the interlocutors, which can be done in various ways. Establishing rapport offline can be a time consuming activity, as it requires hanging out, informal conversation and often drinking lots of coffee and tea with people. On the contrary, creating rapport through digital methods lowers the bar of having informal conversations, often with multiple people at the same time. On top of that, as also argued by Ilmari Käihkö (2021), it makes it possible to to stay in contact on a continuous basis, which also creates an invitation to easily share other relevant data such as photos, articles, or videos. And, when the researcher is simultaneously conducting online participant observation, by communicating via liking and responding regularly to interlocutors' social media updates.

In line with challenges discussed above, being dependent on the internet (and are therefore limited to the interlocutors who have access to the internet) certainly creates challenges to conducting interviews, as well as to the creation of rapport. Added to that is that certain people are more inclined to have small talk via chat or voice messages, where others prefer to refrain from that, or simply cannot 'keep up'. This also reflected in the research in Medellín and Kosovo, where mostly people between the ages of 18-35 would be more open to small talk via messaging apps, where especially people above the age 40 are less inclined to share. As such, this can lead to a bias in the selection process, where the emphasis could come to lie on a younger age group for example. Especially when reaching out to interlocutors via social media, it is important to be cognizant of the particular subgroup that is predominantly using a platform, and to avoid the pitfall of assuming this to necessarily be a reflection of a certain community.

This however only goes for the continuous or frequent conversation via online platforms, and does not apply to the interviews itself. It is, logically, during the interviews also of importance to establish rapport, and one of the added challenges is that using digital methods often results in more one-time interviews. This is because the entry bar is lower, people can call in from the comfort of their own home, but this also means it is crucial to obtain as much relevant data as possible in one go. In order to establish this form of rapid rapport it is important to take time at the start of the interview for small talk, to establish a connection based on mutual understanding, for example by providing personal details from the researcher.

4.2 Getting access and finding connection to spaces and people

When conducting online interviews the decisions on where the interview takes place lies with the interlocutor. As a consequence, the interview might be perceived as less 'interrupting' of daily life, as there is no necessity of travel or the distractions of a 'new' environment. This notion is corroborated by researchers such as Salmons (2016) or Gruber et al. (2008, pp. 257–258), who argue that conducting online interviews might be less stressful, or even more relaxed, as the interlocutors find themselves "in

the comfort of a familiar online setting" (Salmons 2016, p. 62). Marije's research in Kosovo provides an interesting insight into the contrast between the online and the on-site interview, as the second half of interviews took place online after the country 'closed down' due to the spread of COVID-19. During these interviews it quickly became clear that being able to talk to someone in the comfort of their home helped to build quick rapport, while at the same time providing the research with an interesting insight into their private spheres. The vignette below describes a situation where Marije obtained valuable data during a first interview, such as the private space of one's own home, which in physical reality often takes longer.

> In Colombia it was mid-afternoon, but in the Netherlands – where I was – it was already late at night. Maria answered my zoom-call to conduct the interview we had agreed upon a week before. While I tried to begin with informalities, aiming to quickly establish some form of rapport, she mentioned she did not have too much time and that it would be good to start right away. A bit taken aback I collected my thoughts. I asked her about her daily life, about her idea of peace, and slowly she started to open up. She told me about her son, who was doing well during his first year in college, about her beautiful neighborhood which she was so proud of living in, and about other things on her mind. While the hour passed rapidly, Maria did no longer seemed pressured for time, she had visibly relaxed and enjoyed our conversation. I answered her questions about life in the Netherlands, and the home I lived in, and she eagerly showed me around her home. We talked about her favorite paintings on the wall and their meanings, the movies she owned and loved, and the noise of street life that entered her living room. Before we knew it, we were speaking for nearly three hours, at which point Maria needed to get on with her day and I, on the other side of the world, had to go to sleep.

Conducting online interviews also made it possible to 'enter' areas that would otherwise not have been accessible due to safety issues, this became especially clear in Medellín. In various instances interlocutors could provide an insiders view, and also show Marije a 'live stream' from the street they lived on, or provide insight into their *barrios* from the rooftop of their house. These are images that would have been difficult to obtain if it weren't for the use of digital methods. On top of that, the ability of joining an interview by simply calling from the comfort of Marije's home made it easier for people living in dangerous or remote areas to participate. As a result the accessibility of hard-to-reach parts of society might be increased through the use of digital methods, as it offers the opportunity to 'digitally be' in an area that one otherwise could not enter.

When discussing the challenges however, it is crucial to also acknowledge the limitations to participating in online interviews. Obviously, people need to have access to the internet in order to participate; this access can be limited due to for example electricity cuts, internet shortage or high internet and phone prices. As an example, in Lebanon telecom fees are among the most expensive across the Arab world and poor and remote areas of the country are less well connected and suffer regular power- and internet outages. Simply put, in order to be eligible for an interview you need to have a phone and (fast speed) access to the internet. Hence, there is an automatic exclusion of those who do not. When moreover aiming to use walking interviews, it is important to keep the context in mind. For example, many less affluent or insecure parts of the world have not been mapped (in detail or at all) on Google Maps street view, while in other places it is by far not safe enough to conduct walking interviews. Thus, as all other resources, digital access and connectivity are not equally distributed across space and across different groups in society.

Of course, all of this is linked to not *physically* 'being there', which is also discussed as a challenge of participant observation. In a similar manner, there is a lack of 'tacit knowledge' when not being able to sit in front of the interviewee. For example, even though the use of video calling makes it possible to observe certain aspects of cultural body language, you will not be able to make a holistic observation. While challenges as such are of course impossible to circumvent fully, building strong rapport is again crucial to obtaining in-depth data and to understanding both the tacit and explicit aspects of a society.

5. Conclusion

Embracing the digital, both as a tool and as a space, can be a viable avenue to continue ethnographic fieldwork under difficult circumstances. Such strategies are vital, because when violence erupts, our work in many cases only increases in importance. Whether it is about studying actual violence or about studying other phenomenona within a violent context, continuing knowledge production in conflict affected-settings is important. It can be a way to remain committed to the people we have been working with for a long time; continue work on important local issues; or to strive for social justice in the face of violence, crimes, and oppression. Whereas spending time in the fieldsite can bring with it too many safety risks, for both ethnographers and their interlocutors, digital ethnography can be a solution (although we certainly do not claim it always is).

As we have discussed in this paper, there are important considerations to be taken into account when moving fieldwork (partly) online. Conducting online research requires critical reflection on and methodological grounding in existing methodological frameworks. In this text we have set out various strategies for doing so, discussing two key methodologies of ethnography, participant observation and qualitative interviewing. All of this is with the thought in mind that, as we have also stated above, an online presence cannot replace being physically at the fieldsite. The key, according to us, is to make a careful consideration which balances the possibility of access to the field and the limitations of collecting data from afar. Beyond safety considerations, additional considerations may also be part of this decision, such as the environmental impact of fieldwork.

We end with a note on the ethical issues that online ethnography raises. The American Anthropological Association has 'do no harm' written as rule number one and it is a general agreement among anthropologists globally that this rule is essential to all aspects of doing research. While, reasonably, this rule also applies to using digital methods when conducting research, there is growing attention on the importance of ethics in digital ethnography, also referred to as 'digital ethics', such as discussed in section 2.1. This however does not cover the manifold ways in which we use the digital as a tool for doing observations or interviewing, as we have discussed. Many ethical dilemmas resemble the larger debate on ethics applicable to ethnography in general, which is why we do not elaborate on them in this article. At the same time, a number of particular questions also come forward. For example, how do we avoid promoting extractivist research, where the researcher extracts information for their own benefit, while in the comfort of their own home? Other questions revolve around the particularities of reciprocity and remuneration in an online context. For example, should researchers reimburse internet costs of interlocutors when interviewing them online? These and other questions indicate the many discussions that still need to be had among ethnographers about how to integrate the digital into everyday ethnographic practices.

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Personhood in the digital realm

Archer vs. Dreyfus[•]

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Abstract

In this paper, I will provide a brief overview of Hubert Dreyfus' and Margaret Archer's views on the concept of a person, with the question of the possibility of AI-human interactions in the background. My aim is to explore how the contrasting views held by the two thinkers on human-AI relationships might help to map the terrain within which philosophical discussions about this topic are meaningful. Before examining their views, I will contextualise their thinking by focusing on the following questions: Is the traditional definition of the human being as a rational animal tenable from the perspective of AI? What are the scenarios concerning the possible cohabitation of humans and robots? Ought we to modify our views of the human place in the universe if personhood is not restricted to the members of the human species? The comparison of the two thinkers highlights decisive differences in approach: While Dreyfus' main question is how the digital environment affects human nature, Archer focuses on AI personhood, suggesting the fluidity of boundaries between humans and robots.

Keywords: AI; Archer; Dreyfus; robots

1. Introduction

With regard to philosophical anthropology, it could be argued that the most significant question that has been posed by the concept of AI since it was first proposed by Turing is the perennial question of what it means to be a human being as a person (in the sense of Strawson's 'primitive concept').[1] In order to gain insight into this question, I have selected two prominent thinkers, Hubert Dreyfus and Margaret Archer, for closer examination. In what follows, I would like to suggest that they represent two different ways of thinking about the concept of a person in the digital environment. Thanks to this, we can use their considerations to outline the terrain within which the philosophical discussion about this topic is meaningful. In light of these considerations, I will not delve into some differences that might be perceived as significant from another perspective. From the perspective of this paper, for instance, whether AI is based on large language models or not is not a primary concern.

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[1] Strawson 1959: 101ff.

In my overview of Dreyfus' and Archer's concept of a person from the perspective of human-AI interactions, I will concentrate on their later works. Dreyfus was among the first social theorists and philosophers to reflect at length upon the effects of the internet on its users' personalities,[2] while Archer started to think about the possibility of non-human agency (AI personhood)[3] around the same time.[4] Dreyfus, a lifelong critic of AI, held that "for the time being at least, the research program based on the assumption that human beings produce intelligence using facts and rules has reached a dead end, and there is no reason to think it could ever succeed".[5] Therefore, the question of personhood from his perspective concerns only the end user of computers: how does the technology embodied in computers affect humans? The question concerning specifically this technology is justified because the computer represents the defining technology of communication, and it is also an "instrument of instruments",[6] since it governs and employs other instruments. Archer considered her primary task as reclaiming the notion of agency threatened by the power of social structures. In her later years, she pondered the possibility of non-human agents because of the appearance and spread of AI robots during the last decades. She raised the following two interrelated questions: Can intelligent robots be regarded as persons (agents)? Is cooperation or even friendship possible between humans and robots?[7] All these questions affect our traditional conceptions of a human being.

Therefore, in comparing their conceptions, two questions need to always be kept in mind: 1. Is the capacity to think the determining feature of the human being? 2. Is rationality the privilege of human beings? From these questions follow further ones since acknowledging just the theoretical possibility of AI personhood implies questions about possible cohabitation: will it be peaceful, with ties of solidarity between different species, or will it lead to civil war? Are humans justified in treating the gifts of nature as resources in their service, or must they willy-nilly revise their traditional views of the "human place in the cosmos" (Scheler)? What are the evolutionary prospects for humans, given the technological possibilities?

2. Technology and the rational animal

As a first step in comparing the views of the two thinkers about personhood, let me briefly highlight some key topics of thinking about the relationship between humanity and technology during the last hundred years. My first reason for doing so is that these 'enframe' the outlook of the authors to be discussed here. My second reason is inspired by an analogy. Concerning the notion of 'person,' it is plausible to draw an analogy with an insight from the history of communication technologies. The emergence of AI (and the possibility of AGI) must shed new light not only on the nature of intelligence but also on the concept of a person in general.[8]

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[2] Dreyfus 2008.

[3] Archer 2000.

[4] It is symptomatic that Dreyfus had to revise his book a few years after the first edition. Further, it's remarkable that the two thinkers didn't reflect on each other's works. More precisely, it is curious that Archer neglected Dreyfus' work since he devoted virtually his whole life to the problem of AI, while the topic of the non-human agency appears in Archer's later works.

[5] Dreyfus 1992 [1972], ix.

[6] Cf. Aristoteles *De* anima, 432a.

[7] This is, of course, not only a theoretical problem. What is at stake becomes urgently clear when we must decide on questions such as whether "we ought not to produce cerebral organoids implanted in a 'robotic body'" (Gabriel 2021: 57).

[8] In his book about the internet, Dreyfus refers several times to Sherry Turkle, the psychoanalyst who, in her pioneering book (1983 [2005]), raised before him the question of how the human-computer interaction shapes ('informs') the human spirit. Turkle's insights were inspired by the experiences of those who "were first confronted with machines whose behavior and mode of operation invited psychological interpretation and that, at the same time, incited them to think differently about human thought, memory, and understanding... they came to see both their minds and computational machines as strangely unfamiliar or 'uncanny' in the sense that Sigmund Freud had defined it. For Freud, the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) was that which is 'known of old and long familiar' seen anew, as strangely unfamiliar" (ibid.: 1). Therefore, she states, psychoanalysis and computation are, to her, equally *subversive* vocations because they *defamiliarise* what, if anything, seemed until then an unquestionably familiar phenomenon (cf. *dépaysement*). The 'uncanny' means precisely this duality: it includes "both the look back and the look forward. Seen from one angle, relational artifacts seem familiar, extensions of what came before. They play out ... the themes of connection with animation of the machine ... And yet they are also new in ways that are challenging and evocative. To understand our times we must learn to fully experience this double vision" (ibid.: 290f.).

A similar development took place in the realm of communication technologies more than half a century ago. Marshall McLuhan criticised[9] historians for not studying the impact of orality and literacy on the forms of thought as well as social structures and entities, acceding that "[p]erhaps the reason for the omission is simply that the job could only be done when the two conflicting forms of written and oral experience were once again co-existent as they are today". McLuhan suggests with this remark that the question concerning the role and significance of communication technology became visible and thus virtually unavoidable[10] due to a significant shift in the sphere of communication technologies (in McLuhan's case, to the appearance of a new kind of orality through the emergence and spread of radio and television). Following in his footsteps, Walter J. Ong showed[11] how the "technologizing of the word" "restructures consciousness" (primarily through writing), our mental capacities, and thinking in general; and that it, therefore, must affect how we conceive of ourselves as persons).

According to the Aristotelian-scholastic view, intelligence is the distinguishing feature of human beings[12] ('animal rationale'), and only human beings can be persons in the ordinary sense – thus, 'intelligence' and 'person' virtually seem to be synonyms. (Put another way: their domains overlap since only human beings are blessed with intelligence – a person is, according to Boëthius' definition, an "individual substance of a rational nature"[13]). Therefore, speaking about *artificial* intelligence – even if 'intelligence' is understood figuratively – inevitably calls for revising the concept of a person. From its very formulation, the idea of AI challenges the view that personhood is the exclusive attribute of the human species (and that belonging to the human species is a sufficient condition of personhood).[14] Viewing humans as beings whose distinguishing feature is intelligence (equated with the ability of logical thinking) gave rise to the idea that to imitate what is essentially human, machines must be able to make observers believe that they are just as capable of thinking (that is to say, manipulating logical symbols) as humans, and vice versa: the advancements in AI gave rise to the view that the human brain works essentially like a computer (the 'computer theory of mind'). If this could be proven, it might lead us to reconsider the nature of mental phenomena (including the freedom of the will) in a way that correlates them with biochemical processes in the brain. Despite their determined anti-cartesian stance, both reject the notion that mental phenomena might be merely epiphenomenal byproducts of these processes.

3. Scenarios of cohabitation

According to Jost Landgrebe and Barry Smith[15], the nearly hundred-year history of AI has witnessed three periods of exaggerated expectations and subsequent sobering. The authors call this phenomenon the 'AI hype cycle'.[16] They assert that we are at the end of the third cycle, having reached the third phase of sobering. They provide several reasons for the cyclical phenomenon of the subsequent waves of enthusiasm and sobering concerning the possibilities of artificial intelligence (AI), the most important being the "lack of knowledge and the weak foundation of AI enthusiasm itself". This enthusiasm has given rise to (and has been fed by) an "optimism as to future advances in AI feeds ... into what is now called 'transhumanism', the idea that technologies to enhance human capabilities will lead to the emergence of new 'post-human'". The authors describe two scenarios of achieving this 'post-human

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[9] McLuhan 2011: 2ff.

[10] It was, of course, *possible* for historians to make enquiries into the nature of writing before the emergence of the new technologies (or before the recognition of their importance).

[11] Ong 2012.

[12] According to the theological view, human beings are also privileged because of the gift of free will (*arbitrium*).

[13] *Contra Eutychen*, IV. 8f.

[14] Turing believed that God could endow animals and machines with a soul (hence with the ability to think), arguing that to think otherwise "implies a serious restriction of the omnipotence of the Almighty", cf. Turing 1950: 443.

[15] Landgrebe – Smith 2022: 9ff.

[16] In 1992, Dreyfus wrote that "the research program *based on the assumption* that human beings produce intelligence using facts and rules has reached a dead end, and there is no reason to think it could ever succeed" (Dreyfus 1992, ix). (Dreyfus' qualification – my italics – needs emphasis: he doesn't exclude the possibility of this sort of AI.)

condition': "[I]n one scenario, humans themselves will become immortal .... [I]n another scenario, machines will develop their own will and subdue mankind into slavery...."[17]

Both traditional religions and "secular humanism"[18] took the privileged status of the human being for granted (either as the Lord of the universe or as someone whose will imposes law or who "imposed the order which he taciturnly deemed justified"[19]). This status, however, will be questioned in both scenarios from the perspective of the *nearing singularity*. History destined humans and machines (gadgets) to live in symbiosis: from now on, the question is whether they are able to; if they are, how and at what price? In the first scenario, humankind may survive and, in a sense, be able to preserve its privileged status; the price of this being a certain degree of transformation deploying the given technological possibilities. This metamorphosis is going to, step by step, blur the boundaries between humans and machines,[20] or more generally, between the species ("we are cyborgs", "we have always been cyborgs").[21] Thus, humans have become a fluid species. In the second scenario, humankind loses its privileged status for good, and machines take over the world. (As Rushkoff succinctly formulated[22]: "Program, or be programmed. Choose the former, and you gain access to the control panel of civilization. Choose the latter, and it could be the last real choice you get to make".)

Instead of two scenarios, let me speak about the same scenario (or development) viewed from two different perspectives. Using Archer's suggestive opposition,[23] let me call the first perspective *robophilia,* while the second *robophobia.*[24]

Although Archer doesn't specify or even outline the meaning of these terms, the intention is evident enough. *Robophilia* suggests at least the possibility of peaceful cooperation between humans and robots. It hints at, however, something more. Understood in the Aristotelian vein as 'friendship', *philia* (*amicitia* or *caritas)* implies that humans and robots can constitute a cohesive group or society based on solidarity. As Aristotle puts it: "...the pursuit of a common social life is friendship".[25] Archer adds[26] that "[s]olidarity exists only when relations of friendship become general".[27] Thus, if she can plausibly argue that friendship is possible between humans and robots, she can also plausibly argue for the possibility of a community based on their solidarity.

According to Archer,[28] "*Robophobia* dominates *Robophilia*, in popular imagination and academia".[29] She identifies the following paradox in this connection (without explaining it): "the fear of AI 'taking over' remains" while we are getting more and more familiar with AI in our ordinary activities.[30] The former attitude represents the fear the symbiosis of humans and machines will not be peaceful: an inevitable struggle for dominance ensues between them, bringing about the worst that can happen to a community – the state of *stasis*, the civil (or fratricidal?) war. However, we must face another lurking danger, too: that of *fetishising* the importance of AI in our everyday lives. As Mark Coeckelbergh warns,[31]

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[17] These scenarios are similar to those identified by Donati (2019: 54-57). These "place human transcendence, respectively, in the total immanence of technological evolution and in an immanent process of creation that makes exist what is not." In addition to these two scenarios, the author introduces a third one, which "conceives transcendence as an emerging relation between what exists (immanent reality) and what can be (transcendental reality)."

[18] Archer 2011: 283.

[19] Ibid.: 51.

[20] The hope and fear concerning the human-machine relationship are exemplarily embodied in Data and the Borg from *Star Trek.* It is hardly accidental that the former is an individual while the latter is a collective (corporate) being (cf. Dinello 2016); still, both beings can unquestionably be regarded as persons.

[21] Haraway 2004: 8; Sorgner 2023.

[22] Rushkoff 2010: 13.

[23] Archer 2023.

[24] Haraway (2004: 12) highlights the ubiquity of machines, directly evoking religious ideas ("... they are everywhere and they are invisible. Modern machinery is an irreverent upstart god, mocking the Father's ubiquity and spirituality... The ubiquity and invisibility of cyborgs is precisely why these sunshine-belt machines are so deadly. .... They are about consciousness – or its simulation.")

[25] Aristoteles *Politica* 1280b.

[26] Archer 2011: 290.

[27] Moreover, Archer and Donati (2015: 66) regard friendship "as paradigmatic of 'relational goods'."

[28] Archer 2021: 177.

[29] In the following, I will use these two terms to refer to hostile or friendly attitudes towards technology.

[30] Archer 2020: 16.

[31] Coeckelbergh 2015: 226.

"[b]y focusing on human-technology relations, we might be blind to how technologies such as automation, AI, and robots mediate human-human relations." Let me call this phenomenon *AI fetishism*. A more sublated form of this is when the tools are held in awe because of their physical properties that evoke a superhuman dimension. Arendt formulates this kind of fetishism the following way: "For the animal laborans ... as it is subject to and constantly occupied with the devouring processes of life, the durability and stability of the world are primarily represented in the tools and instruments it uses, and in a society of laborers, tools are very likely to assume a more than mere instrumental character or function".[32] Dissecting the so-called 'substitution effect', Jack M. Balkin states[33] that the substitution "involves a *fetish or ideological deflection*", in analogy with the 'commodity fetishism'. He adds: "What is true of commodities in markets is also true of the use of technological substitutes in the form of robots, AI agents and algorithms. These technologies become part of social relations of power among individuals and groups".[34]

The anxiety concerning the potentials of AI accounts for the frequent reference in the literature to the Hegelian dialectic of mastery and servitude (or Lordship and bondage).[35] Hegel describes[36] the development of self-consciousness as the struggle for recognition of two consciousnesses (the dialectic of the master and the slave).[37] The fear of those who present the potential future struggle between machines and humans as a variation on the dialectic of the master and the slave tacitly presupposes thereby the personhood of machines since consciousness is, in any interpretation, one of its decisive criteria. Thus, the life-and-death struggle between machines and humans is an interpersonal conflict (or a conflict between various groups of the same society: civil war).[38] Even without an ensuing war, their cohabitation tends to be seen by the robophobiacs as problematic, at least because, in itself, it amounts to the extinction of humanity. The transhumanists,[39] hoping to overcome what is "merely human", only contribute to it. Charles Rubin succinctly formulates the paradox: "On the one hand, the motive force for transforming ourselves is a deep dissatisfaction with the merely human. On the other hand, this dissatisfaction, and the efforts at transformation it produces, are presented as quintessentially human".[40]

4. Human place in the universe revised

The first scenario implies that human nature experiences a transformation while adapting to the new culture, the symbol of which is the computer.[41] In the second scenario, though human nature itself may remain untouched, the status of humankind as the ruler of the world changes for good. The first scenario is the expression of human yearning for immortality, and the second is that of fear of slavery (or 'social death'). In either case – whether human nature changes due to the technical possibilities (in McLuhan's

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[32] Arendt 1998: 144f.

[33] Balkin 2017: 1225.

[34] About this fetishism – including inverse commodity fetishism – see also Fuchs 2022.

[35] For Arendt, the dialectic of the master and the slave was, even by 1958, irrelevant because "the question ... [was] not so much whether we are the masters or the slaves of our machines, but whether machines still serve the world and its things, or if, on the contrary, they and the automatic motion of their processes have begun to rule and even destroy world and things" (Arendt 1998: 151). This thought was formulated by Hans Jonas as the vulnerability of nature (Jonas 1984 [1979]: 6ff.) and was extended by Nick Bostrom in his vulnerable world hypothesis (cf. Bostrom 2019).

[36] Hegel 2018: §187.

[37] Hegel makes an important distinction: "The individual who has not risked his life may well be recognized as a *person*; but it has not attained to the truth of this recognition as recognition of an independent self-consciousness". With this remark, he suggests the plausibility of distinguishing between 'person' understood as an individual member of the human species and 'person' who, in addition to this, displays certain characteristics, too. Their "life and death struggle" is to be understood figuratively as "social" life or death. Since the consciousnesses strive for recognition, neither of them is interested in the death of the other if only because they can't get due recognition from a dead opponent. Cf. Taylor 1975: 215.

[38] A variant of the dialectic of the master and the slave is to formulate the AI/human being relationship in terms of colonisation. Cf. Archer 2021: 179. It is worth recalling Horace's famous dictum in this context: *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit* (*Ep.* II. 1. 156).

[39] Following Rubin (2014), I use this word here as a generic term to refer to the representants of variegated streams of 'humanism'. (It surely doesn't apply to the declaredly non-anthropocentric metahumanism). As a general overview of these 'humanisms' cf. Sorgner 2021.

[40] Rubin 2014.

[41] The first sign of this change was to describe the working of the human mind using the analogy of the working of computers. Cf. Jaki (1969) as an early critique of this view.

terminology: the "extensions of man" or "prostheses"[42]) or the human place in the world due to the rule of the machines – the change caused by the emergence of computer-based technologies is perceived as all-pervasive, incomparable to changes caused by (or ascribed to) earlier technologies.[43] This is because, in addition to controlling other tools, it is the main tool of communication, too. Networked computers provide the possibility of communication between human beings, between humans and computers, and between computers (and other tools [IoT]). Applying Dewey's famous remark[44] – "social life [is] identical with communication" – to our situation, the presence of tools of *communication* is and must be all-pervasive (as well as be perceived as such) since they affect both human nature and the status of humans in the cosmos of things created by themselves. (Consequently, as Turkle asserted,[45] the computer was not "just a tool"; she argued for the need "to look beyond all the things the computer does *for* us ... to what using it does *to* us as people"). Paraphrasing Freud,[46] humans, after Copernicus, Darwin and Freud himself, are forced to abandon their unchallenged privileged status, this time in another respect.

Hence, the history of philosophy or thinking about man and society in the last hundred years can be understood as centred around "the question concerning technology" (Heidegger). According to Weber's diagnosis,[47] a particular attitude, asceticism, "transferred to the life of work in a vocational calling... commenced to rule over this-worldly morality, it helped to construct the powerful cosmos of the modern economic order. Tied to the technical and economic conditions at the foundation of mechanical and machine production, this cosmos today determines the style of life of all individuals born into it..." With this diagnosis, Weber suggests that the ordered whole of society ('cosmos') affects the individuals and controls them through the *psyche* (they interiorise the control). The central importance of technology has been acknowledged by various philosophical schools (Heidegger and the Frankfurt School) that otherwise most desperately oppose each other. From this perspective, it is not an exaggeration to assert that "[t]he proper form of modern philosophy is the philosophy of technology, because technology... is both the defining and the most worrying aspect of modernity".[48]

This all-pervasiveness of technology is reflected in the language, too: due to internet technology, computing has become ubiquitous (or omnipresent).[49] Before the emergence of the personal computer, ubiquitousness was, according to the *American Heritage Dictionary,* a feature of mass culture (the symbol of which was an earlier tool of communication, the television[50]). Ubiquity or omnipresence in both spheres[51] suggests a transcendent realm which surpasses individuals (as well as groups of individuals) with limited capacities. This situation in itself must affect how we think about human nature, although the ubiquitousness itself can "dull our sensitivity to their effects".[52]

Ubiquitousness or omnipresence, however, seems to be a central feature not only of the technology or mass culture but of the individual, too. Pellegrino describes[53] this phenomenon as an anthropological constant: "Ubiquity evokes a desire as ancient as humanity: 'being anywhere anytime' as opposed to the hic et nunc constraints of face-to-face interaction. ... The tendency toward reaching a virtual, potential omnipresence is supported by convergent artefacts, which make ubiquity more at hand than ever. Being here and there, performing multiple tasks at the same time, distributing our attention to different media,

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[42] Even 'thought-prosthetics', cf. Turkle 2005: 3.
[43] Cf. Bolter 1984: 8f.
[44] Dewey 2018 (1916): 8.
[45] Turkle 2005: 3.
[46] Freud 1917: 4ff.
[47] Weber 2001 (1905/21): 123.
[48] Young 2015: 375ff.
[49] Although *ubiquitas* and *omnipraesentia* are not strictly equivalents (except in some cases), *ubiquity* and *omnipresence* here can be understood as such. It is worth noting here that in the last printed version of OED, *ubiquity* had not yet surfaced in the context of computing.
[50] See Adorno 1954: 216.
[51] The non-plus ultra of ubiquitousness is "ubiquitous real-time worldwide surveillance" to protect the "vulnerable world" against the "black ball" inventions in possession of which "individuals [could] ... kill hundreds of millions of people using readily available materials" (Bostrom 2019, 455). About the phenomenon of ubiquitous surveillance cf. Masco 2019.
[52] Turkle 2005: 3.
[53] Pellegrino 2008: 80.

communication partners and communicational routines, is an everyday experience for an increasing number of people." The individual can be present, "here and there... at the same time" virtually (or spiritually). According to one definition of the *Oxford English Dictionary,* virtual is "[t]hat is so in essence or effect, although not formally or actually; admitting of being called by the name so far as the effect or result is concerned." That is, virtual space is, in all respects, the same (just as real) as physical space, except that its reality is not a physical one. (The same is true of the objects contained in a virtual space.) As Chalmers formulated[54]: "Virtual objects are real, too!"[55] Thus, "virtual" actually came to mean[56] "as if".[57] Virtual space is the simulacrum of the physical one. Somebody's virtual presence somewhere (like Christ's in the bread during the Eucharist for the Lutherans) "is not simply represented but makes itself felt".[58] Virtual space can partly overcome the lack of physical reality due to this.[59] Thus, to be present at various places at the same time implies a certain degree of separation of the soul from the body. Put in Platonic terms: immersing into the virtual reality, the soul leaves its body behind, breaking free from its prison.[60] This state results in so-called 'present shock'.[61] It is a symptom of somebody who can be present in their physical reality in one place at a given time. Such a person must become frustrated because of their finitude in facing many options at any given moment since, lacking reliable criteria of preference, they can't decide (the result of which is the many symptoms of FoMo). Therefore, such a person can't insert him/herself into any narrative (digiphrenia) – he/she becomes unable to experience lifelong attachment or commitment. (Or put it in terms of classical moral philosophy: the self who fancies himself sovereign and believes that thanks to his free will (*libera voluntas*), he "freely designs ends that are pursued for their own sake" suddenly realises that he lacks even the freedom of choice (*liberum arbitrium*) "which is only free to select the means to a pre-designed end".[62] This conclusion appears to align with Dreyfus' view about one's ineliminable embeddedness in a life-world. It is surely a prerequisite for this that one has – or is – a body [63]. While for him, this body is, due to his existentialist commitment, as a matter of course, the organic body of humans, Archer leaves room for the possibility of agents with inorganic or hybrid bodies. (Dreyfus, who died in 2017, could not have knowledge about the most recent developments in the field of AIs.) This possibility led to a new wave of reflection on the concept of 'humanism' (e.g. trans- and posthumanism).

4.1 Excursus: The many faces of 'humanism'

Language reflects that technological changes imply changes in the human essence. Various 'humanisms' try to define the new human condition. Post-, super-, trans-, and ultrahumanism suggest a certain

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[54] Chalmers 2022: 187.

[55] This statement evokes William James' view that "[t]he origin of all reality is subjective, whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real" – as interpreted by Schütz (1945: 533). If, therefore, virtual is real (and vice versa) the 'virtual' world must, as a matter of course, contain 'multiple realities' just as the 'real' world.

[56] Shields (2003, Chapter 1) gives a very instructive historical survey of some other, by now obsolete meanings of 'virtual'. Appropriately interpreting *'virtus'*, we almost immediately get to its new meaning: cyberspace (or virtual space) has the power or ability to bring about the illusion of physical reality.

[57] Heim 1998: 221.

[58] Ibid.: 220.

[59] From the early days of the internet, sceptics (Dreyfus included) concerning the internet's capacity to make real communication possible and bring about genuine communities have been pointing to the deficient bodily experience. This deficiency has by now been partly remedied thanks to web cameras. However, it remains, by and large, the case that the "difficulty for interpretation [in non-face-to-face communication] is the lack of 'cues'." Nagel 1998: 193; cf. Rushkoff 2013).

[60] Soma – sema, cf. Plato *Gorgias* 493a. A natural person, who has only one physical body (making it possible to be identified as a person) can't be in its full reality in two places at the same time. The king, in contrast, has two bodies, a natural and a political one, thus he can, and his office is to be everywhere anytime (for that matter also the fisc, cf. Kantorowicz 2016 [1957]: 7-23; 185 n. 92). "...the Prince in his capacity of a *Iustitia animata* had to make that goddess manifest, and as her constituent he could claim for himself with some inner logic a virtual omnipresence in his courts: through his officers he owned... 'potential ubiquity' even though in his individual body he could not be present everywhere" (ibid.: 142).

[61] Rushkoff 2014.

[62] See Arendt 1978: 132.

[63] See e. g. Dreyfus 1967.

transcendence with their prefix; they convey a desire to overcome allegedly natural human limitations.[64] 'Technological humanism' stresses the role of 'artificial' nature, man's dependence on the magical force of technology (embodied in "technofantasies"[65]), believing that "Homo sapiens as we know it has run its historical course".[66] In addition to the ones mentioned, we have some other humanisms as well: a-, anti-, and metahumanism: each term suggests a vague discontent about the earlier and more traditional views of 'the human place in the cosmos' and, due to this, an uncertainty about the future status of human beings in the new cosmos created by technology. These 'humanisms' share an intense interest in the developments of technology. They betray a situation marked by the dominance of technology in which human humanity has become a question to itself.[67]

This situation was anticipated by Heidegger in the *Letter on Humanism* (1947). The author of this work, the key topic of which is the status of man as animal rationale, "entered a trans-humanist or post-humanist realm of thought in which an essential part of philosophical reflection on the human being has moved ever since".[68] In Heidegger's enigmatic formulation: "[m]an is not the Lord of the beings. He is the shepherd of Being".[69] With this remark, he hints at a profound change in thinking about man: he is the Shepherd of Being because he is "more than merely human if this is represented as 'being a rational creature'." From the perspective of the Aristotelian-scholastic tradition, this cannot be but an irreparably grave loss – man ceases to be what he once was. But Heidegger asserts that man "loses nothing" with it. On the contrary, "he gains in that he attains the truth of Being. He gains the essential poverty of the shepherd, whose dignity consists in being called by Being itself into the preservation of Being's truth".[70] This truth, which is not given to us once and for all, is revealed (or disclosed) through technology. For Heidegger, this is what enframing[71] (the essence of technology) means: providing an ever-changing frame thanks to which we perceive the phenomena of the world around us. "Technology is therefore no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing. If we give heed to this, then another whole realm for the essence of technology will open itself up to us. It is the realm of revealing, i.e., of truth".[72] What he perceives as a danger is not the technology itself but certain features of modern technology: "The revealing that rules throughout modern technology has the character of a setting-upon... Unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and switching about are ways of revealing." Thinking through the characteristics of revealing ruling modern technology, Heidegger concludes that "man himself belong[s] even more originally than nature within the standing-reserve [*Be-Stand*]". "The current talk about human resources [*Menschenmaterial*] ... gives evidence of this".[73] Man whose destiny is to be the Shepherd of Being is thus reduced to the status of standing-reserve (or human resource) for modern technology.

5. The standard concept of a person

Since the 1960s, Strawson's 'primitive concept of a person' has been widely regarded as the standard concept of a person, and here I take it as the starting point. According to this view, for somebody to count as a person, they must occupy an identifiable place in space and have a body since this is "a necessary condition of states of consciousness being ascribed" to them. It is because they occupy in every moment a definite place in space that experiences can be ascribed to them and that they are the owner of experiences. According to this concept, a person is a unity of mind and body: "The concept of a person

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[64] That this suggestion of transcendence can go hand in hand with dehumanisation was shown by Donati (2019: 53) on essentially the same grounds as discussed above.
[65] Ihde 2006:162.
[66] Harari 2016.
[67] "Quaestio mihi factus sum", Augustinus *Confessiones* X. 33.
[68] Sloterdijk 2017: 200.
[69] Heidegger 2011a: 167.
[70] Heidegger 2011b (1953): 221.
[71] For the sake of simplicity, I stick here to the standard translation of *Ge-Stell, pace* Kisiel (2014) who translates it as 'syn-thetic com-posit[ion]ing'.
[72] Heidegger 2011b (1953): 222.
[73] Ibid.: 224ff.

is to be understood as the concept of a type of entity such that both predicates ascribing states of consciousness and predicates ascribing corporeal characteristics, a physical situation &c. are equally applicable to an individual entity of that type." (Here, I disregard the possibility of someone's being in several places at the same time, due to technological solutions. This possibility is not excluded by Strawson himself: "we might, in unusual circumstances, be prepared to speak of two persons alternately sharing a body, or of persons changing bodies &c"[74]; but the problem was exemplarily explicated by Parfit.[75]) Besides, a person does have intentions, desires, etc., just as they have a body. Although Strawson doesn't state explicitly that only human beings can be persons, Frankfurt blames him[76] for "the misappropriation of a valuable philosophical term". He argues that "the type of entity Strawson has in mind ... includes not only human beings but animals of various lesser species as well." Therefore, he proposed his own criteria of personhood (that of "second-order desires," or "want to want"). At the same time, he added that "the criteria for being a person do not serve primarily to distinguish the members of our own species from the members of other species". Frankfurt argued that "[o]ur concept of ourselves as persons is not ... a concept of attributes that are necessarily species-specific. It is conceptually possible that members of novel or even of familiar nonhuman species should be persons; and it is also conceptually possible that some members of the human species are not persons." He also adds that usually we still attribute personhood only to a human being: "[w]e do in fact assume ....that no member of another species is a person. Accordingly, there is a presumption that what is essential to persons is a set of characteristics that we generally suppose – whether rightly or wrongly – to be uniquely human".[77]

There seems to be an agreement that without having both kinds of properties (spatial and mental), no entity can count as a person. There also seems to be another agreement that the entity that fulfils Frankfurt's criteria must necessarily be regarded as a person. Viewing the person as a unity of spatial and mental characteristics entails the embracing of a dualistic picture of humans. It entails embracing the standpoint that one can meaningfully speak about the existence of mental phenomena (even if they are "emanations of the non-mental processes occurring in the brain";[78]) and, consequently, that it does make sense, using the vocabulary of 'folk psychology', to speak about *free will*, and more generally about a person and their actions in terms of morality. With this dualism, I also take for granted the distinction between brain and mind.[79]

6. Dreyfus and Archer

Concerning the attitude towards the possibilities offered by new technologies, Dreyfus and Archer can be regarded as opponents. What makes their opposition all the more interesting is that they both define themselves as social (or critical) 'realists'. This suggests that their philosophical outlook has some common ground. Although 'realism' is notoriously difficult to define, both Archer and Dreyfus assert that the individual is situated within a lifeworld where they must contend with tangible forces, including social structures that are not 'constructions.' Therefore, 'realism' is, for both of them, ultimately about agency. While for Dreyfus, it cannot be but human, Archer doesn't exclude the possibility of non-human agency.

The first step to 'retrieve realism' is for Dreyfus and Taylor arguing against 'the picture that held us captive' (Wittgenstein), against the cartesian dualism which separates mind and body (mental and bodily activities), asserting that we need perhaps "the whole organism in its environment, in order to get what we understand as perception and thinking".[80] The possibility of human experience is inseparably linked

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[74] Ibid.: 132.
[75] Parfit1984: 199f.
[76] Frankfurt 1971: 5.
[77] Ibid.: 6.
[78] See Landgrebe & Smith 2022: 23.
[79] See e.g. Scruton 2014: 51-75. This doesn't entail the separation of mind and body; see Langrebe/Smith 2023: 23.
[80] Dreyfus – Taylor 2015: 4.

with the human body; therefore, access to reality is possible only through everyday practice in which conceptual thinking is 'embedded'.[81] The consequence of this is that "[w]e therefore can't think of science as a way of discovering an independent reality .... Embedded coping is the only realism we can make sense of, and all the realism we need to make sense of science". By contrast, the 'dominant view' is "an outlook which has to some extent colonized the common sense of our civilization. This offers us the picture of an agent who in perceiving the world takes in 'bits' of information from his or her surroundings, and then 'processes' them in some fashion, in order to emerge with the 'picture' of the world he or she has; the individual then acts on the basis of this picture to fulfil his or her goals, through a 'calculus' of means and ends."[82]

Thus, Dreyfus and Taylor contrast the world of everyday practice (*Lebenswelt*), which "is shaped by [the agent's] form of life, or history, or bodily existence"; the world of coping the agent of which is "engaged... embedded in a culture, a form of life" with the world of the 'calculus', of 'means and ends'[83].

Focusing on the notion of (human) agency, Archer, too, emphasises the primacy of embodied practices, asserting that they "[are] more important than their social relations" and that they "[have] logical and substantive priority in human development". Therefore, she links the "emergence of self-consciousness" with "our active engagement with the world, through which the very distinction between the subjective and the objective (self and otherness) was formed." From these steps follows that "language itself is a practical activity, which means taking seriously that our words are quite literally deeds".[84] Thus, concerning the relation between practice and selfhood (or knowledge), Archer takes virtually the same view as Dreyfus and Taylor. However, by emphasising the primacy of practice, her aim is also to avoid anthropocentricism – the belief that man is the measure of all things. Since "it is only as embodied human beings that we experience the world and ourselves: our thought is an aspect of the practice of such beings, and thus can never be set apart from the way the world is and the way we are." Accentuating only 'us' (i.e. human consciousness) leads to "a world made in our image and thus bounded by our human limitations..."[85] – with this remark, she hints at the possibility of non-human consciousness. Moreover, she emphasises that for the realist "[t]his anthropocentricism is a turn too far... for it confines truth about the world to that which can be experienced and discussed, thus limiting the enterprise to an actualism which can never progress to the real".[86]

Archer considers her primary task to be solving the problem of "structure and agency". To succeed, she must overcome the opposition between methodological holism and individualism. In her approach, structure and culture are just as real as human agency;[87] to understand their linkage is a "vexatious task" for everybody, not just the social scientist, "for each human being is confronted by it every day of their social life... We are simultaneously free and constrained and we also have some awareness of it. The former derives from the nature of social reality; the latter from human nature's reflexivity".[88] While the structuralists' method and ontology threaten the "dissolution of humanity", modernity's man is "a being whose fundamental constitution owes nothing to society".[89] She is motivated first of all by the fear of the disappearance of the human being as described by Foucault: "Man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea".[90] Social structure (or the hypostasised Durkheimian 'social fact') threatens the elimination of human beings (even if "there are not too many theorists who are ready to treat personal

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[81] Ibid.: 52.
[82] This opposition is identified by Nyíri (2016: 441f.) as that of conservative and left-wing/liberal mentality, the former leading to "realism, and ultimately to common-sense realism", while the latter "to the epistemological and ontological positions of relativism and constructivism."
[83] Ibid.: 92.
[84] Archer 2000: 312, 121.
[85] Ibid.: 145.
[86] Ibid.: 45.
[87] Archer always reminds us that structures are activity-dependent. Cf. e.g. 1995: 72.
[88] Archer 2000: 1.
[89] Ibid.: 17, 51.
[90] The famous last sentence of *The Order of Things* is quoted several times by Archer. See e.g. 2000: 19; 2004: 66; 2015: 90.

and social identity as completely interchangeable"[91]). It is why agency and personal identity become the central topics for Archer: from the narrative of *Genesis* onwards, our choices "are the processes shaping society ... continuously throughout all time".[92] She reclaims the agency of the individual who, facing a decision, always carefully considers the dictates of reality. "'Who will become what' ... entails a genetic account that involves choices made under conditions which are not of our making".[93] She accuses the other two alternative explanatory models, *Society's Being* and *Modernity's Man,* of the "epistemic fallacy" of neglecting reality (or substituting "what reality is taken to be" for "reality itself"[94]). She calls "Modernity's Man" by another name – "secular humanism". According to her interpretation, this model or worldview is not only responsible for regarding the individual as being detached from society, but it is also 'anthropocentric' "because it places humankind at the centre of the universe." This distinguished position for the secular humanists means 'mastery' over the created world, the right to subdue other beings.[95] It entails the view that "man is the measure of all things." It is not a kind of Protagorean relativism for her, but the belief that human beings are in a position of disposing of every other being in the created world. From this standpoint, what distinguishes humans from other beings of the universe is consciousness.

Consciousness or reflexivity[96] (expressed in internal dialogue) is what, for Archer, mediates between structure and agency, and this makes "the enchantment of every human being".[97] However, due to the emergence of robots, new kinds of beings came to light in our everyday environment; therefore, Archer had to ponder the possibility of robotic agents and raise the question of their personhood.

Concerning their attitudes towards AI, Dreyfus and Archer thus embody the standpoint of *robophobia* and *robophilia*. Their opposition recalls the difference in outlook that once allegedly characterised Heidegger and McLuhan: while the former was considered 'the father of information anxiety,' the latter "[was] the child of the television medium of the 1960s".[98] According to the usual interpretation, while Heidegger was a philosopher who saw technology as a grave threat to the life-world, McLuhan conceived of the tools of communication as potential remedies for the troubles of the world (the global village as an antidote to the tribalism surfacing in ever newer forms).

From Dreyfus' point of view, if the 'information anxiety' (or *robophobia*) is justified, and technology is nothing but a threat to the lifeworld, and humans and machines are rivals, with their interaction being a zero-sum game.[99] If AI outperforms humans, it amounts to demonstrating the obsoleteness of humanity. "In this approach, the computer appears as a rival intelligence that challenges the human being to a contest."[100] It is this challenge that threatens humans being rendered the slaves of computers. (Besides, this would be an uncoerced, 'voluntary servitude.')

This challenge is real if (and only if) "all understanding [i.e. rationality] consists in forming and using appropriate symbolic representations,"[101] and if a human being is, first of all, a rational animal. Dreyfus accuses artificial intelligence researchers of holding these presuppositions. They assume that machines can best emulate the necessarily – because of the human finitude – discursive human thinking in

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[91] Archer 1995: 292.
[92] Ibid.: 293.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Archer 2015: 91.
[95] Nothing could, in this respect, be more anthropocentric than what is expressed in Gen 1, 28: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (NIV). Archer commits herself to a reading of 'subdue' and 'rule' according to which these words do not express a violent, despotic power but a benign one, since delegated to human beings by the Eternal. Cf. Burnside 2011: 152-159.
[96] I take here the two as equivalents, cf. Archer 2000: 312. Frankfurt (1988: 161f.) states that in the ordinary sense, consciousness entails reflexivity since neither can be thought of without the other. Frank (2022) makes a distinction between egological and pre-reflective self-consciousness. This dual structure is similar to the one described by Archer (2000).
[97] Archer 2000: 319.
[98] Heim 1993: 65.
[99] Heidegger, who often quotes – also in connection with technology – Hölderlin's famous words from *Patmos* ("Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst/Das Rettende auch") suggests that the symbiosis of *Dasein* and *design*, lifeworld and technology, is an actual possibility.
[100] Heim 1993: 57.
[101] Dreyfus 1992: xi.

manipulating mathematical symbols. Artificial intelligence can outperform human intelligence in this respect, so, according to them, the former gradually (and inexorably) supersedes the latter. The critics of AI usually object that with modelling rational thinking, AI researchers have not yet modelled human mental activity as such, not to speak about human behaviour in general. Turing himself gives a list of them ('Arguments from Various Disabilities'),[102] remarking that these disabilities are due to the limited storage capacity. Dreyfus, however, refers regarding these disabilities several times to Pascal's distinction between *l'esprit de géométrie* and *l'esprit de finesse:* this latter capacity is something which can't be taught in the strict sense; it is the ability to grasp the matter 'at once, at one glance'[103] which it is impossible to reproduce mathematically. If he is right, symbolic AI is bound to fail since it, by definition, can't perform its task.[104]

Dreyfus argues for this belief from phenomenological considerations: for being able to think computers should have bodies[105] (and let us recall that according to the standard concept, without bodies, they cannot be persons). Moreover, the facts with which AI has to do are abstracted from the contexts in which they made sense, and so, they are "neutral data".[106] Thus, in Dreyfus' thinking, the machine-human interaction can't, in any sense, be interpersonal. The personhood of computers doesn't even come into consideration here.

By contrast, the personhood of humans as end users *does* raise questions. Let me recall Ong's statement that tools of communication restructure consciousness. In the case of computers, this restructuring starts with the users' perception of space and time.[107] Dreyfus is, however, interested in something else: how does the computer shape human behaviour?

From Archer's point of view, the question is whether personhood is a privilege of humans or it can be attributed to other beings, too (including beings with inorganic bodies). She asserts[108] that belonging to the human species is, in itself, a necessary condition of selfhood, not of personhood; nonetheless, every human being is to be "treated as possessing worth and dignity" because of their "being made in the image of God".[109] At the same time, she allows for the personhood of other (e.g. inorganic) kinds of beings: "... personhood is not in principle confined to those with a human body".[110] Her goal with this is to avoid anthropocentricism and speciesism.

As I have mentioned above, concerning the relationship between computers (more precisely, the internet) and humans, Dreyfus' question is how this relationship transforms human behaviour: "What if the Net became central in our lives?"[111] He sees the very humanity of human beings at stake here, for two reasons. 1. The "promise of the Net is that each of us will be able to transcend the limits imposed on us by our body";[112] our Platonic philosophical tradition praises the soul dispensing the body (and, according to Nietzsche's famous dictum, Christianity is Platonism for the people). Thus, he reformulates the question the following way: "Is the body just a remnant of our descent from the animal... or does the body play a crucial role even in our spiritual and intellectual life"?[113] The answer to the question formulated as

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[102] Cf. Turing 1950: 447ff.

[103] In the history of philosophy, this ability has been attributed either to God alone ('uno ictu mentis', Boëthius, *de consolatione philosophiae,* 5.4.33; 'uno obtutu', Kant: *De mundi sensibilis...,* I. §1, n 2.), or humans as well ('uno obtutu', Leibniz, *De totae cogitabilium varietatis uno obtutu complexione*).

[104] Landgrebe and Smith (2022: x) emphasise that Dreyfus' considerations about AI are inspired by Heideggerian thinking. Still, his conclusions are the same as theirs, although their arguments are grounded "on the mathematical implications of the theory of complex systems".

[105] Cf. Dreyfus 1967.

[106] Cf. Dreyfus 1992: 281. "[i]nformation must not be confused with meaning", formulated the same phenomenon Weaver 1949: 99.

[107] Bolter 1984: chs. 6-7.

[108] Archer 2011: 283.

[109] To be precise, she writes about every person's being made in the image of God. She also states that dignity is not a feature of *personhood*. It is a relational category; dignity is 'conferred' on somebody by others (Archer 2019: 23). With this view, Archer differs from e.g. Spaemann (1996), who regards belonging to the human species as a necessary and sufficient condition of personhood.

[110] Archer 2019: 28.

[111] Dreyfus 2008: 6.

[112] Ibid.: 4.

[113] Ibid.: 6.

either/or seems evident. In this case, the greatest promise of the Net is at the same time its greatest danger (and *das Rettende* doesn't appear on the horizon). If it is true that the Cartesian (or Platonic) dualism is false; if it is true that computers deprive users of their bodies (or at least body awareness, creating the illusion that we are no longer tied to a definite place or time); and if to be possibly regarded as a person, someone must 'have' a body identifiable in space, then the conclusion must be that computers deprive their users of their personhoods. Or put in another way: "What is most seductive about the virtual world, ... the promise of freedom from finitude".[114] All this holds if and only if users can't or won't make the necessary and evident distinction between the real and virtual world (supposing that our world believed to be real is not a simulation). However, a crucial virtue of the virtual world is just the seductive power with which it invites users to immerse in it.[115]

From this perspective, the answer to how the internet affects our personhood is simple. If the possibility of human experience is inseparable from the body, and if access to reality is possible only through everyday practice, telepresence is absence. As Dreyfus asserts, "telepresence, both of objects and people, is parasitical on a robust sense of the presence of the real correlative with the body's set to cope with things and people".[116] If this is so, immersion into virtual reality – if (and insofar as) it becomes everyday practice and the user loses their ability to tell the virtual from the real – threatens to annihilate the possibility of conceptual thinking (including the decision about relevance) as well as the capability of commitment and making value judgements.

For Dreyfus, a vexing question concerning the internet is whether the "World Wide Web is improving or diminishing the quality of our lives".[117] In light of what was earlier said, his answer seems simple. Given the importance of embodied (and embedded) practices and the disembodied nature of the internet, quality of life can't but diminish. This answer presupposes the existential viewpoint, according to which life is worth living if and only if it has meaning. For our life to have sense, we must be committed to something while being aware of our finitude and vulnerability. Thus, if "one is already committed to a real-world cause, the World Wide Web can increase one's power to act".[118] Therefore, primarily those who are exposed to a danger – namely, that they become unable to be committed to a cause and attached to a real community –, are they who became addicted to the internet's virtual world before being committed to a real-world cause. Inversely, those who became addicted to the virtual world before having committed themselves to a real-world cause are especially exposed to the danger that they become unable to find attachment to a real community. In this respect, Dreyfus regards Kierkegaard as his predecessor for whom "the public sphere itself [was] .... a new and dangerous cultural phenomenon". (Or from another perspective: the danger is not that the public space of a virtual community fosters the 'tyranny of public opinion' feared by Mill or Tocqueville).[119] In Kierkegaard's view, the press produces nihilism ('anything goes'); it is the source of levelling, ultimately due to the Enlightenment's idea of the detached observer. The public sphere, which from one perspective could seem 'the triumph of democratisation' (since everyone can develop an opinion about just anything), from the other, was "destined to become a detached world in which everyone had an opinion about and commented on all public matters without needing any first-hand experience and without having or wanting any responsibility".[120] While McLuhan believed (or perhaps *chose* to believe) that the electronic global village could provide a remedy for barbaric tribalism,

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[114] Ibid.: 105.

[115] Dreyfus' conception of AI is inseparably linked with his old-fashioned cultural criticism, as is evident from his references to Pascal concerning *diversion* (Dreyfus 2008: 97). Immersion in a virtual world (like that of *Second Life*) is a kind of *divertissement pascalien*. Heim (1993: 154) identifies immersion as one key factor of virtual reality. ("...the illusion is immersion", ibid.: 112). Bolter writes in the same vein about "immersion in popular film, television, and fiction" and its rejection (Bolter 2019: 93f., 112, 117).

[116] Dreyfus 2008: 123.

[117] Ibid.: 136. Note that posing the question in this way implies the availability of a standard with the help of which one can give an answer which is not to be doubted. (In the earlier chapters, Dreyfus analyses the prospects of search engines or the then-new phenomenon of distance learning. His discussions seem to retain only some historical relevance today.)

[118] Ibid.: 137.

[119] Ibid.: 74

[120] Ibid.: 75.

according to Dreyfus, the promising prospect of "a worldwide electronic agora precisely misses the Kierkegaardian point that the people talking to each other in the Athenian agora were members of a direct democracy who were directly affected by the issues they were discussing, and, most importantly, the point of the discussion was for them to *take the responsibility and risk of voting publicly* on the questions they were debating. For Kierkegaard, a worldwide electronic agora is an oxymoron".[121] The public sphere provided by virtual space (cyberspace) is thus *a virtual community* offering the possibility of immersion without engagement or commitment. The contrast of anonymous immersion and commitment recalls Kierkegaard's distinction between the ethical and the aesthetic way of life (*Either/Or*), which since then has become a cornerstone for critics of the Enlightenment (a product of which is the public sphere; the third, the religious way of life, is beyond the scope of the phenomena discussed here). MacIntyre characterises[122] the aesthetic way of life as that of masks (the individual is not able to be committed to somebody or something); the life of those choosing the first way of life lacks unity (it "[is] dissolved into a series of separate present moments"). In contrast, "in the ethical life the commitments and responsibilities to the future springing from past episodes in which obligations were conceived and debts assumed unite the present to past and to future in such a way as to make of a human life a unity". The paradigm of the aesthetic expression is the romantic lover, while that of the ethical is the marriage.[123]

Dreyfus applies Kierkegaardian opposition to highlight the difference between the virtual and the real world. While the internet is a medium which favours the aesthetic way of life, the prerequisite of living an ethical way of life is the *small community* in the *real world* because such a milieu enables and promotes responsible communication. He formulates his own either/or: either "disembodied nihilism" or "embodied meaningful [individual] differences".[124] He suggests that we bear an ethical responsibility to choose between the two and that the choice depends on someone's worldview: the Enlightenment shows affinity with the aesthetic, tradition with the ethical way of life imbued with religiosity: "If we remain the kind of beings that Kierkegaard understood us to be, we will despair if all meaningful distinctions are levelled, and since Judeo-Christian meaningful distinctions require commitment and vulnerability, which require our embodied finitude...".[125]

Unlike Dreyfus, Archer does take into consideration the possibility of AI personhood. She can do so because she attempts to avoid anthropocentricism and speciesism, insofar as she doesn't regard belonging to the human species as a necessary condition of personhood. For her, the emergence of personhood from selfhood results from a morphogenetic process in which she attaches central importance to "two emergent capacities ... our *reflexivity* and our *concerns*". Archer explicitly states that these capacities are "dual conditions for personhood".[126] Therefore, if she can show that these features can be attributed to non-human agents as well, then, theoretically, nothing prevents them from the possibility of being regarded as persons.

Archer enumerates[127] three regular objections to the possibility of AI personhood.[128] The first barrier is that of normativity, the robots' alleged lack of ability to tell right from wrong. The counterargument is very simple and plausible. Alluding to MacIntyre's questions (*Whose justice? Which morality?*), she asks: Whose and which morality should be programmed into robots? These questions are relevant for her because of the crisis of normativity experienced in our everyday life: "With the shift from Law to Bureaucratic Regulation, the social need for shared normativity diminishes". The first barrier is closely related to the second, the emotional one: AI robots lack emotions or feelings. Archer considers this

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[121] Ibid.: 138f.
[122] MacIntyre 2007 (1989): 242.
[123] Ibid.: 40.
[124] Dreyfus 2008: 123.
[125] Ibid. The choice between the two ways of life, according to MacIntyre (2007 [1989]: 40) doesn't amount to a choice between good and evil; "it is the choice whether or not to choose in terms of good and evil".
[126] Archer 2019: 16, 23.
[127] Archer 2020: 17.
[128] These objections are significant also because of what they betray about the robophobiacs' concept of a person.

objection irrelevant, referring to the central importance of *concerns*. In this way, she intends to avoid, besides anthropocentricism,[129] emotivism.[130] She emphasises that there are "matters we human beings cannot help but care about" (e.g. preventing imminent danger); the emotions are "commentaries upon our concerns in the three orders of natural reality ...,"[131] and as such, they are not essential for our personhood. (Moreover, their goals may be completely unethical.[132]) The alleged third barrier is of little importance: it concerns "the absence of Qualia, a 'subjective feel'."[133] She reminds us that it is also a barrier between humans.[134] If this barrier can be set aside by learning the rules of language use (cf. Wittgenstein's private language argument), for what kinds of beings would this be a more appropriate task than the robots?

If AI robots can fulfil the criteria of personhood, and the barriers separating them from humans are not unsurmountable, then friendship between humans and robots is, perhaps, not impossible (we can "join in friendship. ... with a non-organic body but not with an anonymous human subject on a life-support machine").[135]

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to compare Hubert Dreyfus' and Margaret Archer's views of personhood in Turing's universe. I have argued that a comparison between the two thinkers is possible because they both are 'realist' thinkers, and the comparison is also fruitful because they represent markedly different positions concerning the possibility of AI. For Dreyfus, the question is how the use of computers affects *us* – since the question of AI personhood is irrelevant to him. Archer targets two main questions: Are we justified in ascribing the possibility of personhood to robots? (can robots be regarded as agents?) and: can humans and non-humans together form a society based on the principle of solidarity?

Before directly comparing them, I hinted at how the development of technology questions the traditional definition of the human being as a rational animal since the very idea of AI challenges the view that personhood can be ascribed to the human species only. As a next step, I sketched the current scenarios of cohabitation between human and non-human agents, from that of civil war to that of peaceful and mutually profitable symbiosis. I pointed out that the emergence of AI and robots inaugurates the end of anthropocentricism: human beings must be ready to abandon the idea of their privileged status in the cosmos for the sake of survival. Finally, the disclosing of some aspects of the various kinds of "humanism" and sketching the "standard concept" of a person made up the theoretical background for giving an overview of the most important thoughts of the two thinkers. I pointed out that despite some common features of their thinking, they represent quite different standpoints concerning AI. Perhaps further investigation could shed light on the causes of this profound difference, which may have roots in their differing worldviews (given the similarities in their philosophical outlook).

My second step was to highlight their shared common theoretical background. Since they both are social realist thinkers, it does make sense to compare their views concerning AI. They represent different versions of 'realism' which leads them to different evaluations of the role of AI and robotics. As a third step, I tried to show that our understanding of the possibilities of human-machine cohabitation largely depends on whether we take an anthropocentric or a non-anthropocentric view of the world.

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[129] In this context, anthropocentricism amounts to "conflating worth with being", i.e. our concern with our subjective judgement.
[130] Archer 2004: 328. Archer's argument here is very similar to that explained by MacIntyre. In his analysis (2007 [1989]: 23f.), emotivism "entails the obliteration of any genuine distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations" making it impossible to appeal to impersonal criteria in a moral debate. This is the cause of the "interminable and unsettlable character of so much contemporary moral debate" (ibid.: 226).
[131] Archer 2021:180.
[132] Archer 2000: 225.
[133] Archer 2020: 17.
[134] "I can only believe that someone else is in pain, but I know it if I am"; "Another person can't have my pains", so Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* (§253, §302), before asking the question: "In what sense are my sensations private?" (§ 246).
[135] Cf. Archer 2019: 27.

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JOURNALᵒᶠ **DIGITAL**
SOCIAL RESEARCH

Dwelling with feminicide data

Digital methods for feminist research

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Abstract

This paper presents an innovative digital research methodology that imbricates feminist, participatory, and computational epistemologies to research the role of data in social contestation. Focusing on the social media conversation about feminicide, specifically on Spanish-speaking Twitter (now X), the study examined a dataset of 2.86 million posts to find which emotions and actions are involved in encounters with data, surfacing the "affective politicality" of data. The research is grounded on digital methods and develops through moments—personal and collective, human and computational, extended and focused—of "dwelling with data" across different research scenes. The contribution of this methodological reflection is to showcase a feminist mode of digital social research that integrates participation, encounter, emotion, and ethical commitment in the production of knowledge about and with the digital.

Keywords: digital methods; Twitter; X; data; feminicide; feminist methodology

1. Introduction

This paper presents an innovative methodology for the study of data and social media conversations. As a contribution, it stands alongside scholarship seeking to reimagine digital social research from intersectional feminist perspectives, focusing on embodiment, reflexivity, and response-ability (see for example, De Vuyst, Geerts, and Rahbari 2022; Özkula et al. 2024). It is an approach situated in/from Latin America and that draws on feminist and liberatory epistemologies, and emerging fields such as digital sociology, digital humanities and feminist and/or critical data studies. The objective is to contribute to the advancement of digital social research, exemplifying a mode of feminist enquiry that mobilises computational and interpretive digital methods, and puts participation, encounter, emotion, and an ethico-political commitment to the object of study at the heart of our knowledge production practices (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011).

To allow the reader a closer view of the methods, the paper does not follow the classic problem-methods-discussion structure. Instead, I present a methodological reflection that shows how an approach that imbricates computational, participatory and feminist epistemologies materialised through different moments of "dwelling with data" (a notion I borrow from Brianna Wiens and colleagues (2020)). To situate the reader, I begin by briefly outlining the research problem: the doings of feminicide data

circulating on social media. The following section locates the methodology developed to approach the research questions within the context of computational, participatory, and feminist research. I then show the insights and findings accessed through this mode of research. The paper concludes with a call for a practice of digital social research that is feminist, participatory, and committed to social justice.

2. The research problem

Violence against women is (and must be) a global concern, and feminicide, the gender-related murders and other violent deaths of cis and trans women and girls, are especially alarming. (ONU 2023; UNODC 2023). The women's and feminist movement, with Latin America at the vanguard, has mobilised various strategies to counter the violence, including a long history of quantifying it to understand and make it visible. In the current context of increasing datafication, and driven by the accessibility and ease of use of digital tools, more and more activists are adopting (and adapting) data practices as a means to address and counter feminicide. My own work, Feminicidio Uruguay[1], constitutes one of many examples (see D'Ignazio 2024)— of the activist practice of converting human lives (and deaths) into data to achieve a social change objective, a process I conceive as *strategic datafication* (Suárez Val 2023).

Strategic datafication not only involves making data about a social issue, but also putting them into circulation, both as part of more targeted lobbying actions (for example, delivering reports to state institutions) and of broader processes of raising visibility and public awareness for an issue. In this last sense, social media—where violence is one of the main topics in the conversation about gender-related issues in Latin America (Batista et al. 2017)—are one of the scenarios where activists mobilise data on feminicide.

While the usefulness of gender-related violence data for research, action, or evidence-based public policy is undeniable, it is less clear what these data do beyond evidentiary uses, for example, when mobilised in the (digital) public sphere. Furthermore, there is an open discussion about the role of social media in processes of social change, from arguments that identify virtual spaces as a scenario for political interventions that can challenge power and be socially transformative (Fuentes 2019), to perspectives that consider that the logic of "communicative capitalism" underpinning social media spaces can lead to a profound depoliticisation (Dean 2005). In addition, violence against women and girls that takes place in and through digital contexts, including social media, is an ongoing and growing problem (Cerise et al. 2022). These considerations raise the strategic question, for those of us who datafy feminicide or other social issues, of whether (and where, and how) to distribute the data on social media, where data become one more contribution to the circulating data stream (Dean 2005, 58).

Data can be "potent rhetorical tools" (Drucker 2017, 913) that do powerful "persuasive work" (Kennedy et al. 2016). This work is carried out not only by the discursive and visual elements of data arrangements (Suárez Val 2021b), but also the emotions and affects[2] that are involved in encounters with data as "vital components of making sense of [them]" (Kennedy and Hill 2018, 830). In this sense, arrangements of feminicide data—in spreadsheets, graphs, maps, etc.— constitute "affect amplifiers" (Suárez Val 2021a). They are artefacts where feminist emotions in response to the violence are transmuted through practices of datafication, and are projected into the public sphere in hopes of modulating the affective (and political) atmospheres around gender-related violence. But what happens in concrete when feminicide data enter into wider circulation? Do they mobilise us —in both senses of moving (emotion and affect) and leading to movement (action)— towards the ultimate goal of ending violence against women?

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[1] https://feminicidiouruguay.net

[2] In the theoretical discussion on this matter, I align myself with the proposals of destabilising the emotion/affect binary (for example, Anderson 2009; Wetherell 2013). I understand emotion and affect as mutually intertwined, in the sense that "emotions involve bodily processes of affecting and being affected" (Ahmed [2004] 2014, 208) and that affect can be conceived as "the intensity with which we experience emotions [...] and more important, the urgency to act upon those feelings" (Papacharissi 2016, 311).

With the purpose of contributing to the development of strategies for the public mobilisation of feminicide data, I set out to explore *the role of data in the social media conversation about feminicide* (Suárez Val 2023).

3. Computational, participatory and feminist research

Consider this scene. You log on to Twitter (now X), and start scrolling through your feed.

A tweet pricks your eye. It is an illustration of a woman. She sits in the centre of the image, looking directly at you. She is holding a sign that says "#WeHaveOtherData". Behind her, the purple background is covered in outrageous statistics about gender-related violence and about (a lack of) appropriate investigation of feminicides in Mexico. The text of the tweet is just three hashtags: "#WeHaveOtherData #feminicide #Mexico".

You scroll on and amidst the infinite stream of news, promoted content, product placements, and memes, another tweet makes you gasp. This one is just text. It reads: "If the statistic of one feminicide every 30 hours doesn't move you AT ALL, then you are part of the problem".

You have just had two encounters with feminicide, and with feminicide data, on Twitter.

*

To understand the role of data in the public conversation about feminicide, it is necessary to examine what I call their *affective politicality*: the unexpected ways in which data can participate in inspiring, supporting, or sustaining personal and collective actions that hope for social change, where emotions and affects play a key role (Suárez Val 2023). Discovering these "unexpected ways" requires zooming in on the encounter with data, which I understand (sociologically) as a *situation*: "the moment when the introduction of a new entity into social life disrupts habitual ways of doing" (Marres 2020, 8).

The situation under analysis in my research was the *encounter with feminicide and with feminicide data* conceived as an occasion to be or "to learn to be affected, meaning 'effectuated', moved, put in motion by other entities, humans or non-humans" (Latour 2004, 205). As an activist who distributes feminicide data in social media, I wanted to understand how this might unfold where such data can be encountered in posts, publications, or tweets. The specific research question that interested me was, what emotions and what actions are involved (and how) in the situation of encountering feminicide data on Twitter?

It is increasingly recognised that affective reverberations or resonances are an important topic in the study of the Internet (Paasonen 2019, 7–8; see also Kuntsman 2020), and Twitter has proven fertile ground for examining the intersection between social mobilisation and emotions. Twitter presented an ideal setting to carry out this research, due to its potential to "reveal the social" (Brownlie and Shaw 2019, 105), but also for its role *in* social life (Marres 2017, 38). In a practical sense, although its terms of use and application programming interface (API) are constantly changing, at the time the research was carried out Twitter allowed for the collection of large information-rich datasets, which could be explored using qualitative and quantitative methods (Bruns 2018). On the other hand, although feminicide data also circulate on other social platforms and applications, in Latin America, Twitter has been a powerful space to articulate issues related to gender and spread feminist hashtags with a transnational dimension, including the emblematic #NiUnaMenos against gender-related violence and feminicide (Belotti, Comunello, and Corradi 2020). My research thus contributes to a growing corpus on feminist activism and Twitter (for example, Belotti, Comunello, and Corradi 2020; Chenou and Cepeda-Másmela 2019;

Laudano and Aracri 2022; Núñez Puente, D'Antonio Maceiras, and Fernández Romero 2019; Sued and Hernández Garza 2023).

When designing the project, I sought to develop a methodology that would allow me to identify opportunities for encounters with feminicide data on Twitter, meaning tweets[3] related to feminicide where data play a role, and to visualise and examine what (political) emotions/affects are involved and what personal and collective actions are organised or mobilised in such encounters. The main scenario for the research was a set of 2.86 million tweets, collected between September 2020 and March 2021. However, I also sought for the research to become a kind of intervention: an occasion to generate encounters between the community of practice that addresses and counters the issue of feminicide with data, and to be affected by the data. Therefore, I also created collective, participatory scenarios for the research to unfold.

Since the main object of study is a social "Big data" dataset, the present investigation could be situated within data studies (Kitchin and Lauriault 2014; Leurs 2017; D'Ignazio and Klein 2020), digital sociology (Marres 2017), digital humanities (Fiormonte, Chaudhuri, and Ricaurte 2022), or computational social sciences (Shugars 2023; see also Aguilera Ontiveros and Abrica Jacinto 2022). These disciplines share an approach to the digital "that is both critical and creative, and engages with the changing roles of technology and knowledge in contemporary social life" (Marres 2017, 3). They also have in common the goal of solving real-world problems and, in many cases, of actively contributing to social change, which is why they often work in collaboration with communities and activists.

Like activism, digital studies are also characterised by a strong orientation toward participation, where technologies come to "[reactivate] older, participatory approaches in social enquiry" by enabling alternative configurations for interaction (Marres 2017, 31). On the other hand, since the development of participatory action research (PAR) in the 1970s (Fals Borda 2009), participation and intervention are deeply embedded in the DNA of Latin American social science research.

The methodology that I present in this paper, inserted as it is in these genealogies, is aligned with feminist PAR that explicitly aims at social change, centres the diverse experiences of women and gender dissidents, connects theory with practice, recognises the situatedness of analyses, and involves multiple perspectives (and disciplines) by collectivising the knowledge production process with interested communities (Biglia 2007).

And, of course, entangled in all methodological decisions is my own positionality as a Latin American researcher and anti-feminicide feminist activist, which shapes how I "ask research questions, approach field sites, share/disseminate knowledge, and [how I] read and interpret data" (Özkula et al. 2024, 3).

4. Dwelling with data

When I started recording cases of gender-related murders of women in Uruguay in the form of a spreadsheet and a map (with Google Apps, now Workspace), I started a daily sharing my life with feminicide data that persists today. And when I began studying my own (and my peers') activist data practices as a researcher, this coexistence took on a different quality, as the methods, technologies, and platforms—such as spreadsheets, mapping, or social media—at the core of my activist work were reconfigured as research objects and tools.

The notion of "dwelling with data", as developed in Shana MacDonald, Brianna Wiens, and colleagues' ongoing work on research methods for feminist digital humanities (see Wiens et al. 2020; Wiens and MacDonald 2024; Wiens 2021), fit well with my own experience of attending to and caring for data that is both an activist strategy and an object of study. The authors write (Wiens et al. 2020, 11):

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[3] I maintain the nomenclature in use during data collection, where a "tweet" is a publication generated by an account on the social media platform currently called X (x.com), with up to 280 characters and which may include attached images or videos.

Dwelling with data involves paying close attention to "the specificities of space that are overwritten by dominant perceptions and uses of it"; collecting potential data in those spaces as a "means of investigating...material vibrancy"; practicing a reflexive inquiry that "pause[s] between analysis and action... to situate...embodied experience as an index of whatever investments [we] may hold"; and remediating to signal how our research actions have framed the materials being presented.

The research I am presenting here is based on my own ethico-political and affective commitment to feminicide and feminicide data—my "matter of care." (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011). The methodology and analysis strategies evolved in different moments—personal and collective, human and computational, extended and focused—of dwelling with data in the various "research scenes" that were configured through the events, actions, and conflicts that unfolded during the creative research process (Wiens et al. 2020, 12). It is in these scenes that the feminist and participatory epistemologies that guided this research materialised.

At the core of the research were digital methods for Internet research, which repurpose the affordances of online devices to investigate them (Rogers 2013). For example, using Twitter's application programming interface (API) to study the conversation about feminicide on Twitter. Because they require the participation of computational (non-human) "actors", digital methods are always a "collective accomplishment" (Marres 2017, 41). But following a feminist principle of "embracing pluralism" (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020), I sought to open my research to other (human) actors. Interspersed with solo work with the non-human collaborators (programming code, examining spreadsheets, or writing texts such as this one), I carried out workshops, talks, and peer consultations. I thus invited other committed people (activists, students, researchers) to participate in all phases of the research, from the design of data collection, the interpretive moments, to the analysis.

To show how the methodology materialised, in the next sections I outline some of the research scenes and main findings. The data moved to a different support (was remediated) in each scene (for example, from Twitter to a spreadsheet, from there to graphic visualisations and, finally, to these pages) where various methods, technologies, and participants dwelled with the data. By recontextualising the data, each scene influenced and expanded our understanding of the data and their doings (Wiens et al. 2020, 12). In this sense, this paper configures yet another research scene, one where the reader participates by encountering, interpreting, and analysing feminicide data in this new support.

4.1 First scene: collaborating with activists to find feminicide-related content on Twitter

T-CAT (Twitter Capture and Analysis Toolset) is a set of tools designed by the Digital Methods Initiative (see Borra and Rieder 2014), which uses Twitter's API to identify (in real time) and analyse tweets that match a given search query, that is, a list of words or phrases. To prepare a list of terms that would capture the conversation about feminicide on Twitter, I started from my own knowledge as a researcher and activist and as a participant in this conversation, and I then involved my peers: other activists from different Latin American countries (Brazil, Colombia, Mexico), consulting them about the most relevant terminology in their contexts. The aim was to get a relevant set of Spanish words and phrases that would act as indicators of the conversation around Twitter in the continent.

The final list (see Table 1) included *terms or combinations of terms related to feminicide as a category* (for example, "feminicide" or "femicide", but also "misogynist murders", "feminicidal violence", "homicide woman gender"), including those that name lethal gender-related violence against trans women (for example, "transphobic murders"), and hashtags that have been used in relation to activism against feminicide in the region (for example, "#NiUnaMenos", "#VivasNosQueremos", "#AlertaFeminista"). These indicator terms served to demarcate the thematic space of feminicide and as search agents to detect tweets that could become a site for the analysis.

Between September of 2020 and March 2021, T-CAT captured a dataset of 2.86 million tweets (including replies and retweets) that matched the search query: a situated snapshot of the conversation about feminicide in Latin America.[4]

Table 1. Terms for capturing and filtering tweets in T-CAT.

Search terms to capture tweets

Feminicide_Data ('asesinatos de pareja', 'asesinatos machistas', 'asesinatos misóginos', 'asesinatos transfóbicos', 'homicidios transfóbicos', 'violencia feminicida', AlertaFeminista, AltoALosFeminicidios, asesinatos mujeres género, BastadeFemicidios, CuantasMás, femicidio, femicidios, femigenocidio, feminicidio, feminicidios, FeminicidiosEmergenciaNacional, homicidios mujeres género, MachismoMata, NiUnaMás, Niunamenos, NoEstamosTodas, NosotrasTenemosOtrosDatos, PandemiaDeLaViolencia, ParenDeMatarnos, StopFeminicidio, TocanaUnaTocanaTodas, transfemicidio, transfemicidios, transfeminicidio, transfeminicidios, travesticidio, travesticidios, ViolenciaMachista, VivasLasQueremos, VivasNosQueremos)

Terms to filter tweets that refer to data

dato OR estadística OR cifra OR índice OR número OR gráfica OR tasa OR porcentaje OR por ciento OR cantidad OR infografía OR mapa OR mapeo OR línea de tiempo OR visualización OR aumento OR incremento OR monitoreo OR registro OR tabla OR observatorio OR censo OR padrón OR planilla OR patrón OR 📈 OR 📊 OR 📉

4.2 Second scene: searching for data in the conversation about feminicide on Twitter

In the next research scene, I set out to explore how data made an appearance as an "actor" in the situation under study. T-CAT allows the use of queries to filter the captured dataset, so, to detect the presence of data in the tweets, I started working on a second list of search terms (see Table 1). Here began a more intense dwelling with the research object.

Rather than following the previous method of choosing query terms from my experience and in consultation with other activists, I decided to start working, or dwelling, with the dataset. To find out how data are encountered in the Twitter conversation, I followed an iterative process of reading random samples of 1,000 tweets at a time, identifying which words or phrases indicated the presence of data, and repeating the process until I found no more new terms. The terms I recorded refer to *data in their quantitative or aggregate formats* (for example, "number", "rate"), *data visualisation* (for example, "graph", "map", the *emoji* for increase 📈 and decrease 📉), or *data collection methods* (for example, "observatory", "census", "monitoring"). While I consider data broadly as "units or morsels of information" whose "aggregative quality [..] helps to lend them their potential power, their rhetorical weight" (Gitelman and Jackson 2013, 1,8), the selection reflects the strong association of the notion of data with numbers and graphical representation, with their abstract and aggregative qualities (Gitelman and Jackson 2013, 6).

Filtering the dataset with T-CAT using the resulting search query (see Table 1) returned a subset of 160,895 tweets (including replies and retweets) that matched the selected data-related terms. I call these tweets "data-inflected". Here the "inflected" sound metaphor reflects that, although a mention or reference to data appears in the text, data (or even specifically the feminicide data) are not necessarily the central topic of the tweet. Rather, if "to inflect" is to "vary the intonation or pitch of (the voice), especially to express mood or feeling" and to "influence or color (music or writing) in tone or style" ('Inflect', n.d.), then, in these tweets, data inflect the voice(s) in the conversation about feminicide, potentially influencing the tone and style, and which moods or emotions are expressed and/or how.

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[4] Although the lists of terms respond to the Latin American context, conversations from other Spanish-speaking regions were also captured.

For reference, here are two examples of feminicide-related tweets that are not data-inflected, followed by the two data-inflected tweets we saw in the vignette that began the previous section:[5]

RT @username We need more politicians and candidates to speak up against feminicide

�️ #MyFriendWakeUp from @username is a campaign against femicides 🚫 that aims to encourage men to identify and question machista mandates and construct new masculinities 👊👦👧 @username [link]

[image] #WeHaveOther<u>Data</u> #feminicide #Mexico

If the <u>statistic</u> of one feminicide every 30 hours doesn't move you AT ALL, then you are part of the problem

A limitation of this approach is that a textual reference is required for the computational actor (T-CAT) to correctly identify relevant tweets. In the examples above, terms that matched the search query are underlined. Tweets that do not include at least one of the terms in the search query in the text part, are not captured. When it comes to identifying the presence of data in the Twitter conversation about feminicide, this would exclude, for example, tweets that attach a graph or an infographic, or that share "morsels or units of information" (such as the names and ages of women who were victims of feminicide), but do not include data-related terms (as defined in the search query) in the text.[6]

With this caveat, the number of data-inflected tweets in the dataset was one of the first findings: data do not have a strong presence in the conversation about feminicide taking place on Twitter. Of the total tweets collected in the period, less than 6% were inflected by data. The relatively low prevalence of data in the conversation about feminicide echoes the insistence of activists who work with feminicide data that "they are not numbers, they are women".

4.3 Third scene: observation of the rhythm of feminicide on Twitter and the participation of data.

In a region where on average at least 12 women are murdered every day in gender-related attacks (CEPAL 2016), the rhythm of feminicide reverberates through Twitter with alarming regularity. The visualisations below show the rhythm of feminicide on the platform: the daily number of tweets (including replies and retweets) related to feminicide in the period under study (Graph 1) and the daily percentage of these that are data-inflected (Graph 2), obtained from the analysis with T-CAT.

Interestingly, the vast majority of tweets in the dataset are retweets (81.12% overall and 83.38% of data-inflected tweets). That is, the rhythm of the feminicide conversation on Twitter is strongly marked by retweeting as a specific opportunity to engage and act offered by the platform. If, as studies suggest, the articulation of emotions makes tweets more likely to be retweeted (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2012), it could be said that Twitter activity is shaped by the (political) affective rhythm of feminicide.

While data appear to play a minor role overall (as we saw above, less than 6% of tweets are data-inflected), they participate in the conversation by activating with more or less intensity at given moments. Another sound metaphor, "intensity" here refers to a "change in energy to the applied notes" (data being the notes) that may "determine how the listener perceives the music he or she is listening to" (in this case feminicide) and "introduce a different type of feeling in your listener" (Patel 2022). In Graph 2 we can see that, some days, data barely participate in the conversation, while other days, close to a quarter of all tweets and retweets include a mention to data.

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[5] Tweets have been translated into English from the original Spanish, to facilitate reading and to hinder identification of the authors.
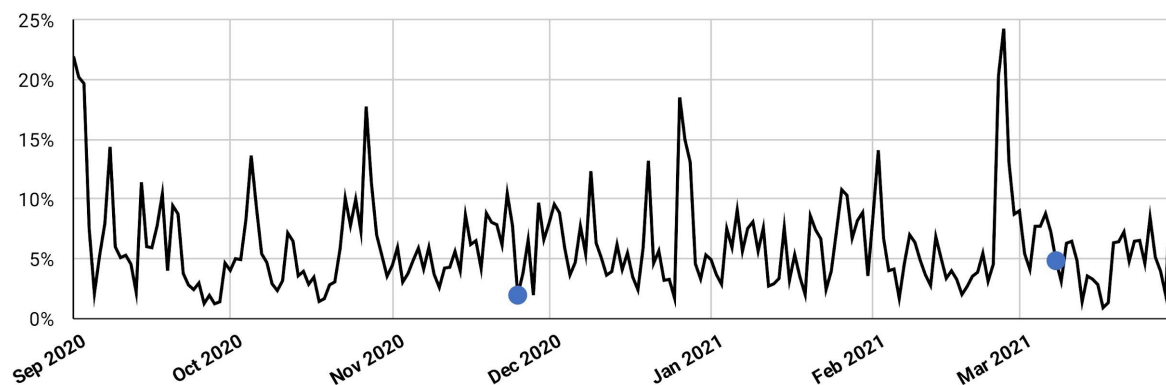
[6] While reading random samples, I did not find a significant number of tweets that included data but did not match any of the terms. However, it is worth noting that because of this textual requirement, tweets from my own project, *Feminicidio Uruguay*, where for each new feminicide I share a screenshot of the location along with the name and age of the woman and the activist hashtags #AlertaFeminista [feminist alert] and #MachismoMata [machismo kills], were not included in the data-inflected subset.

Rhythm of feminicide on Twitter
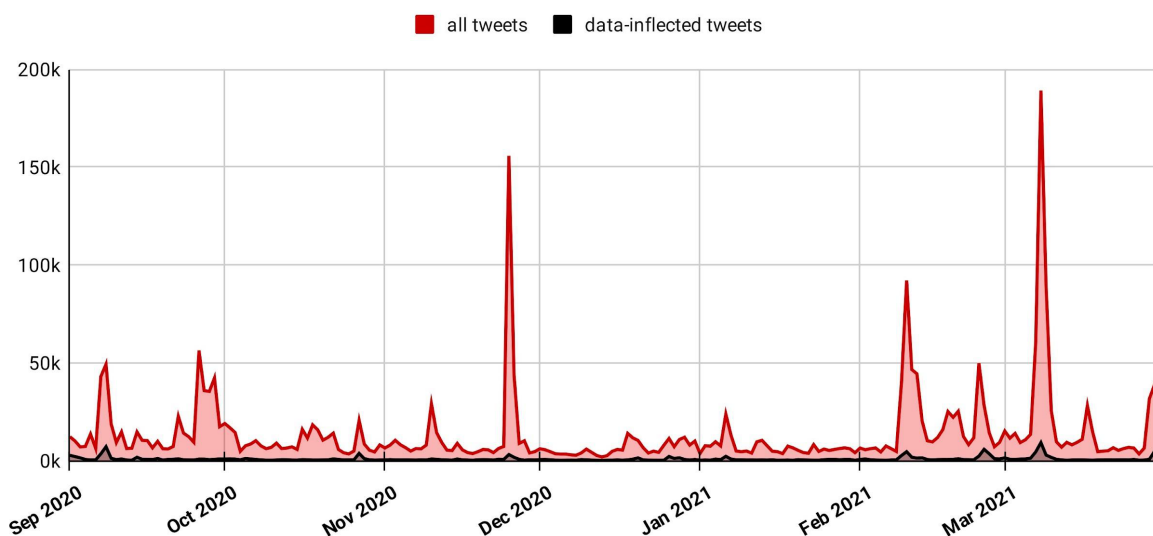
Graph 1. Daily distribution of tweets related to feminicide (red) and subset of data-inflected tweets (black), from September 2020 to March 2021. Prepared by the author with Google Sheets.

Graph 2. Daily percentage of data-inflected tweets in the feminicide stream on Twitter. The blue dots mark November 25, 2020 and March 8, 2021. Prepared by the author with Google Sheets.

To explore changes in intensity, in this scene the dwelling needed to extend outside of Twitter. Here I identified the phrases and hashtags most prominent at the peaks of activity, and I used searches on Google and other social media (for example, in feminist groups on Facebook or Telegram) to understand what was happening in these periods. Through the more detailed view of the overall peaks of activity afforded by this dwelling, key drivers of the rhythm of feminicide on Twitter emerged: *calendrical formatting work*, *data controversies*, *cases of feminicide and their aftermath*, and *manhunts*.

Dates that organise networks of activism, academia and international organisations, what Richard Rogers (2005, 28) calls *calendrical formatting work* are a strong driver: activity peaks on two key dates for international feminist activism (March 8 International Women's Day and November 25 International Day to Eradicate Violence against Women are the two highest peaks, see Graph 1). However, data are not intensely active at those moments (less than 5% of tweets on those specific dates are data-inflected, see Graph 2).

Another driver of activity are *data controversies* generated when the feminist movement distributes data to refute or correct government accountability which, as expected, intensify the participation of data

in the social media conversation around feminicide. For example, the feminist reaction to "incorrect" official data in Mexico (with the hashtag #NosotrasTenemosOtrosDatos [we have other data] (García González 2021)) and the publication of activist data in Argentina or Chile (in parallel or in the absence of official data) all caused spikes in activity, both in general and in tweets inflected by data.

However, what more consistently moves the conversation about feminicide on social media, and most activated or intensified the participation of data, is the rhythm of *cases of feminicide and their aftermath*, including *manhunts*. When exploring the peaks with greater intensity of data-inflected tweets, I found that they coincided with reaction to and action on specific cases of feminicide in different countries: publishing of press releases, demands for justice, organisation of marches, follow up on judicial processes, or international searches for alleged perpetrators. The terrible rhythm of feminicide can be felt in the ebb and flow of activity on Twitter, which surges and wanes in relation to specific acts of feminicidal violence and/or the actions and calls to action that follow. In contrast (because it links individual cases to data) with the activist insistence that women are *not* numbers, that the participation of data intensifies in relation to specific cases suggests that, on social media, data might be mobilised to make the political work of supporting the claim that each singular case of feminicide is part of a broader structural problem of systemic violence against women.

4.4 Fourth scene: analysis of emotions and actions involved in encounters with feminicide on Twitter

This scene required a closer dwelling with feminicide data during several iterations of solo and collective analysis, and it also involved hours of coding and working with spreadsheets.

To understand the affective politicality of data, I sought to examine what emotions/affects and what actions are involved in the encounter with feminicide data, and how. At this stage, I adapted and expanded the "situational analytics" method developed by Noortje Marres (2020), which uses computational tools to scale up collective and interpretive forms of analysis to the massive scale of big data, such as that obtained from social media. Specifically, I used Lexicon Analysis, which consists of two stages. First, random samples of a dataset are analysed to build a "lexicon" of *indicator terms*, meaning words and phrases that will signal the presence of the various entities of different types that play a role in the situation under study, in this case emotions and actions. The lexicon is then run through a Lexicon-based Categorisation and Analysis Tool (Le-CAT)[7], to analyse the participation of these entities and the relationships between them across the entire dataset.

Given that "most complete knowledge comes from synthesizing multiple perspectives, with priority given to local, Indigenous, and experiential ways of knowing" (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020, 18) and "innovation more often arises in the arguments and debates between colleagues" with multiple belongings (in activism, academia, etc.) (Timmermans and Tavory 2012, 180), a productive aspect of Lexicon Analysis is that it allows to collectivise, and therefore diversify, the interpretive work. In this method, research data are first approached qualitatively and collaboratively at a small scale, and the resulting analysis is applied computationally at the scale of big data. In this way, a feminist, situated, and participatory analysis can move from one tweet to millions of tweets, and we can work with large datasets without losing "intimacy in research" (Fraser and Puwar 2008).

Furthermore, unlike text mining methods such as sentiment analysis, which uses generic lexicons that assume universal emotions, or topic modelling, which uses automated natural language processing, the lexicon in this method emerges from the data under analysis, is constructed by humans, and adapts to the situation under study, allowing the production of "situated and embodied knowledges" (Haraway 1991, 191). The categories are not preconfigured, but are defined and refined in an iterative, abductive, and collaborative process (see Timmermans and Tavory 2012), which produces a lexicon that emerges from

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[7] Le-CAT was developed by the Center for Interdisciplinary Methodologies at the University of Warwick in collaboration with the Media of Cooperation Group of the University of Siegen (Tripp [2018] 2020).

the data, but also from the knowledge, experiences, and personal and collective emotions of those who participate in the interpretation.

I initiated the interpretive work by carefully reading a random sample of 1,000 data-inflected tweets, to identify words, phrases and *emoji* that signaled the presence of emotions or actions, and then grouping these indicator terms into categories. For example, in close reading the samples, I interpreted that terms such as the hashtag #FuriaFeminista [feminist fury], the angry *emoji* 😠, or the word "bronca" [anger] (among others) signalled the involvement of anger, so I added to the lexicon a category of type "emotion" named "Anger" and included those words, hashtags, and *emojis* as its indicator terms.

Next, I invited activists, students, and researchers to participate in two virtual research workshops (on Microsoft Teams). In the first, we worked in groups and in plenary, reading, analysing, and discussing random samples of tweets from different periods in the dataset to modify or add categories and query terms to my preliminary lexicon. In the second workshop, we experimented with different methods to analyse Twitter data applied to the research dataset.[8] In both research scenes we got angry, we felt excited, we cried… we let ourselves be affected by the data we were dwelling with.

Between the workshop participants and I, we read thousands of tweets, which I later reread to refine the final lexicon. By the end of this research scene, I had examined the texts and images of more than 4,000 tweets about feminicide, and I read additional tweets as I re-coded and tested Le-CAT's programming,[9] organised samples and results in spreadsheets, generated graphs, and advanced the analysis. At points, I felt I was reaching saturation in relation to the scientific rigour of qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2021), but also in relation to "researcher saturation" (Wray, Markovic, and Manderson 2007), as I was finding it hard to process the emotional overload of repeatedly reading about violence and loss. Here I want to emphasise the need to develop strategies for participant care and researcher self-care, especially when social research confronts us with violence in a sustained way (see Suárez Val, Martinez Cuba, and D'Ignazio 2022). In my research, these strategies included discussing with participants the possible affectations of working with feminicide as a research subject, dedicating time for commemoration, breathing, and reflection during the workshops, and making myself available for any follow-up concerns as well as researching women's support groups in participants' countries of residence, in case such information was needed.

Once the workshops concluded, I synthesised the learnings into a "master" version of the lexicon to work with Le-CAT: eleven emotions and eleven actions, each containing between two to fifty-nine indicator terms (Table 2). Emerging from collective, affective and situated encounters with data-inflected tweets, the contents of this lexicon begin to visualise the political-affective landscape of the conversation about feminicide in relation to data.[10]

Given a lexicon and a dataset of tweets, Le-CAT provides a diagnosis of the total occurrences for each lexicon category, counting each time it finds an indicator term for that category (multiple occurrences of a category in a single tweet will be counted separately), and of unique occurrences of each category, counting only once each tweet in which at least one indicator term of the category occurred. Focusing on unique occurrences, Graph 3 shows the percentage of tweets with matches for each action and emotion

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[8] In this workshop, which I co-led with Zofia Bednarowska-Michaiel, we worked on an English dataset of tweets and used text mining techniques and visual analysis informed by Lexicon Analysis. This last method formed another scene in the broader research project, but I will not develop it in this paper due to space limitations.

[9] One of the adaptations I made to the method involved re-coding parts of Le-CAT to enable the possibility of using regular expressions [regex] as indicator terms. For example, an indicator term for the "Care" action is "acompañ\w+" which matches "acompañ" followed by one or more alphabetical characters: "acompañar", "acompañamiento", "acompañante", etc.

[10] The lexicon is in itself a research device that allows us to make some qualitative speculations about the repertoire of actions and emotions that participate in the conversation about feminicide on Twitter. Due to space limitations, I do not include a detailed analysis here, but, for example, observing the emergent categories allows us to see that actions that participate in data-inflected tweets tend to be collective or related to the state, rather than personal, and more emotions were found that are normatively considered negative (anger, disgust, fear, grief, frustration) vs. positive (hope, gratitude, loving care).

in the lexicon, both in the full research dataset of 2.86 million tweets and in the data-inflected subset of 160,895 tweets.

Table 2. Emotions and actions that made up the lexicon for the analysis.

Lexicon category type: Emotion	Lexicon category type: Action
Anger	#SocialMediaCampaigns
Care about	Care-giving
Disgust	Demands
Fear	Impersonal action
Frustration	Knowledge sharing
Gratitude	Lack of action
Grief	Naming
Hope	Personal action
Lack of care	Popular organising
Loving care	Remembrance
Shock	State/government (in)action

Occurrence of actions and emotions
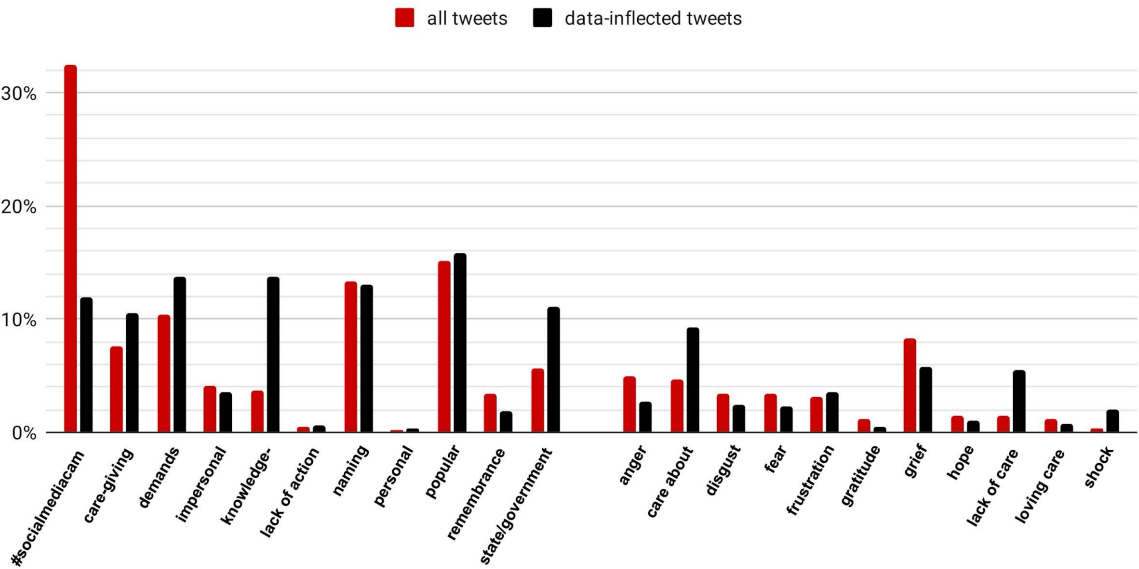
Graph 3. Percentage of tweets that matched actions (left) and emotions (right) in the feminicide stream on Twitter (red) and in the subset of data-inflected tweets (black), September 2020-March 2021. Prepared by the author with Google Sheets.

Le-CAT also diagnoses the co-occurrence for the different types of categories defined in the lexicon, in this case "action" and "emotion", by counting a co-occurrence between two categories every time it finds at least one indicator term from each in the same tweet. The alluvial diagrams below, made with RAWGraphs[11], visualise the relationship of co-occurrence between the actions and emotions defined in the lexicon, for the full dataset (Graph 4) and for the subset of data-inflected tweets (Graph 5).

After running the lexicon against the full dataset (which includes data-inflected tweets) and the subset of data-inflected tweets,[12] the diagnostic yielded three key results. In the feminicide stream on Twitter,

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[11] https://rawgraphs. io.

[12] I chose to compare the data-inflected subset and the entire dataset (rather than create a "not data-inflected" subset) to get a whole view of emotions and actions across the feminicide-related conversation.

(finding 1) data-inflected tweets are equally action-orientated as the entire conversation (61.48% of data-inflected tweets matched terms indicating actions, compared to 62.55% overall), but (finding 2) they are slightly more emotionally charged (30.59% of data-inflected tweets matched indicator terms for emotions, compared to 25.11% overall). This second finding is interesting because it puts into tension the "common sense" that data are neutral and rational, that is, that they have no emotion or are less emotional than other ways of expressing an issue.

However, (finding 3) the most striking variation when data are present, that is, the difference that data make, lies in which actions and which emotions participate more or less in the conversation about feminicide on Twitter, and how they enter into relation with each other. The participation (prevalence) of categories of both types differs significantly between the full dataset and the data-inflected subset, as seen in Graph 3, and the distribution of co-occurrence between actions and emotions is also different, as can be seen in Graphs 4 and 5.

The three most prevalent actions across the feminicide-related Twitter conversation are **#SocialMediaCampaigns**, **popular organising**, and **naming**. These correspond to activist strategies of using social media to organise and empower the digital (hashtags) and offline (popular organising) struggle against feminicide and to engage in the (political) act of naming the women lost to feminicide. In data-inflected tweets, query terms indicating **popular organising** and **naming** have a similar presence compared to the full dataset. However, we see a sharp decrease in **#SocialMediaCampaigns** and a significant increase in **knowledge-sharing**. The latter could be reasonably explained by data's role in knowledge production. The former might be explained by activists' reluctance to *posicionar* [make prominent] data in social media, as one participant put it, in line with the maxim that it is women, not data, that matter for activists. However, some activists do use hashtags in relation to data, so this discrepancy is worth further investigation. We also see smaller increases in actions related to **demands** (calling on states and institutions to act) and **state/government inaction**, possibly suggesting data's role as evidentiary support for concrete calls for public action, and in actions of **care-giving**, which relates to offers of support, such as helplines or accompaniment for victims.

Another interesting finding emerges when analysing the emotions, as we see that, when data are present, care becomes more prevalent in the feminicide-related Twitter conversation. With a marked difference relative to the full dataset, it is the emotions related to care—**care about** and its flipside, **lack of care**—that are the most prevalent in data-inflected tweets. The proportionately higher occurrence of care-related emotions in data-inflected tweets added to the (modestly) increased activation of the action of **care-giving**, could be consistent with an interpretation that data practices around feminicide constitute practices of care, involving affective states, material practices, and ethico-political commitments (Suárez Val 2023).

If the contrast in prevalence enabled by Le-CAT's occurrence analysis begins to suggest that the presence of data makes a difference in which emotions and actions are involved in the feminicide-related conversation, the co-occurrence analysis provides more support.

The difference in which and how emotions and actions *relate to each other* when data are present is patently visible when comparing the alluvial graphs for co-occurrence across the full dataset (Graph 4) and the subset of data-inflected tweets (Graph 5). The more a category is paired with others, the longer the black sideband for that category, starting with the most connected categories at the top. The number of tweets in which an emotion-action pair has been found is represented by the width of the colour bands that connect each category with another. This relational graphic representation (in contrast, for example, with a numerical table), allows us to detach ourselves from the numbers, and return to an interpretive mode.

In the full dataset of tweets related to feminicide (Graph 4), we can see that the bands of each action flow towards each emotion quite coherently with the participation of each category. That is, if we compare it with the occurrences graph (Graph 3), we see that in the feminicide stream on Twitter the actions that participate the most are also (in the same order) the most connected to emotions and, in the same way,

the most connected emotions are the most prevalent (although the order changes slightly). Some action-emotion pairs are visibly predominant—for example, **remembrance/grief, care-giving/neglect, popular organising/grief**—but, overall, actions and emotions seem to co-occur in a fairly predictable and regular way with each other (in the sense that it does not seem surprising that the categories that participate the most are also the most connected). In contrast, when looking at data-inflected tweets (Graph 5), we see more variation and some especially predominant action-emotion pairs when the feminicide stream on Twitter is data-inflected. **Lack of care**, which reflects indifference or insensitivity towards feminicide, is the emotion most related to action in data-inflected tweets, almost exclusively, and in equal parts, with the actions of **demands** and **care-giving**.
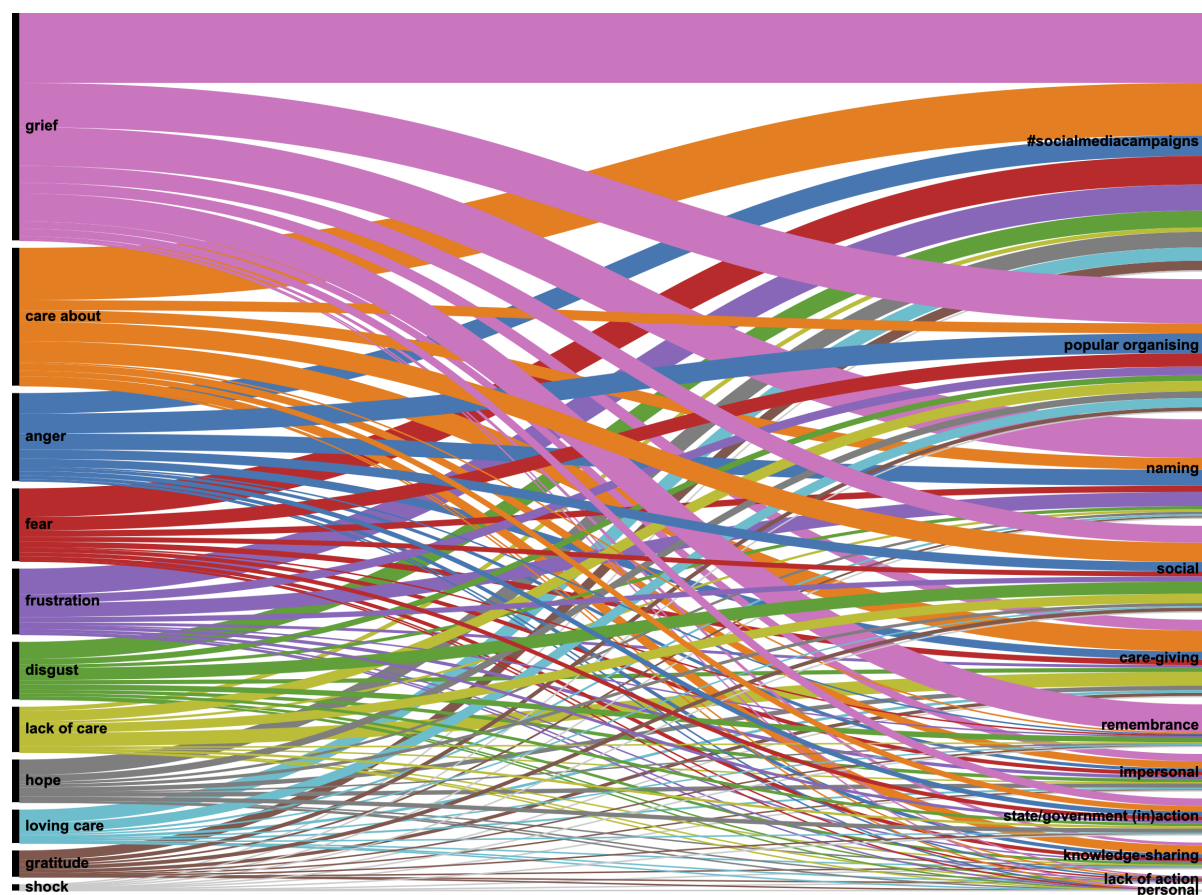
Graph 4. Co-occurrence of emotions (left) and actions (right) in tweets related to feminicide, September 2020-March 2021. Prepared by the author with RAWGraphs.
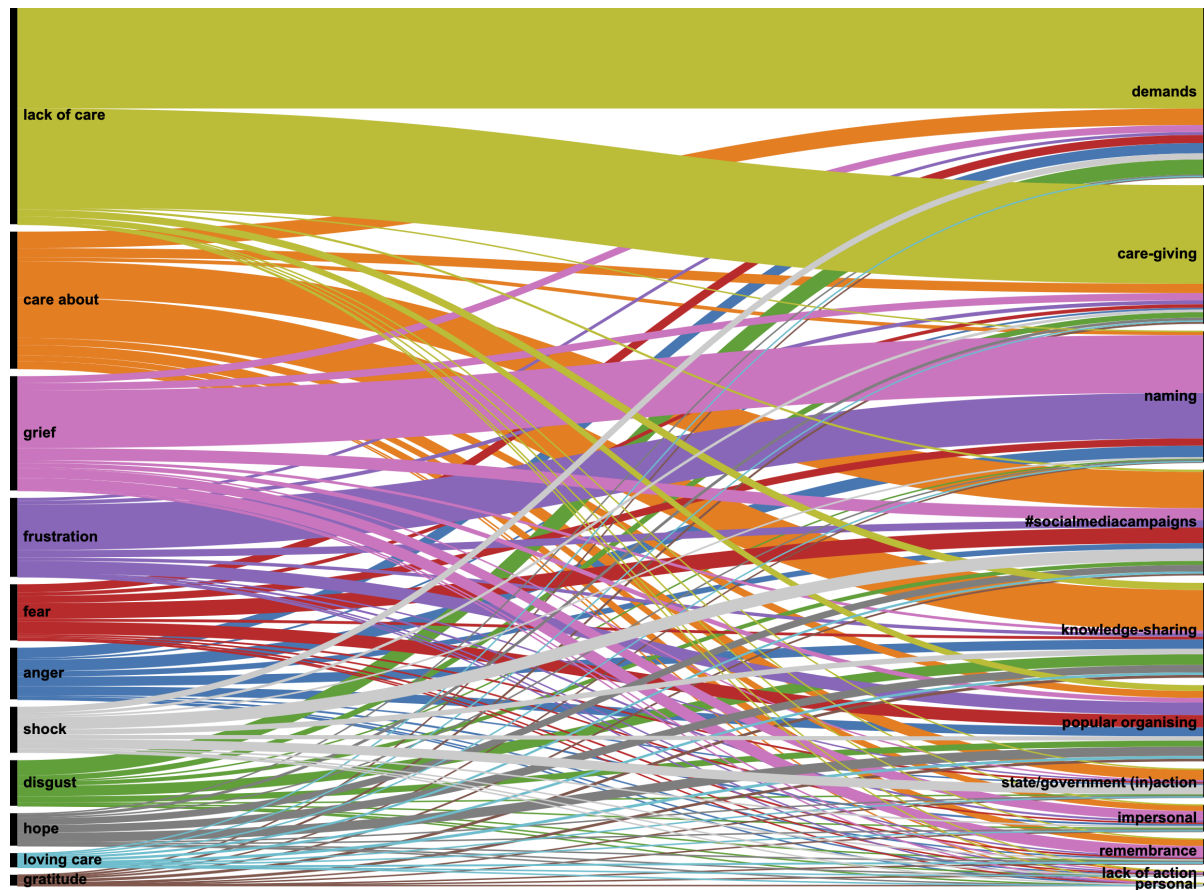
Graph 5. Co-occurrence of emotions (left) and actions (right) in data-inflected tweets, September 2020-March 2021. Prepared by the author with RAWGraphs.

Due to space limitations, I will not go into a more detailed analysis of the results here, but the findings strongly suggest that data do bring a different affectivity and politics to the public conversation around feminicide. By making visible that when data are present there are variations in the prevalence and relationships between the different actions and emotions present in the Twitter stream, the analysis suggests that data play a specific role in the public conversation about feminicide. They activate or are activated in particular configurations with different actions and emotions. That is, data have an affective politicality that is deployed at specific moments, inflecting which and how actions and emotions participate in the situation of encountering feminicide on Twitter.

4.5 Fifth scene: collectivising knowledge-production and being affected by data.

One of the intentions of my research was to facilitate meetings between current and potential members of the feminicide data community of practice, to support each other and "clone our techniques" (Murphie 2008). In line with this, I invited people who work with feminicide data or are interested in the topic to join me in "thinking together" (Pyrko, Dörfler, and Eden 2017).

I already mentioned above the consultations and workshops that were part of the query building for data collection and the Lexicon Analysis. The participatory research scenes in the project also included two *conversatorios* [semi-guided conversations] with other feminist data activists, where I shared preliminary findings and where we talked about our intentions, hopes, and fears for feminicide data. These collective moments contributed further ideas and guidance for the research, but more than that, they served to form connections between people who make up the feminicide data community of practice, myself included.

For me this was one of the key interventions of the participatory instances that formed a central part of my methodology: they were not only occasions to analyse feminicide data, they were also occasions to encounter and be affected by feminicide data. Indeed, the affective politicality of feminicide data did its work through the research encounters, as they unexpectedly served to organise and motivate new commitments and collaborations. For example, after meeting each other through the workshops, activist-researcher Natascha Castro and I decided to co-organise two meetings of families of women who were victims of feminicide in Uruguay,[13] which resulted in the preparation of an informative publication to support those who find themselves in the situation of going through the aftermath of feminicide (Castro, Martínez, and Suárez Val 2024).

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

In this section, I presented and reflected on an interpretive and computational methodology that centers participation, encounter and emotion, configuring different scenes for dwelling with data. This innovative approach allowed to visualise that data inflect which actions and emotions are involved in the conversation of feminicide and how, and that the emotion-action of "caring" has a relevant role in this affective politicality. The process combined methods, technologies, and participants into activities and spaces where we dwelled with data, including collaborative workshops, hours of coding, some spreadsheets magic, and many reflexive moments. One of which is this paper, which I share as an input for those who mobilise data and/or digital or computational methods for social change, to reflect on and improve (our) digital and research strategies.

5. A feminist mode for doing digital social research

In this paper, I described some of the research scenes where an investigation into the role of data in the conversation about feminicide on Twitter was developed. My multiple situatedness in relation to feminicide (and to feminicide data)—as a woman, researcher, anti-feminicide activist who makes data—defined and informed how I designed and carried out the project. I explored the affective politicality of data by dwelling with them—on my own and with others (including those reading this work), in interpretive and computational ways. Thus, the feminist and participatory epistemologies that guided the research materialised in different scenes, which were occasions to both analyse and be affected by feminicide data. There were other scenes (which I do not include here due to space limitations), and of course the process was actually much messier than presented, with multiple back-and-forths between scenes and data as I iteratively weaved the analysis. I prioritised this orderly presentation and methodological reflection, over delving into the theoretical analysis, with the intention that those who read this paper find inspiration or some clues for the design of their own research.

Grounded on my own commitments with feminicide and feminicide data, the methodology I developed put at its core digital methods that enable different forms of interaction with data. It is an approach that does not relegate computational tools to a merely functional role, but, on the contrary, recognises that research is "a distributed accomplishment: [whereby] online platforms, users, devices and informational practices actively contribute to the performance of digital social research" (Marres 2012, 139). In addition to myself and other committed humans (including of course the tweets' authors), T-CAT, Le-CAT, Twitter's API and algorithms, Microsoft Teams, Google Sheets, RAWGraphs and the word processor in which I am writing these lines, among other technologies, all had a role in this research. Recognising the inseparability of "objects" and "agencies of observation" (Barad 2001, 232) requires us to pay attention to the ways in which the technologies and methods we apply in our research also construct the object of study. In this sense, this paper shows that working collaboratively and remediating research

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[13] Psychologist Romina Martínez and Asociación Civil El Paso were also co-organisers.

data through different supports can be productive: each instance provoking and facilitating new interpretations. This feminist mode of producing knowledge is based on the assumption that working collaboratively is the richest way to democratise and redistribute knowledge production, and to move towards more equitable and just societies.

Patricia Maguire (2000, xix), a pioneer in feminist and action research methodologies, called on those who wish to develop socially engaged research to "Dig where you stand, connect, listen, and risk actions that are congruent with your deep passions and thoughtful theories." This is what I did when I decided to start this participatory research from my own commitment as a feminist activist against feminicide and from my experience with digital tools. As datafication and technological developments continue at breakneck speed, particularly in relation to artificial intelligence, it seems more important than ever to understand, support, and also question activists' engagements with data and the digital.

María Puig de la Bellacasa (2011, 86) tells us that "Ways of studying and representing things can have world-making effects." With this paper—which shows a mode of working with computational and interpretive methods that centers emotion, participation and encounter—I take up Maguire's invitation and throw down the gauntlet to those who work (and I include myself) in this discipline to build a practice of digital social research that is feminist, participatory, and committed to making a more just world.

Acknowledgements

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Professional socialization and prudence strategies

The use of Facebook groups by social workers

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Abstract

This article explores the increasing use of social media, particularly Facebook groups, by social workers for professional socialization and support. Social media platforms are used individually to promote services and develop professional identities, and collectively for knowledge sharing, mutual support, and critical reflection. The study focuses on Quebec social workers, examining their use of Facebook groups to connect, share experiences, and reduce work-related stress. Data were collected from a private Facebook group, posts within the group, and interviews with 14 social workers. The analysis identified three main action logics behind group usage: integration (community belonging), utility (finding tools and information), and subjectivation (questioning practices) (Jauréguiberry & Proulx, 2011). The study found that social workers use these groups primarily outside working hours for professional practice discussions, personal opinions, social mobilization, and job-related posts. Prudence emerged as a key theme, with participants exercising caution to protect their psychological well-being and professional reputation. Facebook groups serve as important spaces for professional socialization, offering support and resources while requiring careful navigation to avoid potential risks.

Keywords: Social Workers; Social Media; Prudence; Facebook

1. Introduction

While already ubiquitous in our personal lives, social media is increasingly occupying a significant place in the professional field. Indeed, they seem to be increasingly used, particularly in professional socialization processes (Lemay et al., 2023). Some professionals use them for individual purposes, either to promote their services, develop their professional identity, or to find tools and information to enhance their own practices (Adedoyin, 2016; Magogeat, 2019; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013). Furthermore, social

media platforms appear to be equally common in collective professional use (Lemay et al., 2023). These platforms can serve as conducive spaces for knowledge development, critical reflections, professional mutual support, sharing of experiences, etc. (Gandy-Guedes et al., 2016; Kasperiuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019; Ruan et al., 2020).

The use of these social media platforms is currently present across various disciplines, ranging from management and education to healthcare professions (Lemay et al., 2023). However, what do we know about these uses in the field of social work? Research on social media and social work is quite diverse. Some have examined the use of social media by social workers as a tool for promoting the profession and their services (Adedoyin, 2016), or as a tool for exploring the profession, for example, ethical issues by students in the field (Alharbi et al., 2020; Chan, 2015; Reamer, 2015). Others have considered the use of social media as intervention tools (Lopez & Kirwan, 2023; Oliver et al., 2015), whether it is group intervention (Lopez & Kirwan, 2023), collective intervention related to community development (LaMendola & Ballantyne, 2023), mobilization (Seller & Herrera Gutierrez, 2023), or interventions of various types, for example, in the context of a health crisis, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic (Chaves-Montero, 2023; La Rose, 2023). A final research topic, more closely related to the theme of this article, is the use of support groups on social media by social workers (Gandy-Guedes et al., 2016). In this article, the authors show that informal groups on Facebook can enable social workers to band together, exchange ideas and, above all, reduce the stress associated with their work. These groups can become important professional and emotional support spaces. Although such groups are very popular in Quebec, especially on the Facebook platform (Lemay, et al., forthcoming), there are few articles on the subject at present.

Drawing on an article describing the extent of exchange groups among social workers on the Facebook platform (Lemay et al., forthcoming), this article will address the following question: What are the meanings behind the uses of exchange groups among peers by social workers in Quebec? To answer this question, this article has two objectives: 1) to describe the uses of these peer exchange groups by social workers; and 2) to understand the meanings of these uses by social workers.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data collection

The data corpus for this research is taken from three different sources: a Facebook group, the posts within that group, and the individuals who are members of it and other groups related to social work. Firstly, we selected a private Facebook group focused on social work in Quebec, reserved for professionals and students in the field[1]. The chosen group boasts several thousand members and dozens of daily posts. Regarding posts, due to the group's high activity, we analyzed the content from November 2022 to February 2023. The collected data for analysis included the post title, content, date and time of posting, number of reactions, number of comments, and the URL to the post (to find it again if needed). The data were then transferred to an Excel document for analysis. These observations helped illustrate the most frequently discussed topics within the group and address Objective 1.

Lastly, we recruited 14 professionals or aspiring professionals in social work for a self-guided tour of their usage of social work groups of which they are members. This guided tour unfolded in two stages: 1) a 60-minute semi-directed interview to understand their usage of these groups and 2) a guided tour of their activity traces on these groups to comprehend the context and meaning attributed to their active participation. More specifically, each participant explored the history of their activities (publications, comments, reactions, etc.) in each of the groups of which they are a member, while commenting on them. These guided tours allowed us to address Objectives 1 and 2 of the project.

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[1] In order to facilitate the reading of this article and since social work is currently a profession predominantly occupied by women, we allow ourselves to feminize the text. The feminine form here represents all genders.

A recruitment poster was posted on various Facebook groups and networking platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn). The participant selection criteria were minimal. They simply had to: 1) identify as social workers (some professionals do not hold the official title of social worker, such as those working in community organizations), and/or be studying social work; and 2) be a member of at least one social work–related group or page. Recruitment proved challenging, and despite multiple follow-up attempts over several months, the final sample size (14 participants) was determined by the low response rate rather than by deliberate choice. Several hypotheses may shed light on why we were only able to recruit 14 participants. The first relates to the high volume of daily posts in these groups. It is possible that few people actually saw our recruitment post, which may have been lost among the many daily publications. If we were to repeat the process, we could ask the group administrators to pin the post in order to keep it visible for a longer period. Moreover, group members may not have felt directly concerned by the call for participation, perhaps assuming that one needed to be highly active in the groups to take part. One way to address this issue would have been to clearly state on the flyer that even less active members were welcome to participate.

2.2 Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed in a semi-inductive manner. An inductive thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 2003) was conducted on the analysis of the publications and interview to address Objective 1 and partly Objective 2, allowing the data to speak for themselves in defining codes. These data were then organized and presented to address the objectives. Finally, using the concept of the three action logics (Jauréguiberry & Proulx, 2011), we conducted a deductive analysis to better understand the meaning behind the uses of social media groups by social workers. The authors suggest that there are three action logics behind digital usage: 1) a logic of integration, where the user primarily seeks to create connections and develop a sense of community belonging; 2) an utilitarian logic, where the user seeks personal gain (tools, information, products, etc.); and 3) a logic of subjectivation, where the user primarily seeks to distance themselves and question their own existence (Jauréguiberry & Proulx, 2015). We will analyze the types of usage based on those three action logics: integration, utility, and subjectivation.

This study, of course, has certain limitations. First, it was difficult to analyze with the same level of precision activities that leave no digital trace, such as reading posts without reacting to them. That being said, we asked participants to describe what they do on the page, which allowed us to still gather some information about these non-visible forms of engagement. Furthermore, since recruitment was conducted directly through the groups, we were unable to reach social workers for whom participation in these groups may have had a negative impact on their professional trajectory, as they were no longer present in these spaces at the time of recruitment. If we were to conduct the study again, we would consider recruiting through other platforms, or even by posting flyers in schools and workplaces.

2.3 Ethical considerations

Research involving human subjects raises many ethical questions, and when social media use is added to the mix, even more arise. These issues concern aspects of confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity, and the distinction between private and public life. Thus, to mitigate these issues and especially the risk of identification, we decided, among other measures, not to publish any participant names, group and/or page names. Note that to respect those requirements no verbatim of the observed publications will be presented to illustrate the results below. However, we will use certain direct quotations from the interviews conducted with the participants, while ensuring strict anonymity. The project received approval from the ethics and research committee of the Université de Montréal.

3. Results

3.1 Socio-demographics of participants

We conducted interviews with 14 social workers and/or social work students (n=3). More than half (n=9) of the participants were between 25 and 35 years old. The others were predominantly over 35 years old. We did not observe major differences in group usage based on the age of the participants, whether in terms of frequency of consultation or platforms used. Of the 14 participants, only one was studying full-time, and two were in training in addition to working as social workers in the field. Many have diverse backgrounds, meaning they have not always followed a strictly social work professional path. Furthermore, they do not all work in the same setting, but the vast majority work in the public sector. A few have private practices, but none work in the community sector, which is noteworthy.

Despite their differences, what unites these participants? They generally joined the groups for reasons of belonging to values and the profession, or to improve their professional practices at the beginning of their careers in a new setting, by meeting other social workers and asking them questions. The common thread is thus the aspect of professional socialization. They all joined to connect with other social workers, whether to mobilize, improve their interventions, or simply participate in sharing experiences. Therefore, the motivation to join an unofficial and online professional collective, not directly linked to their workplace, appears to be central to the meaning of their participation.

3.2 Objective 1: Describing the uses of peer exchange groups by social workers

3.2.1 According to the interviews

All participants mentioned that their use of social networking sites related to social work is primarily embodied through groups on Facebook. Their more personal uses, which are not related to social work, are carried out on platforms such as Instagram, Tiktok, Bereal, etc. The different Facebook groups they are members for professional use are mostly of the "private" type, as is the case for the group that served as the basis for our observations in this project. Although most of the groups identified by the participants are exclusively reserved for social workers and students in the field, several participants also mentioned being part of interdisciplinary groups, the common thread of which is usually a specific workplace. For example, a social worker might be part of a group focused on physical rehabilitation intervention, where they would interact with doctors, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, etc. Furthermore, the groups reserved for social workers named by the participants either include social workers from all backgrounds and regions or social workers from a specific workplace (e.g., child protection) and/or a particular region. Regarding social workers' participation in these groups, participants believe it is more passive, often limited to reading posts. This participation almost always occurs outside of working hours and at a frequency of several times a week. The uses that social workers have for these groups are therefore varied. Each participant is part of several groups, with different goals and targand audiences. Some aim to share intervention techniques, others deal with specific issues, or offer a space for informal exchange and support.

3.2.2 According to observations of posts

To gain a more precise understanding of the uses of such groups by social workers, we analyzed the posts in the chosen group through non-participant observation, focusing on the topics addressed by the users. Thus, we identified seven main subjects: 1) professional practice; 2) personal opinion on a topic related to social work; 3) social mobilization; 4) the Professional Order of Social Workers; 5) social work education; 6) job offers and job searches; and 7) other posts, which are of a personal nature and do not fit into the other subjects. Of these seven subjects, professional practice represents more than 50% of the posts.
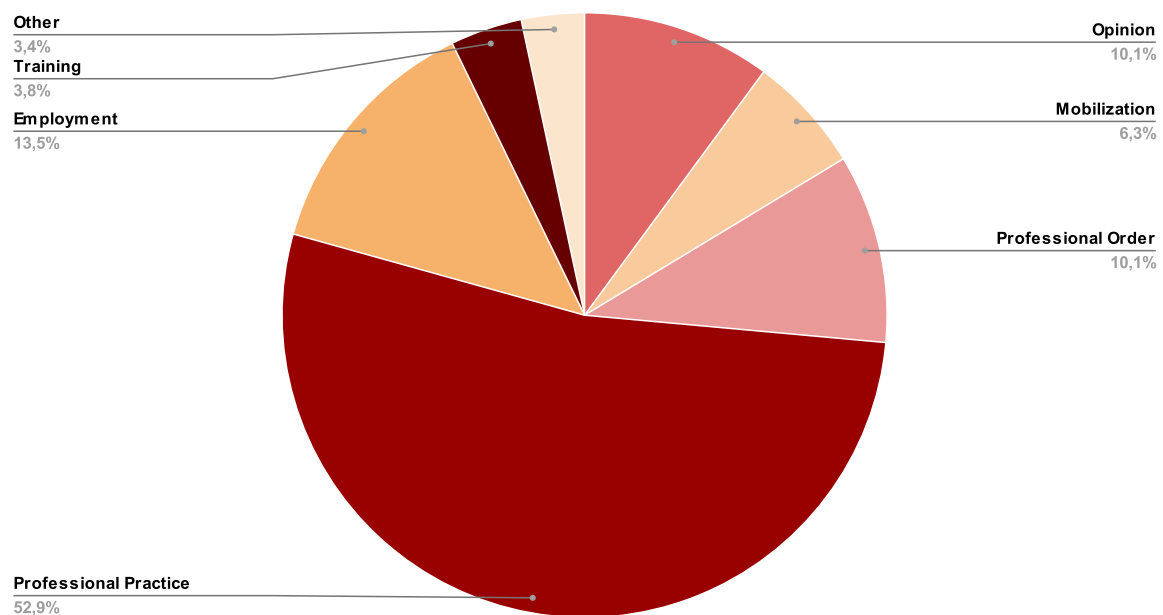
Graph 1. Topics of Posts in the Observed Group

This theme is divided into two categories: sharing (of tools, practice tips, training, or events) and requests (questions on a theme, a case, or a particular work environment, sharing of experiences and/or tools). The last is the requests that represent the majority (75%) of posts related to professional practice. The most common were questions about a work environment or a specific theme. For example, "Does anyone work in a nursing home and could answer a few questions?" or "I'm looking for a social worker specializing in the autism spectrum, I have a few questions for them."

3.3 Objective 2: Understanding the meanings behind these uses for social workers

To understand the meanings behind the use of groups by social workers, we questioned them and analyzed their responses using the theory of action logics presented by Jauréguiberry and Proulx (2015). Jauréguiberry and Proulx (2015) explain that studies focusing on user experience have shown that there are three underlying logics of action behind digital practices: (1) an integration logic, where use is driven by a desire to develop a sense of belonging by remaining constantly connected; (2) a utilitarian logic, where use is oriented toward achieving some form of gain or efficiency; and (3) a subjectivation logic, where use serves purposes of autonomy and critical distance, allowing individuals to explore the meaning of their existence. These logics are not mutually exclusive. A single individual may mobilize multiple logics within the same experience or shift between them depending on the context (e.g., utilitarian use at work and integration use at home). We chose to base part of our analysis on this theoretical framework because our focus is precisely on the experience of social workers within these groups, and it offered a useful lens to explore the various dimensions of that experience.

3.3.1 The action logics behind these uses

All three action logics seem to be equally present. Moreover, it is rare for a group to follow only one action logic. Uses often involve at least two different logics.

The first action logic, **integration**, provides an initial explanation for the meaning of these group uses by social workers. Indeed, participants mentioned being part of these groups to find a sense of belonging,

a community that understands the issues they face daily and with whom they can share laughter, frustrations, and experiences.

> "I think it really helps just to let some of the stress out. It also helps build a kind of support network. When you're going through something and you think, 'This doesn't make any sense,' and then you see lots of people commenting, saying they relate—you know, it creates this sense of solidarity, and you feel less alone (translated from french)"(4).

This action logic was very present among social workers who work alone or in small settings. For many, these groups are spaces where they feel understood, where they can share their difficulties, but also their successes, with peers who will understand them.

The second action logic, **utility**, was often reported by the participants. Indeed, they mentioned using these groups to find answers to their questions related to social work, to share or find tools and information for their practice, to recruit new colleagues, and sometimes even to find a form of clinical supervision (especially when it is not available in their workplace).

> "Some people just read and soak up a lot of information—they're learning things. They don't necessarily comment, but as soon as there's information being shared—whether it's clinical knowledge, training opportunities, updates about the professional order, or news about a new government program—well, that helps meet their need for information (Translated from french)" (8)

Although our observations showed that the majority of posts aimed to ask or share something, the respondents placed this logic on par with the other two. We could explain this distinction by the fact that the 14 respondents were not the authors of any of the 247 posts we observed. We could hypothesize that members with a more active participation on these groups (posting, commenting, reacting) perceive these groups in a more utilitarian way, and that simply was not the case for our respondents.

The third logic, **subjectivation,** was also visible in the discourses of our participants. In this sense, they said they were part of these groups to be able to question their own intervention practices and social work in general. Even though their participation remains rather passive, reading posts alone still leads social workers to question their practices and their ethical positioning.

> "I read the posts, but I don't get involved—I never really jump in. But it does make me reflect, like, on my own practice. Like, is it okay when I say this? Or, oh, I didn't know that was considered oppressive by that community. So yeah, sometimes it really makes me think about my practice, especially about how I express myself (translated from french)." (12)

For many, these groups are conducive spaces for debates and questioning. It is also in this action logic that social workers will use social networking sites to mobilize members and encourage them to participate in various events (related to debates). Some months are more active for this action logic, especially when significant events occur. We could think of media coverage following tragic events involving social workers, or simply every year during the renewal of the professional order licenses.

3.3.2 Evolution of uses
During the interviews, we noticed a distinction between what initially motivated participants to become members of certain groups and what motivates them to continue participating today. Indeed, they mentioned that the needs these groups addressed have evolved with their professional journey. When they were students, these groups primarily addressed a need for mobilization, advocacy, and defense of the profession. When they entered the workforce, this need transformed into something more practical and useful, where social workers could find tools and professional advice to start their careers on the right foot. Subsequently, during difficulties experienced in their workplace, these groups served more to share their personal experiences with a community that also faced these challenges. Finally, during a job change or a period of staffing shortages, these groups could be a good platform to recruit and find a new work environment.

Almost all participants mentioned some form of evolution in their use of exchange groups. Indeed, if their initial motivation to join these groups often involved obtaining answers to questions they had, their

motivation to stay in these groups today has evolved. In this sense, participants mentioned being motivated to participate in these groups to potentially help colleagues, either by supporting them in their reflections, emotions, or by sharing sought-after information and tools. Thus, their motivation has mostly shifted from a utilitarian logic, aimed at obtaining information, to an integration logic, more focused on helping others. The sense of community building, sharing knowledge, has therefore taken precedence over individual needs.

3.3.3 Why choose the digital space?

To deepen our understanding of the meaning behind the usage of these groups by social workers, we asked our participants to explain if online groups offered them something different than in-person meetings. All participants mentioned that the digital realm brought very interesting elements that would be impossible to replicate in person, such as the breadth of the number of people/opinions reached, the speed of communication, the overcoming of geographical and temporal barriers, the possibility of regrouping together outside the walls of the organization and of being in the profession without being in the workplace, etc. That being said, several also mentioned a "yes, but" perspective, meaning,

> "Some people post a lot, but it's not like being in a real-life group where there's a leader saying, 'Hey, there's a protest at this time, let's all meet up.' Social media is so broad, it just feels impersonal. Me, I won't go to a protest unless someone I know asks me to go with them (translated from french)" (1).

This "yes, but" perspective seems to be particularly present when it comes to a logic of subjectivation, of questioning. That is, this uncertainty about the potential of the digital realm only seems to arise when questioning participants about concrete social changes, about questioning the profession. For all questions related to utilitarian and integration logics, the digital realm seems to be a perfect medium, even better suited than the offline world. Finally, we asked our participants if they thought it was important for social workers to be part of these groups. Most of them confirmed that they believed it was important for social workers to be part of these groups, mainly to stay informed, but above all to create contact and a supportive community of belonging. This response leads us to question the presence of such offline communities. It is not possible to assert that these do not exist, however, it would be reasonable to argue that these online communities are an important addition to the offline local solidarities already in place.

That being said, regarding the question of the importance of being part of these groups for social workers, the participants told us that it was equally important for this to be done while respecting their limits of involvement and their needs. These groups should allow them to stay informed about current issues, to address their questions, but should not be a burden of work, as all this is done outside of working hours. It is in this logic that several participants reported exercising caution in their participation in these groups.

4. Cross-cutting analysis - The prudence stance

Indeed, the analysis reveals the prominence of prudence on social networking sites (SNS) as a limit to the previously identified action logics. This theme serves to somewhat mitigate the strictly emancipatory and libertarian representation of social networks, as well as those depicting them as sites of violence, of the return of the repressed, etc. We did not find a definition of the concept of online prudence in the existing literature. We therefore propose a definition that brings together various elements found in the literature and that resonate with the experiences shared by our participants. Thus, for us, prudence in digital environments refers to the ability to anticipate the potential negative consequences of one's online actions (Koonin, 2013). It involves risk assessment, managing exposure to information (Zhang et al., 2024), and critical reflection before posting or engaging (Weijs et al., 2019). It is a vigilant stance aimed at preventing potential harm associated with platform use (Kamal et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2024).

Prudence emerges as a strategy for distancing oneself from both of these archetypes. This is not about prudence regarding confidentiality or the accuracy of information found in these groups, but rather about

professional risks, risks to their psychological health, and the strategies some adopt to avoid them. These risks and strategies will be further developed below. We did not initially plan to inquire about this subject, but almost all participants spontaneously broached the topic. Therefore, we attempted to conceptualize this prudence. The following illustration presents the reasons/motivations behind this prudence and the strategies of prudence (Figure 1).
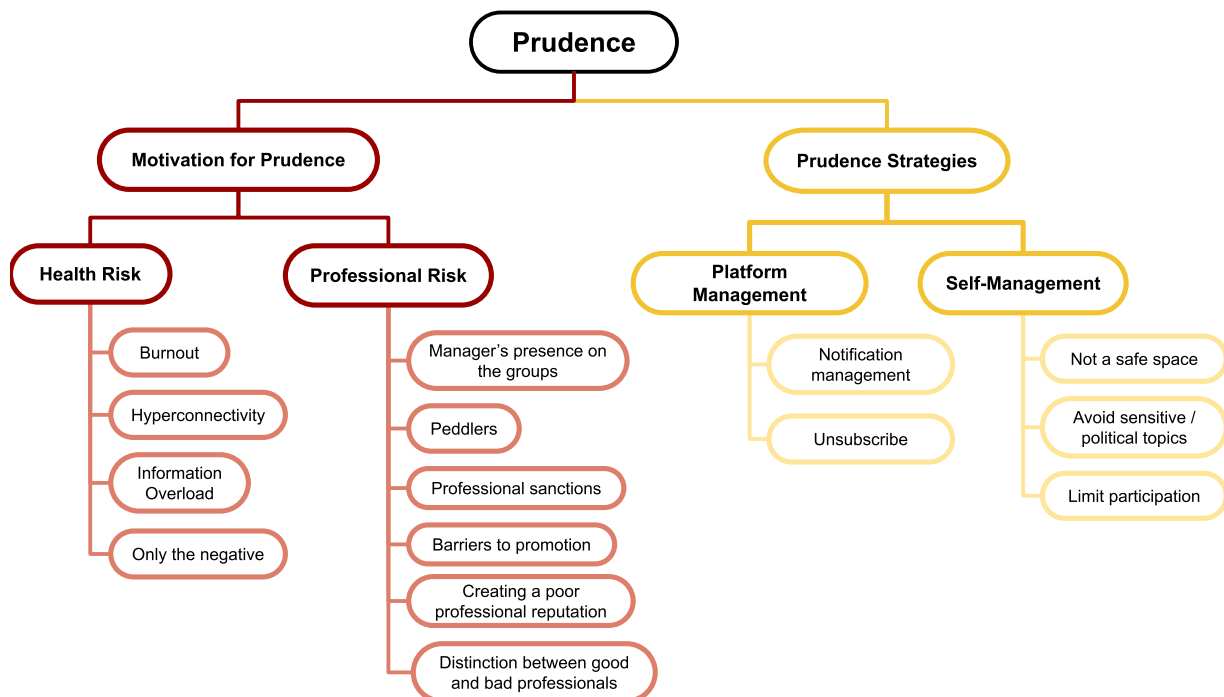

Figure 1. Motivations and strategies for prudence

4.1 Motivations for prudence

4.1.1 Health risk

The first reason for this prudence is the potential health risks of participation in certain groups. In this regard, participants were mainly concerned about their psychological well-being. For some participants, this kind of group can become quite negative in the content shared, meaning that there are often posts aimed at criticism, sometimes without nuance, or sharing negative experiences.

> "And it's not really helpful because it's mostly complaints about structural issues. It doesn't really add much, since we all know—we all know we're stuck in a messed-up system. We all know the healthcare system is falling apart, we all know the new public management is total bullshit. But after that, since there's no real solution, there's nothing concrete (translated from french)" (1)

While for some, such posts may have a positive effect by stimulating the advocacy and mobilization nature of social work, for others, it can have a demoralizing, demobilizing, or even exhausting effect, not to mention the risk of being drawn into controversy. Indeed, some participants confided that the overload of "negativity" in these groups was one of the reasons they were decreasing their participation more and more. It is worth noting that not all groups were targeted by this risk, such as groups whose main purpose is to lighten the mood or show self-deprecation by posting humorous memes.

While this surplus of negative statements can contribute to professional exhaustion, especially when combined with difficult working conditions, it is not necessarily the only source. Participants also mentioned a risk of information overload, as well as the feeling of always needing to be connected

(hyperconnectivity). In fact, since they all use their personal Facebook accounts, they are constantly exposed to social work-related posts in their personal time and space. While most simply report ignoring them, for others, simply seeing them in their newsfeed can be exhausting. Thus, the need to protect oneself against overexposure to posts whose topics can be perceived as negative, redundant, or too burdensome to handle, is one of the reasons why participants exercise caution in their choice of group and in the form their participation takes.

4.1.2 Professional risks

This second motivation behind the participants' prudence was by far the most mentioned during the interviews. By professional risks, they mean all the dangers to participants' professional careers. In this regard, they mentioned not actively participating in online discussions, fearing sanctions in their workplace, or even hindering promotion opportunities. Some cite, for example, the risk of creating a poor professional reputation among other workers or managers, partners from other disciplines or organizations, and future employers. These fears do not come out of nowhere. Indeed, the social workers interviewed explain their prudence by the fact that these groups are often followed by several thousand members and it is impossible to know who really sees the posts. Thus, many reported that managers are also on these groups and that in the past, social workers have been reprimanded, or questioned, for statements they made online. That being said, managers are not the only potentially risky members. Indeed, participants confided that it has happened that other social workers take screenshots of posts or comments and report them to employers so that the social worker in question is sanctioned.

> "And then there's the fact that people often take screenshots and send them to the professional order or your employer. I actually got in trouble with my employers because of posts I made in a group. Early in my career, I had made some memes that were critical of the lean approach. Some people took screenshots from the page and sent them to my bosses, and I got called in (translated from french)" (8).

Although these cases do not seem frequent, the source of fear is therefore no longer just the boss observing from their office, but also colleagues, those in whom they thought they could trust. Furthermore, some participants mentioned not wanting to participate in debates or comment on the practices of another social worker because such discussions often lead to tensions. This can sometimes lead to a very clear binary separation between what can be considered as "good" social work practice and what cannot. It could therefore be easy to be considered a "bad" social worker if one's practice does not follow that of the majority. These risks have thus led our participants to exercise caution in what they say and react to on these groups.

4.2 Prudence strategies

The second element of analysis refers to the strategies put in place to exercise prudence on these groups, regardless of the motivation behind it. These strategies involve either a form of managing the use of the application or platform, or paying particular attention to one's own behaviors on these groups.

4.2.1 Platform management

The first strategies mentioned by the participants are those directly related to managing settings on the social networking platform's application or platform. For example, some mentioned that when they feel they receive too many notifications from the group, they simply adjust the group's settings in the application to stop receiving them. The same goes for posts in their news feed; if they feel overwhelmed by group posts, they will simply unsubscribe while remaining a member and can view the posts when they feel like it. They can, of course, re-subscribe later if they wish. This kind of strategy helps to limit the risk of informational or emotional overload due to negative posts during especially active periods on these groups, such as the license renewal month or media coverage of particular events.

4.2.2 Self-management

The second group of strategies mentioned by the participants referred to modifying their behaviors to limit risks, either for their psychological well-being or their professional life. For example, many mentioned avoiding participating in discussions on sensitive or more political topics.

> "I've never been someone who posts a lot, because I'm kind of scared of getting attacked. Like, someone who puts something out there—I'm afraid what I write might not be right and that people will go after me or it'll start a whole debate. I don't feel like fueling that. I know people who are really good at it—they even add sources and educate others on different perspectives... But it takes time. It's a lot of work to do that (translated from french)" (1)

Liking a post was also not considered, as it still publicly indicates a stance on the content. Thus, most participants said they greatly limit their active participation in groups, except when it comes to sharing resources or responding to more neutral questions. Note that even if their active participation is reduced, they still take the time to read and reflect on sensitive and/or political posts to form their own opinions. Critical thinking is generally present, even if it is not expressed in writing in the public space. Moreover, to avoid pitfalls and possible professional sanctions, some participants mentioned that they pay particular attention to not perceiving these groups as safe spaces. With the high number of members and the fact that they cannot know all of them, it is impossible for them to trust them all enough to discuss personal matters. Thus, by not considering the group as a "safe space," they avoid discussing topics they would not discuss with strangers. These two forms of prudence strategies represent the entirety of what was reported by the participants. Of course, it is impossible to assert that all members of these groups are prudent, as many still publish content on these groups. They simply did not participate in this project.

4.3 Discussion - Insights from research on the concept of prudence

4.3.1 Online surveillance as a form of control

As previously noted, several participants mentioned exercising caution in their online interactions due to perceived scrutiny from their peers or prospective employers. Lewis (2018) posits that the emergence of the Internet and various social media platforms has introduced a novel mode of surveillance. He further contends that this surveillance has become almost normalized in online spaces, leading users to adjust their behaviors accordingly. However, Lewis (2018) also suggests that such surveillance is not inherently negative; rather, it can serve as a mechanism for regulating interactions to mitigate potential deviations and undesirable behaviors among users. As echoed by our interviewees, the sense of being under observation by other group members prompts them to self-regulate their participation and carefully consider their expressions, given that such content is accessible to all members.

Concerning the aspect of online surveillance by employers, Paré and Smith (2023) observe a growing number of legal cases where employers litigate against employees for statements made online. Thus, the apprehension expressed by our participants was not unfounded. Some employers may initiate legal action, or become subject to it by their employees, if the latter face repercussions for online statements, whether on personal or professional accounts, that could adversely affect the organization they represent (Paré & Smith, 2023). According to these scholars, the crux of the issue lies in the realm of freedom of expression. Fear of facing professional repercussions compels employees to exercise self-censorship not only within the confines of their workplace but also in their online presence. In the digital sphere, the delineation between professional and personal realms becomes increasingly blurred, paralleled by a nuanced understanding of freedom of expression.

4.3.2 A Space for knowledge sharing?

Pi and collaborators (2013) posit that online communities have emerged as significant platforms for knowledge dissemination. Users of social networking sites increasingly join groups with diverse themes and objectives to access information, seek answers to their questions, find support, and acquire tools. In Québec, these groups are numerous and take various forms, such as Intervention psychosociale au

Québec, Version 2.0 Partage d'outils en intervention psychosociale, or T.S Québec : indignations et solutions. However, this knowledge-sharing process is not automatic. Pi et al. (2013) explain that group culture profoundly influences this behavior. Thus, the more a group's culture emphasizes knowledge sharing, the more inclined its members are to share their expertise. Furthermore, the authors suggest that members are even more motivated to engage in such sharing if they believe their contributions will be valuable to others (Pi et al., 2013).

This could elucidate why most participants indicated that they do not primarily seek information on these platforms but rather aim to contribute their own assistance and knowledge to fellow social workers with questions. However, none of them mentioned being mindful of the accuracy of the information they encounter online. Nevertheless, it appears that the social workers we interviewed are more inclined to assist their colleagues than to seek information for themselves.

4.3.3 A matter of prudence for clients

Finally, we were surprised that none of the participants mentioned being cautious about the information they disclose online regarding their clients. While some mentioned using these groups to seek help with specific cases, sometimes considering it a form of clinical supervision, none mentioned paying particular attention to the confidentiality issues of their clients. This does not mean, of course, that they disclose personal information about their clients online, but it is interesting to note that none mentioned this type of prudence, although it is well-explored in the scientific literature. Indeed, Voshel and Wesala (2015) suggest that many social work students discuss experiences with clients in their internship settings on social networking sites, and our observations of publications demonstrate that this behavior also extends to practicing social workers in the field. While sharing reflections and posing questions about a specific case may improve practice and find better solutions for the client, this practice carries risks. Even if the user does not name the client, there is always a risk of recognition. Thus, such publications can lead to severe professional consequences and harm the professional reputation of the social worker and their workplace (Voshel & Wesala, 2015).

Another element not mentioned in the interviews is caution regarding the use of SNSs to gather information about clients, colleagues, or future colleagues (Byrne & Kirwan, 2019). This involves using groups or search engines on SNSs to observe what a client or colleague posts, shares, or comments on during their personal time. This type of behavior raises numerous ethical issues regarding privacy. With easy access to personal information on social networks, it could be tempting for a social worker to obtain information or follow the activities of their clients. Some beneficiaries may post content that is accessible to their social worker without even realizing it (Byrne & Kirwan, 2019). What if they discover that the client is lying about problematic behavior? What if the client is saying bad things about his social worker online? Or what if they have mutual friends? Some clients can even ask their social worker to look at some pictures or publications they made on Facebook (Byrne & Kirwan, 2029). Thus, the boundaries between personal and professional life would become even more blurred (Voshel & Wesala, 2015). On another note, what if a client finds their personal profile and wants to connect with them? How to manage the worker/client relationship online? Reamer (2023) here raises the risk that the client has access to very personal information about their worker, which may disturb the relationship. Although the reflex would be to reject any contact requests from clients (current or former), the social worker must be prepared for the possibility that the client may feel rejected (Reamer, 2023). Thus, social workers must consider, from their professional training, how to present their profile online (Voshel & Wesala, 2015). For example, several of our participants mentioned changing their name on their profile so that they could not be easily found. Voshel and Wesala (2015) also stress that it is important to remember that social workers are never truly "off duty"; they must report certain behaviors to authorities. That being said, the notion of caution regarding the ease with which a client can be found, or oneself found, was not mentioned by the participants. Perhaps because it is not directly related to the use of specific groups in social work, or simply because they do not engage in such practices.

5. Conclusion

In summary, we can assert that social workers primarily use Facebook groups outside of working hours to connect with colleagues from across Quebec. This research has also shown us that the majority of posts made by social workers focus on the subject of professional practice, whether it be asking practical questions or sharing relevant tools and information. Regarding the second objective of this article, which is to understand the meaning behind the use of peer exchange groups on SNSs for social workers, we can advance that the meaning pursued by social workers lies within the three action logics of Jauréguiberry and Proulx (2011). Indeed, our results have demonstrated that social workers use these groups for integration purposes (joining a community of belonging), utilitarian purposes (finding tools, improving practice), as well as for subjectivation purposes (questioning their practices and reflecting on their position as social workers). Another pertinent element reported by social workers is the aspect of prudence in their online interactions with their peers. The analysis of commented visits with the participants allowed us to develop a typology of prudence, presenting on one side the risks, namely those for psychological health and those for professional careers, and on the other side the strategies to limit these risks, namely those related to platform management or management of one's own behaviors. In this sense, we believe that this aspect of prudence deserves further exploration.

That being said, several other angles of analysis seem interesting for future research. For example, it would be relevant to question managers and employers about their presence on such groups. We could inquire about their perception of these groups and confirm, or not, the fears of the social workers we met. Furthermore, it would also seem important to examine the professional skills to develop regarding the use of SNSs and social work. Should it be given special consideration in training? What issues should be addressed? What skills need to be acquired? And is it necessary to evaluate them?

5.1 Risks and limitations of the research

The greatest risk we observed was that of researcher over-involvement, as recruitment was conducted using her personal accounts on various platforms. Thus, she quickly found herself receiving responses on her mobile phone at all hours of the day. She could have turned off notifications for these applications, but that would have also prevented those related to her personal life. Moreover, we note two limitations related to this research. The first is the difficulty in recruiting participants. Despite postings on three platforms, on dozens of pages and groups, and emails sent, we were only able to recruit 14 participants. Finally, we sometimes found it challenging to work with the search engines of the Facebook platform, which sometimes omitted certain results during commented visits.

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Liebesraum

Social media as a space for the ontological (in)securitisation of the far-right

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Abstract

The co-constitution of social media and the Symbolic Order – the system of norms, law, culture, and language conditioning intersubjectivity – has generated an unprecedented political ontology marked by commodified performativity under neoliberalism. This ontology displaces the experience of *the political* in favour of its consumption as a spectacle. This spectacle expedites the misrecognition of far-right discourses as anomic rather than central to the neoliberal Symbolic Order. This paper explores how the relationship between social media and the neoliberal Symbolic Order sustains the normalisation of the far-right as an ontologically-securitising fantasy. I develop a Lacanian framework entangling the concepts of antagonism and ontological security. Through it, I examine the architecture of social media in terms of programmability (the mutual influence between users and algorithms) and homophilic networks (neighbourhoods of 'love for sameness'). Based on the transition from 'hate of the other' to 'love for the same', I synthesise this framework and social media architecture into the novel notion of *liebesraum* or 'space of love'. *Liebesraum* constitutes a spatial-affective apparatus that mediates the occlusion of traumatic encounters with anxieties of sociocultural collapse by situating them in a deceptive homeostasis of commodified antagonism on social media. Through the politically-stunting oscillation between transgressive enjoyment and corrective 'love', and in fostering *faux* agency, *liebesraum* reinforces neoliberalism's ideological grip while simultaneously hollowing it by algorithmically mainstreaming ideologies of exclusion, supremacy, and brutalisation. I illustrate *liebesraum* in two political crises in the US: the 2021 Capitol Hill insurrection and Donald Trump's 2024 electoral victory.

Keywords: social media; ontological security; far-right; homophily; psychoanalysis; Lacan; antagonism

1. Introduction

'Today is 1776'. This line was tweeted on the 6th of January 2021 – the day of the US Capitol Hill insurrection by MAGA ('Make America Great Again') supporters – by far-right Republican Congresswoman Lauren Boebert (USA Today, 2021). The allusion to the US' founding and its

signification as 'free' and 'resolute' was not isolated but accompanied by tweets by politicians across the political spectrum. For instance, 'what' and 'who' belong to the US was conveyed in a tweet by Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer: 'Those who performed today's reprehensible acts were rioters, insurrectionists, thugs, domestic terrorists. They don't represent America [but] tonight Democracy will triumph' (Arkin, 2021). This uproar was constituted by antagonistic discourses aiming to narratively control the Capitol storming and was constrained by the affordances of social media spaces, norms, and logics.

Social media are semi-public spaces where antagonisms are waged under the modern liberal order. These spaces have become performative battlegrounds for 'heroic' antagonisms interacted with by millions of users. For Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, antagonism is the irreducible possibility for social conflict rooted in intersubjective differences, which shape exclusion and thereby how identities are politically formed and contested (Mouffe, 2005). Antagonisms are the socio-symbolic boundaries and relations demarcating society and thus cannot be neutralised by liberal rationalism and consensus politics which, paradoxically, rely on segregating those marginal to the consensus (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, pp. 70-71). *The political* – the condition of antagonism permeating society (Mouffe, 2005) – and *politics* – how antagonisms are organised into institutions – are conditioned by complex market-oriented systems of mediatised socialisation. Understanding this technosocial structure is critical to analysing how the political emotionally manifests and is organised amid the retreat of the modern liberal order. This structure recasts the phenomenon of far-right normalisation as paradoxical, since the latter shapes the dislocation of this order while performatively safeguarding its neoliberal component. In this article, the modern liberal order should be understood as the global governance superstructure of late modernity, while neoliberalism constitutes the predominant ideological framework – focused on deregulation, privatisation, and welfare dismantling (Wilson, 2017) – underpinning this order.

In the context of the modern liberal order's retreat, core antagonisms, like those between liberal Democrats and far-right Republicans in the US, become spectacles (Debord, 1983) or commodities – fetishised objects obscuring the social relations and labour behind their production, embodying the 'virtual soul' of excessive capitalist desire (McGowan, 2025; Vighi & Feldner, 2007). These commodified antagonisms operate in two inextricable dimensions. First, they provide subjects with an illusory sense of stability and belonging to symbolic structures and political communities – i.e., fantasies of ontological security – by reinforcing 'us vs. them' dichotomies in 'neighbourhoods of sameness' on social media. Second, they embody the excess promised by neoliberalism – that we can 'have it all', yet obstacles remain (McGowan, 2025). The commodification of antagonisms relies on reducing intricate categories of existence (e.g., class, race, gender) via schemes of othering, i.e., producing a 'whole' self against an essentialised, threatening Other. This process generates 'authentic' yet illusory senses of agency, purpose, and fixity bound to the 'neighbourhood' and shaped by the social imperatives of liberal modernity. This was evident in adversarial narratives during the Capitol insurrection on social media (e.g. 'support democracy' vs 'stop the steal'). These narratives reinforce ontological security fantasies of belonging ('I am a progressive / patriot!') while being constrained by the algorithmic affordances and spaces of the attention economy ('like', 'share'). They produce agency experienced in post-political[1] spectacles and bolstered within comforting spaces of sameness.

Globally, liberal and far-right discourses contest belonging and identity by tying idyllic pasts to troubled presents and anxiety-inducing futures. This contestation produces dystopias – imaginaries oscillating between hope and anxiety – that frame the recognition of the threatening Other in online neighbourhoods. Consequently, the normalisation of the far-right becomes central to the modern liberal order, performing a paradoxically stabilising-yet-excessive threat that co-constitutes the identity and feelings of agency of the liberal subject. Commodified antagonisms occlude the emotional and material conditions set by neoliberalism that enable the far-right by reinforcing 'sameness' on social media,

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[1] 'Neutral', a-political, consensus-based, technocratic (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014).

twisting hatred, fear, and anxiety of the Other into 'love' for the 'same'. This transition, experienced in a continuum of excessive enjoyment (*jouissance*) and Symbolic 'correction' against this transgression ('love'), is structured by an ever-expanding technosocial system that organises subjectivity and ideology (i.e., an apparatus) through which the far-right becomes normalised: the 'space of love' or *liebesraum*. *Liebesraum* situates the far-right as central to the stability of the liberal Symbolic Order, thus simultaneously revealing the latter's inadequacy and organising its dismantling. This preliminary articulation of *liebesraum* serves as a conceptual provocation, guiding its theoretical development illustrated through examples of electoral *loss* for US Republicans in 2020/2021 and Democrats in 2024.

This article explores how far-right normalisation emerges from the interplay between social media and the modern liberal order by asking: how do commodified antagonisms ontologically securitise supremacist othering through comforting belonging? This is complemented by asking: how does social media's influence on political belonging drive the retreat of the modern liberal order and the transmutation of neoliberalism within far-right ideologies? These questions entail examining social media in terms of *logics* (how they organise social traffic) and *space* (how they manufacture belonging) using a Lacanian framework.

Commodified antagonisms between liberals and the far-right illustrate how far-right normalisation occurs in and sustains *homophilic networks* – i.e., networks of 'love for sameness'. Wendy Chun (2018, 2021) conceptualises network homophily as a predominant principle in neoliberal social media ecosystems by which 'similarity' between users begets connection or 'love' which, consequently, tends to frame segregation as *objective* difference between subjects. Homophily stems from big data analytics, which appear to cater to users' individual demands but, instead, segregate them into neighbourhoods' and train them to expect, recognise, and naturalise these essentialised categories of being and belonging (2018, pp. 60-61). This homophilic structure entails carefully dissecting mediatic content (antagonistic narratives), emotional structure (ontological security), and sociosymbolic frame. I argue that, through homophilic 'love', social media situates traumatic prospects (e.g., ethnocultural replacement) in a *faux* homeostasis of commodified antagonism between liberal and far-right discourses. This apparent inertness safeguards neoliberalism by producing the conditions for, paradoxically, consuming dystopias as enjoyable, excessive fantasies of ontological security. The post-political space of love normalises the far-right as a counter-hegemonic affective force, transfiguring the modern liberal Symbolic into a structure of exclusion, supremacy, and brutalisation.

Four clarifications are in order. First, the Symbolic Order is the psychic registry of language, norms, laws, and culture conditioning intersubjectivity and fantasies. Its examination in this article is grounded in the modern liberal order. Second, social media will be referred to both as a singular phenomenon and in the plural for specific platforms or corporations. Third, while far-right spaces, discourses, and emotions vary across contexts and cannot be reduced to their manifestation on social media, this analysis focuses on how these technologies contribute to far-right *normalisation* and reveal its link with the modern liberal order. Fourth, the prefix '(neo)' in '(neo)liberal' signifies the degenerative relationship between neoliberalism and the modern liberal order. This nomenclature is occasionally used to reiterate their inextricability while simultaneously maintaining an ontological particularity.

The structure of this article is as follows. I begin by overviewing the literature on the link between social media massification and far-right normalisation, highlighting contributions from psychoanalytic media studies. These contributions both inform the development of the Lacanian conceptual framework and allow for a direct application of the latter over social media. Next, I provide a background on the key co-constituted phenomena framing the Symbolic Order: far-right normalisation, the modern liberal order, and neoliberalism. Further, I develop the Lacanian conceptual framework by articulating the concepts of *antagonism* and *ontological security*. Using this framework, I then analyse the interplay between social media and the Symbolic Order, examining the former in terms of logics (programmability) and space (homophilic networks). Guided by this Lacanian reading, I introduce *liebesraum* as a novel synthesising concept. Finally, I offer some concluding remarks on the consequences of *liebesraum* over liberal

modernity. Throughout this article, I illustrate these arguments by examining the *continuum* between emotional transgression and 'correction' in two instances of political defeat for US Republicans and Democrats.[2]

2. Literature review

Scholars have addressed various dimensions of the emotional and political consequences of social media massification, focusing on the relationship between social media and the 'decline' of the Symbolic Order (Flisfeder & Willis, 2014; Johanssen & Krüger, 2022); emotional and behavioural consequences of social media's neoliberal structure (Chun, 2018); the techno-mediatic enabling of far-right normalisation (Cammaerts, 2020; Krzyżanowski, 2020); and the production of ontological security through social media dynamics (Areni, 2019; McDonnell et al., 2023). Johanssen and Krüger (2022) offer views of the Symbolic Order as both declining due *to* and reinforced *by* social media in how they shape our desires and fantasies. Chun (2018) further argues that neoliberal homophily constitutes a perverse incentive system of social identification through consumption.

Neoliberalism's transition into the far-right can be understood in terms of the decline of Symbolic authority on social media. This decline (Dean, 2010; Žižek, 1998) is addressed by Johanssen and Krüger (2022), who discuss Žižek's visions on early cyberspace (1998). Despite cyberspace's evolution, Žižek's psychoanalytic approach remains relevant considering social media's nudging to '*enjoy!*' even during the retreat of the modern liberal order. Two visions – 'cyberspace as symbolic authority in crisis' and 'traversing the fantasy' (Johanssen & Krüger, 2022, pp. 72–76) – are particularly relevant. Social media can be understood as possessing a 'formal structure of symbolic prohibition' (ibid., p. 73) but lacks the enforcer: the big Other – the authority embodying language, norms, and laws (i.e., the Symbolic). As legacy media's grip weakens (i.e., the big Other retreats), subjects seek a symbolic authority to manage their ontological insecurity. In the context of a symbolic realm 'without consequence and binding power', this drive leads to a culture of perversity (ibid.), where individual practices, discourses, and performances vie to 'become the new law' (ibid., p. 74).

Žižek's vision of 'traversing the fantasy' frames social media as a 'sphere of adherence to self-imposed rules and laws' (ibid.). Social media sustains the perversity of the illusion of agency, shaping and responding to the subject's desire through ontological security fantasies. Yet, Žižek suggests this very dependence on fantasy can allow the subject to 'take a step back' and recognise their investment in fantasy (e.g., self-conceptualisations as/of 'real Americans' vs. 'invading hordes') – and, thus, their existential incompleteness, generating resistance (cf. Chun, 2018). Further, Johanssen and Krüger (2022) argue that it is precisely the incompleteness of fantasies that prevents us from full self-recognition. This lack fuels a quest for identity through phantasmatic narratives (e.g., the 'American Dream') that temporarily satisfy our need for symbolic authority yet simultaneously curtail resistance (Dean, 2010).

Flisfeder (2021; with Willis, 2014) offers a complementary take on the relationship between the Symbolic Order, desire, and social media from a Žižekian perspective. Flisfeder rejects the idea that social media signifies the decline of the Symbolic, instead viewing it as 'renewed widespread belief in, and wish for, the existence of the big Other' (ibid.). Social media 'captures' people by catering to algorithmically-curated desires, 'showing and teaching what to want, how to want and how to be wanted' (ibid., cf. Debord, 1983, para 44-45). Subjects turn to the Symbolic for a sense of existential coherence and for this structuring of desire – desire which, for Lacan, is always mediated by the big Other. Within homophilic networks we seek to 'satisfy the desire of the Other in the form of likes, shares, comments, follows' (Flisfeder, 2021, p. 67; in Johanssen & Krüger, 2022, p. 81). Social media invokes the authoritative 'gaze' of the big Other, which subjects constantly seek to impress. This encounter involves not just consenting

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[2] The empirical sources used in these examples and illustrations can be found in the **Appendix** located after the reference list.

to the big Other's demands ('*like and subscribe!*') but also an enjoyment in transgressing its norms – an act that paradoxically sustains desire by reaffirming the Other's presence and the subject's relation to it.

Other scholars have focused on the discursive and psycho-political dynamics of far-right normalisation on social media. Krzyżanowski (2020) analyses how far-right discourses on social media become mainstream through *naturalisation* and legitimisation. He finds that strategic 'civilising' or pre-legitimising patterns in social media distinguish far-right rhetoric, shaping the public sphere to accept radical agendas as natural. Areni (2019) argues that ontological security is central to why and how subjects engage with social media. Social media operates as an ontological-securitising mechanism, allowing subjects to nostalgically engage with the past to cope with anxiety-inducing futures and a content-saturating present (ibid.).

The role of social media neighbourhoods – homophilic networks – on identity-shaping crises like the Capitol insurrection is also discussed from a political communications perspective. Munn (2021) argues that homophily in echo-chambers on Parler created a heuristic middle point between mainstream platforms and 'legacy hate havens' like 4chan and 8kun (ibid., p. 4). These networks allowed for a preparatory mobilisation of a right-wing coalition, bridging 'ordinary' conservative narratives with redemptive violence, reinforcing and amplifying pre-existent beliefs. Karell et al. (2023) note that Parler, lacking gatekeeping, legitimised and visibilized far-right influentials, reinforcing echo-chambers. Gilmore et al. (2023) posit that engagement with far-right networked spheres reinforced political grievances, generating a narrative of far-right insurrectionist legitimacy. This far-right solidarity and 'heroic' recapture of the nation is influenced by the design, policies, and market incentives of social media platforms (Jakubik et al., 2022), crystallised in curation and recommendation algorithms that reinforce networks of right-wing sameness (Arora et al., 2022).

This critical scholarship provides valuable insights into the co-constitution between social media and the Symbolic under neoliberalism. This article complements them by developing a Lacanian conceptual framework entangling the notions of antagonism and ontological security to analyse this relationship concerning the normalisation of the far-right. This phenomenon is understudied in psychoanalytic media accounts, particularly when integrating ontological security as a fantasy both animating and produced by social media. This article not only analyses far-right discourses but broadens 'normalisation' by linking them with liberal homophilic networks, as developed by Wendy Chun (2018). It complements Chun's critical analysis on the relationship between (neo)liberal online networks, segregation, and supremacy by interrogating the political consequences of this link in terms of anxiety, enjoyment, desire, and fantasy. Thus, I contribute to the scholarship on far-right normalisation and Lacanian ontological security by exploring social media as neoliberal-shaped space. This article recasts social media's technosocial qualities as a perverse, *ever-expanding body* of hierarchies, segregation, and exclusion disguised as love, connectivity, and freedom: *liebesraum*. Next, I discuss the backgrounds and connection between far-right normalisation, the modern liberal order, and neoliberalism.

3. Not-so unlikely partners: (Neo)liberalism and far-right normalisation

The relationship between the far-right and the modern liberal order has been sold by liberal narratives as anathematic and even an irreconcilable civilisational struggle stemming from the horrors of World War II. However, this link is more intricate in its composition since these ideologies and material projects have been mutually reinforced throughout history (Davidson & Saull, 2017; Mondon & Winter, 2020), a process blurred and amplified by the ontologically-securitising spectacle of neoliberalism.

The normalisation of the far-right refers to the process by which erstwhile disavowed radical right-wing ideologies become mainstreamed, legitimised, and naturalised (K. Brown et al., 2023; Krzyżanowski et al., 2023). The far-right is a *continuum* (Norocel, 2024) of interconnected organisational forms, sites, and ideologies encompassing discourses of nativism, xenophobia, exclusionary populism, genderphobia, ultranationalism, and authoritarianism aimed at societal reshaping (Kisić-Merino, 2025;

Kisić-Merino et al., 2021). Its normalisation is similarly a non-linear and non-static process (Newth et al., 2025), occurring when liberal subjects may disagree with far-right content but do not question the validity of their participation in the public sphere (Mondon & Winter, 2020).

Wodak (2020) argues that social media has amplified this process of normalisation (see also Kisić-Merino & Kinnvall, 2023). Social media allow the far-right to produce and disseminate content that mass media would vet, revealing how these discourses remain embedded in liberal polities despite their purported ostracization (Seymour, 2024). Merrill (2020) and Price (2025) note that far-right normalisation extends beyond formal politics to social media, where memes and 'moods' are mobilised to exploit nostalgia, e.g., in empty signifiers like Vikings and *folkhem* in Sweden (Kølvraa, 2019). This normalisation reflects the tension between antagonistic ontological security and *in*security fantasies, seen in the anxiety over how far-right mainstreaming unsettles liberal ideals; and in belongingness to a 'White nation' stemming from nostalgic fantasies (Krzyżanowski, 2020).

The relationship between liberalism and neoliberalism is intricate and central for this article. The former is viewed as a broad political, civilisational, and imperial capitalist project, evident in the latter's ubiquity. Although neoliberalism and the modern liberal order are deeply intertwined, with the former hijacking the ontological, moral, and ethical structure of liberalism (Wilson, 2017), they should not be equated. While the liberal order's core political signifier – liberal democracy – is retreating as evidenced by far-right normalisation, neoliberalism represents a neurotic fantasy and cancerous metamorphosis of the former (Ibid.). Neoliberalism is not retreating but mutating and reemerging within 'alternative' right-wing and far-right discourses like techno-feudalism and neo-fascism (Cammaerts, 2020). Neoliberalism superficially retreats alongside liberalism while transcending and cannibalising it, mutating, adapting, and metastasising in far-right fantasies it produced and normalised (cf. W. Brown, 2018). Neoliberalism reveals the traumatic *Real* – that which evades symbolisation, language, control, and prediction (Lacan, 2006, p. 324) – at the core of its liberal origins. It inverts and repackages liberalism as a commodity catering to Western sensibilities in online spaces of political pseudo-activity (Žižek, 2002, pp. xxxi–xxxii). The dual process of liberal dislocation and neurotic neoliberal 'clinging-on' is central to far-right normalisation, which becomes accelerated and occluded by AI-fuelled social media.

Following Wilson's (2017) characterisation of neoliberalism, I conceptualise the (neo)liberal order as a similarly obsessional neurotic fantasy. I expand Wilson's conceptualisation by highlighting both the difference and connection between neoliberalism and liberalism since the former is self-perpetuating at the expense of the latter's decay. The neurotic fantasy involves an unceasing cycle of dislocation and attempts to safeguard the Symbolic Order, stabilising the ontologically-insecure subject's battle for selfhood and agency. Wilson argues that by repressing neoliberalism's social harm and disavowing criticisms, the obsessive neurotic frenetically attempts to maintain its stability as a *naturalised* Symbolic Order to avoid encountering the Real (e.g., the ideological obsolescence of the US Democratic party). The cyclical nature of obsessive neurosis shows that stabilising strategies invariably fail to hold the Symbolic fabric (Ibid.; Žižek, 2009). Wilson, channelling Žižek (2009), argues that neoliberalism's pragmatic and post-political stance paradoxically reveals it as pure ideology (2017, p. 166). (Neo)liberalism's backgrounding of the political is the reality-structuring function of fantasy, protecting the subject against the Real of Capital.[3] To ontologically securitise the subject against this Real (e.g., in rampant inequality resulting from class stratification), neoliberalism projects itself as a stabilising, 'natural' reality rather than an imposed ideology (ibid., p. 167).

Neoliberalism's refusal to address its historical contradictions as un-desired and obsolete rearticulates the Real of *Capital* to *the political* (Jameson, 1981, p. 35; Žižek, 2002, p. 101). The inevitable invasion of the Real – most prominently experienced in the erosion of the modern liberal order – reveals neoliberalism's limits to organise reality, jeopardising its power and legitimacy (Žižek, 2002, pp. liv-lv).

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[3] The Real elements of Capital, like the Real of the political, are what animates the neoliberal Symbolic and yet what the latter forecloses to provide subjective stability. This is seen in how e.g., 'class relations [i.e., the Real of Capital] are obscured by freedom of exchange [i.e., the neurotic fantasy of neoliberalism]' (Wilson, 2017, p. 167).

However, neoliberalism clings on, futilely attempting at neutralising the Real by transforming its contradictions into fuel for ideological reinforcement, avoiding political change in favour of an ontological-securitising 'shambling-on'. This shambling-on, animated in the exhausted form of the modern liberal order, enables and nurtures far-right normalisation. It constitutes the fantasy of ontological security animating the anxiety of irrelevance or dislocation, offering an equally excessive, enjoyable sense of belonging (*jouissance*) to the 'neighbourhood of sameness' through commodified antagonisms. The 2024 US Democratic electoral defeat, where 'betraying' Muslim and Latino minorities were extensively abused and scapegoated online, offers a glimpse into the political weight of this 'shambling-on'. This phenomenon manifests in how party strategists sought performative answers to structural issues. Rather than confronting their inability to offer a meaningful project tackling structural socioeconomic maladies, they resorted to covertly hiring highly-followed influencers to promote the party in an attention-saturated mediascape ('we need a Joe Rogan of the left'; Marcus, 2024; Lorenz, 2025).

The retreat of the neoliberal order, sustained by sublimating the political and occluding the Real of the far-right, is signified not in its structural erosion but in becoming a dystopian fantasy tied with the far-right. The danger to pluralist democracies stems from this naturalised shift and its technosocially-infused decay into far-right civilisational projects masked as neoliberal fantasy. In what follows, I develop the Lacanian conceptual framework with which I will analyse social media's role in generating belonging and agential fantasies sustaining neoliberalism and normalising the far-right.

3. Conceptual framework

Understanding how social media and the (neo)liberal Symbolic Order co-generate far-right normalisation as an ontological security fantasy involves discussing two concepts from a Lacanian approach: antagonism and ontological security. Antagonism constitutes the key relation and content consumed through social media, reinforcing political identities and senses of agency. While antagonisms are phantasmatic and symbolically-conditioned, their structures carry the Real, i.e., the uncertainty, instability, and threat of social collapse embodied in the threatening Other. Ontological security operates as the affective mechanism organising this framework, a fantasy with which to manage the incursion of the Real. This fantasy manifests in the tension between antagonism and belonging – i.e., securitising against the threatening Other –, conveying meaning to political life. Ontological security is closely tied to Lacan's Imaginary register, where fantasies provide meaning to the Symbolic's inscrutability and sustain narratives of a coherent self against the Real's traumatic disruptions.

3.1 Antagonism: The relation and content of political life

Antagonism, an 'ever-present possibility' in society, is central to Chantal Mouffe's Lacanian-inspired work on the political and subjectivity under neoliberalism (2005). It is a constitutive yet pernicious dimension of the political often veiled by post-political discourses and subjects. Antagonism's role in politics is rooted in the relational nature of subjectivity, relying on the 'us vs. them' distinction to generate stable identities and categories of belonging, shaping society by signifying the threatening Other (Mouffe, 2005, p. 15).

The interplay between intersubjectivity and power is framed by antagonisms, as 'the creation of an identity implies the establishment of a difference, a difference which is often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy' (ibid.). Mouffe questions the logic of liberal conflict-solving, which tries to 'rationally' merge opposed perspectives, leading to incoherent political discourses and the marginalisation of dissent. Given the antagonistic nature of intersubjectivity, any form of political consensus excludes the other's perspective, evidencing the limits of rational consensus and the omission of antagonism as *constitutive of* liberalism (ibid., p. 12). The repression of antagonism in liberal politics paradoxically leads to their deterioration and the rise of increasingly-violent iterations, like those the far-right (ibid., pp. 10-12).

The erosion of the modern liberal order is evident in the rise of right-wing authoritarian discourses in 'Western' democracies (Jee et al., 2022), pushbacks against globalisation (Kinnvall & Kisić-Merino, 2023), and declining support for liberal values like human rights and tolerance (Auer & Schaub, 2024). Laclau and Mouffe argue that 'antagonisms are not *objective* relations, but relations which reveal the limits of all objectivity' (2013, p. xiv, emphasis in original). Antagonisms are potentially disruptive since 'society is constructed around these [antagonistic] limits' (ibid.), threatening the liberal order's rationalistic consensus base. Gómez Camarena and Juárez-Salazar (2022) contend that repressing antagonisms under liberal capitalism is a hegemonic project of self-substantiation, reshaping the political as artificial, undesirable, and harmful. For instance, the post-defeat Democratic mobilisation of influencers in 2024-2025 (Lorenz, 2025) aimed to quell the intra-party vitriol spouted online against ethnocultural minorities (García, 2024), redirecting it to perform 'proper' liberal politics for the era of social media.

Neoliberalism's drive towards self-perpetuation and antagonism's unavoidability raise a key question: if antagonism persists, and its omission results in social strife, how does the neoliberal order cope with it? I argue that antagonisms themselves – as windows into the traumatic Real of the political – have been partially sublimated into the structure of neoliberal fantasy, turned into an ideological-reinforcing commodity. I turn to ontological security as a concept linking antagonism with the ideological fantasies that stabilise the security-seeking subject.

3.2 Ontological security: Animating antagonism

Ontological security is a fantasy of categorical closure, providing the subject with a partial sense of stability. Initially, Laing (1965) and Giddens (1991) saw ontological security as a fixed, continuous self-experience of being or 'wholeness' enacted through societal rituals and practices. The Lacanian turn (Browning, 2019; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020) argues that subjects are perpetually *becoming* instead of 'being', constantly attempting to stabilise against their constitutive *lack*. This lack stems from the subject's entry into the sociosymbolic realm, binding it to unrealisable desires and fantasies of reattaining long-lost fullness via ontological security narratives.

Ontological security fantasies are positioned in the registry of the Imaginary, where the interplay of ideal images of the self, others, and the world are co-constituted with meaning according to the Symbolic Order. Fantasy stabilises the lacking subject, allowing the ego to be constituted through identification with the *Other* (Evans, 2006, p. 84). Lacan (2006) argues that the subject's lack marks the loss of primordial 'wholeness' (*jouissance*), producing a drive to recapture it through the big Other. The subject's desire is to satisfy or seek the approval of the *jouissance*-withholding big Other – i.e., it desires the big Other's desire (Hook, 2017). The primordial 'loss' of enjoyment ('wholeness') implies both its 'theft' and 'prior ownership'. As seen in far-right anxieties of 'replacement', enjoyment mobilises the aggrieved subject towards reclamation through ontological security fantasies, which constitutes a key affective component of reactionary politics.

Enjoyment or *jouissance* is a painful mode of intensity organised through ontological security fantasies. It manifests in socially-disavowed, transgressive emotions and attitudes like elation, anger, *schadenfreude*, self-righteousness, and sadism (Hook, 2017). These expressions manifest during socio-affective upheavals against 'threatening' Others deemed as obstacles for attaining lost wholeness, revealing contradictions with our 'rational' sociosymbolic commitments (Glynos, 2001). For instance, the 2021 Capitol storming involved the emotionally-charged, violent incursion of Trump supporters to prevent the allegedly fraudulent confirmation of Democrat Joe Biden as President. This insurrection was a 'festival of excess' (Hook, 2017), where Republicans' symbolic commitments to 'law and order' receded in favour of violent anger, elation, and self-righteousness against perceived threats – the Democrats, the 'elite', the state, the immigrant.

Jouissance transgresses against imaginary others (e.g., Democrats) and the big Other (e.g., the state, the algorithm, or 'American identity'). This transgression responds to ontological insecurity fantasies of supremacy and belonging, serving as a bond sustaining social cohesion (Browning, 2019). In this sense, *jouissance* paradoxically reinforces Symbolic authority (e.g., 'Stop the Steal') by trespassing its conditions. It entails enjoyment for loyal subjects gripped by ideology (e.g., that of 'law and order') through its transgression (the insurrectionist 'take America back!'; Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008). Thus, enjoyment also stems from upholding the social order and subject-affirming fantasies 'in contempt of Others who "illicitly" enjoy in our/my stead' (McGowan, 2021).

The desire to recapture lost enjoyment is productive insofar as the subject believes in this possibility, crystallised in the *object-cause of desire* (e.g., the 'American dream') (Eberle, 2019). The object-cause of desire sits at the interstice of the orders of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real, both driving and causing desire. It is 'the name we give to the [subject's] lack, i.e., a specific signifier that comes to represent social fullness' (Vulović and Ejdus, 2024, p. 127). Fantasies that feed this quest inevitably break and fail, leaving 'the subject to turn to the Symbolic […] to find a way to secure its desire for an ideal image' (Kisić-Merino & Kinnvall, 2023, p. 57). This *return to the Symbolic* is co-constituted with ontological security, producing new Symbolic articulations (e.g., 'White America') that renew ideology's bind on the subject by signifying threats to attaining its object-cause of desire. For instance, via Twitter/X, Donald Trump engaged with his MAGA followership during the late stages of the 2021 insurrection, affectionately calling for 'peace' while attacking the 'thieving' other, enacting the ontological security-insecurity dyad around Symbolic *law*:

> 'I know your pain. I know you're hurt. […] We had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election, and everyone knows it, especially the other side, but you have to go home now. We have to have peace. We have to have law and order. We have to respect our great people in law and order. We don't want anybody hurt.' (Herb & Cohen, 2022)

Threats to neoliberal fantasies of ontological security involve antagonisms and, thus, the Real's incursion. To cope with the Real of traumatic encounters (e.g., ethnocultural 'replacement anxiety'), the subject generates essentialising selfhood categories, producing and substantiating *otherness*. The Real is not only traumatic but crucial for creating political fantasies and new Symbolic structures to address its incursions. Recognising the threatening other shapes identities reinforced by ontological security narratives (Vulović & Ejdus, 2024). The recognition–antagonism dyad mirrors the structure of ontological security: Ontological security fantasies are co-constitutive with *in*security ones. As seen in Rep. Taylor Greene's Twitter/X call to resist the 2020 'fraudulent' election that should 'terrify every American' (Dale, 2021), 'saving America' depends on 'stopping the steal'. This structure reflects how recognising myself in/by the Other entails their radical difference, which constitutes the antagonism at the heart of the political (Kinnvall & Svensson, 2024).

This theoretical framework can elucidate the co-constitution between social media and the neoliberal Symbolic Order as signifying and signified in far-right normalisation. Under this framework, *social media* acts as a convection space for Lacan's three orders: the Symbolic, pertaining to the algorithmic imperatives of neoliberalism; the Imaginary, in reproducing identity-forming ontological security fantasies; and the Real, in situating uncertainty and dislocation in commodified antagonisms. Thus, the co-constitution between social media and the Symbolic Order has two interdependent dimensions: i) social media shapes and is shaped by the symbolic structure and imperatives of the modern liberal order; ii) social media forces the subject's encounter *with* and comforts it *against* the Real of the political through the oscillation between ontological security and *in*security.

In what follows, I explore social media's political architecture through this conceptual framework. This framework is applied to prevalent conceptualisations of social media, itself a vast term and phenomenon encompassing dimensions that exceed the purview of this article (Fuchs, 2021; Lindgren, 2020). Hence, I focus on two dimensions concerning the formation of political subjectivity: the symbolic and material *space* that produces fantasies of ontological security and enjoyment and, thus, belonging and

antagonism, *homophilic networks*; and the techno-affective mechanism reinforcing the illusion of agency and coherent self that substantiate these networks, the logic of *programmability*.

4. Social media as the technosocial dimension of neoliberalism

Programmability and homophilic networks compose the architecture of social media that condition the Symbolic possibilities of the neoliberal spectacle. This architecture reveals social media's complexity in affecting the political algorithmically. Social media *logics* (van Dijck & Poell, 2013) are organisational forms of social traffic responding to corporate imperatives. Logics like programmability mirror the neoliberal order in 'exporting' their functional and ideological principles to public life while retaining a semblance of post-political naturality (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). *Spaces* are networks where logics perform and attain significance. These dimensions condition the affective weight of antagonisms as commodified forms of ontological securitisation through the material operation of algorithms.

Algorithms – coded instructions structuring social traffic and spaces on social media (Fuchs, 2021; van Dijck & Poell, 2013) – substantiate social media platforms and set the coordinates for producing of fantasies of agency. In social media politics (Fuchs, 2021, p. 56), the *jouissance* of ontological security gravitates towards satisfying the 'omnipotent' gaze of 'the' neoliberal algorithm, embodied in the big Other. Wiehn (2023) highlights social media's bonding capacity, since algorithms shape everyday life by facilitating connections, categorising results, and organising identities through homophilic 'connectivity through sameness' (ibid., p. 120). Fuchs argues that algorithms 'determine how we perceive reality' (2021, p. 7) according to market imperatives. This governance influences intimacy[4] and identity, directing them towards commodity consumption and ideological formation (Fuchs, 2021, p. 56). This governance replaces human decision-makers and the political, exalting algorithms as symbolic authorities of late capitalism. Algorithms perpetuate commodification via increasingly intimate user-fed knowledge, nudging affective commitments and desires. They categorise reality as 'target' or 'waste', reifying existence to a spectacle based on our input. These segregating practices, masked as neutrality and 'efficiency' to improve user experience, dehumanise by reducing human complexity to quantifiable, 'predictable' variables (Chun, 2018). The 'learning' leading to this knowledge of the subject follows the first dimension of social media's architecture: the logic of programmability.

4.1 Programmability and the fantasy of agency

Social media logics are organisational principles and critical perspectives that recast platforms as non-neutral, corporate-enacted technosocial architectures undermining democratic institutions. Van Dijck & Poell (2013) argue that social media's ubiquity and decentralisation have reshaped information organisation. Defined as 'processes, principles, and practices through which these platforms process information, news, and communication, and […], how they channel social traffic' (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 5), social media *logics* permeate all spheres of life (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). This 'seeping-in' marks the 'platformization of cultural production' (Poell et al., 2021), naturalising media logics that elude societal scrutiny. Thus, social media logics are core to the neoliberal order, shaping 'the conditions and rules of social interaction' (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 4; cf. Lindgren & Kaun, 2024).

The logic of programmability bridges technological and socio-affective dimensions of social media. Traditional media's top-down approach to audience maximisation attention has shifted to a code-and-user 'horizontal' iteration (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). This shift transformed passive consumers into active users who influence and are influenced by information flows on social media. For example, hashtags, originating in informal settings (Dobrin, 2020), now amplify political visibility, evidencing user influence on coded practices. Meanwhile, algorithmic curation (Lewandowsky et al., 2020) tailors feeds that reinforce preferences with engaging, often antagonism-producing content. Van Dijck and Poell's

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[4] The 'subjectiveness of closeness that algorithms evoke' (Wiehn, 2023, p. 120).

emphasis on user agency is complicated by corporate imperatives and symbolic drivers like popularity and virality. This is exemplified in Twitter's/X's reinstatement of far-right accounts and supressing Elon Musk's critics (Auten & Matta, 2024), and in the US Democratic party's dismissal to address systemic issues in favour of gaining popularity through influencers (Lorenz, 2025).

Van Dijck and Poell distinguish between technological and human programmability. The technological dimension focuses on AI and algorithms governing social media experiences (2013, p. 5), whose influence is obscured by constant adaptation to corporate imperatives and user practices (Verdegen, 2023). The human dimension refers to user agency, influencing algorithms through content, norms, or even resistance (ibid., p 6). Platforms adjust interfaces and policies to optimise engagement, creating a feedback loop which hybridises social and traditional media logics (cf. Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Programmability merges crowdsourced AI learning with traditional editorial legitimacy (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 6), as seen in news media adopting TikTok aesthetics via editing tools and popular interface elements like GIFs and posts (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). The expectation of hybrid editorial legitimacy rests on post-political fantasies of accountability that social media 'must' perform to sustain the neoliberal spectacle. Ironically, these fantasies also enable the enjoyable transgression of the liberal order.

4.1.1 Programmability and ontological security as phantasmatic agency

While programmability is co-constituted between platforms and users, this relation is not inherently democratic. The agency it conveys functions as a neoliberal mechanism of ontological security and fuels commodified antagonism. Social media thrives on interactivity, captivating subjects via the spectacle of meaningful participation. In ontological security terms, programmability mediates emotions, providing a phantasmatic sense of coherence and belonging. It operates as a function of fantasy and technosocial affordance sustaining the pursuit of the object-cause of desire within neoliberalism.

Yet, the limits of agency brought forth by programmability – e.g., in the far-right discursive hijacking of progressive terms like 'woke' – drive the anxious subject back to social media as a graspable embodiment of the Symbolic Order. The Symbolic's overwhelming nature is mirrored in the invisible algorithm, a veiled governor akin to the big Other, holding together the sociosymbolic fabric while withholding lost enjoyment and the object-cause of desire. Lacan's question *chè vuoi*? ('what do you/desire want/s?') frames this pursuit. Subjects need the algorithm watching over and enjoying in their stead, withholding *jouissance* and guarding the 'key' to our object-cause. Programmability feeds this quest by, e.g., allowing subjects to gain visibility, 'crack the algorithm', and responding to ideal combinations of prompts and affordances (e.g., 'hit "like" and "subscribe"!'; Flisfeder, 2021). It generates the *faux* sense of satisfying or resisting the punitive algorithm/big Other, integrating subjects in the (neo)liberal Symbolic as self-gatekeepers and system justifiers.

Resistance – a potential manifestation of the Real of the political – can alter norms *when* sublimated by the algorithm and internalised into the affective structure naturalising neoliberalism. As seen with Republicans during the Capitol insurrection, *resistance*, when reduced to phantasmatic agency, helps justify the modern liberal order's system of commodification. US Republican short-lived 'rebelliousness' or resistance against 'the state' on social media is a case in point. Rep. Boebert claimed on Twitter/X that the 6th of January was their '1776 moment' (USA Today, 2021), with Rep. Gaetz echoing this sentiment during a far-right rally: '[I will be] joining with the fighters in the Congress!' (Touchberry, 2020). The fantasy of agency is thus ephemeral yet *central* to the neoliberal subject's ontological security. Agency and resistance hence incorporate a heroic character subsumed in anxiety and the quest for *jouissance*.

Programmability positions social media as technosocial, political, and psychological ontologies. I expand on van Dijck and Poell's conceptualisation by viewing user participation as furthering algorithmic governance rather than an accountability practice. Further, programmability governs social traffic and antagonisms in specific spaces, homophilic networks. Their co-constitution reinforces the illusion of full agency and composes antagonistic ontologies occluding deeper political urgencies.

4.2 Homophilic networks: Turning hate into love (of the same)

Social media logics operate in fluid loci, which have generated theories like filter bubbles and echo chambers (Bloom, 2023). Expanding these theories, Chun (2018, 2021) critically explores homophily to understand how social media spaces reproduce prejudice, supremacy, and neoliberal imperatives. Chun frames these networks as ideological structures, not solely neutral materiality. 'Homophilic networks' merge *homophily* – 'the axiom that similarity breeds connection' (2018, p. 60) –, with cyberspace's 'spirit' of democratic networked openness, constituting neighbourhoods of 'love' for/in sameness, mutating cyberspace into curated echo chambers that promise fulfilment.

Homophilic networks relentlessly attempt to *expand* by 'fostering and predicting the likelihood of ties' (ibid., p. 76), relying on naturalised segregation and 'similarity'. Homophily essentialises sociopolitical life to grow, transforming individuals into 'neighbours' presumed to prefer 'sameness' (ibid.). This logic naturalises the reproduction of the neoliberal Symbolic by gatekeeping the neighbourhood's borders and rendering far-right ideologies commonsensical through algorithmically-produced 'authenticity' (cf. Price, 2025). In examples of electoral 'loss', these logics manifest differently under a similarly perverse structure. Far-right Republicans like Gaetz, Taylor Greene, and Boebert used their authenticity self-portrayal in their online echo-chambers to stoke insurrectionist affects around a 'real' US and a promise of 'justice' (Moline, 2022; Place, 2022). Meanwhile, Democratic strategists responded to electoral 'market' logics, scrambling to produce a *simulacrum* of authenticity and relatability through hired influencers (Lorenz, 2025). Homophilic networks essentialise subjects as quantifiable transactions, erasing 'historical contingencies, institutional discrimination and economic realities' (Ibid., p. 76), sustaining neoliberal 'ethics', and privileging spectacular politics over democratic plurality.

Homophilic networks are veiled spaces of commodified antagonism, simulating the 'constitutive outside' (Mouffe, 2005) shaping political subjectivity based on the misrecognition of others that become essentialised as metadata. Social media mask segregation as constitutive of homophilic spaces through algorithmic logics (e.g., programmability) that train users to 'expect and recognize this segregation' as *natural* (Chun, 2018, p. 61), perverting cyberspace's promise of freedom, democracy, and plurality: 'Instead of ushering in a postracial, postidentitarian era, [homophilic] networks perpetuate identity via "default" variables and axioms' (ibid.). Segregation is co-constituted with pattern discrimination – techniques 'to manage, prune, and predict' behaviour in terms of 'love for the same' (Chun, 2018, pp. 61-62). Homophily 'launders hate into collective love, a transformation that […] grounds modern white supremacism' (Ibid., p. 62). Algorithmic principles (e.g., curated feeds) naturalise segregation by producing fantasies of ontological security that reinforce neoliberalism: 'Homophily […] is a tool for discovering bias and inequality and for perpetuating it in the name of "comfort," predictability, and common sense.' (ibid.).

Homophilic networks function as algorithmic fantasies reinforcing discrimination. For Chun, these systems generate 'worlds' representing intertwined fantasies of belonging and segregation, legitimised by beliefs in algorithmic objectivity, efficiency, and neutrality. Their power lies in inferring data from subjects' behaviours and neighbourhood positions. 'Controversial' intersectional categories like race, religion, ethnicity, or gender are inferred and repackaged into post-political classifications predicting 'manageable' traits (Chun, 2018, p. 65). Thus, homophilic networks' representation of the 'world' and the political's legitimacy rests on segregationist fantasies of algorithmic efficiency.

Post-political purging of *difference* does not imply its erasure but rather subsumption under 'unimpeachable' algorithmic classifications of worth and merit. Homophilic networks aid in foreclosing democratic alternatives by trying to domesticate the political. When identity formation is subsumed into this logic, antagonisms align with neoliberal principles of habitus, becoming naturalised sociality enshrined with post-political unimpeachability. Antagonisms are thus reduced to heroic individualism within the righteous neighbourhood, where heroism becomes the algorithmically-sanctioned and

ontologically-essentialised expression of subjectivity. Similarly, the political's post-political commodification and ceaseless expansion become fundamental to stabilise neoliberalism.

4.2.1. Homophilic perpetuation through phantasmatic production

Chun's analysis of homophily elucidates how social media perpetuate power and ideology under neoliberalism, however identifying a 'space for political action and agency' (2018, p. 67) within this structure. Applying the Lacanian framework to homophilic networks, this subsection expands on her theory while highlighting the limits of agency due to its embeddedness in ontological security fantasies.

Homophily resonates with neoliberal fantasies of ontological security, which stabilise the subject in comfort or conflict. Chun's metaphor of homophilic networks as a portal – 'an elaborate façade that frames the entrance to an enclosed space' (ibid.) – mirrors the structure of fantasy, generating belonging while binding us to ideology. As seen in the social media engagement ('herding') of MAGA supporters around their senses of grievance during the 6th of January, this interplay transforms the antagonistic formation of liberal and far-right identities into civilisational quests animated by dystopian imaginaries. Chun argues that segregation in homophilic networks depends on the subject's reflexivity, i.e., to *expect* and *recognise* segregation as 'love'. While some degree of reflexivity is possible regarding reified online antagonisms, I complement Chun's argument by pointing to its limits. Our unconscious structures are related to yet escape reflexivity, and are able to destabilise the fantasies of fixity constituting homophilic networks. Segregation thus is also manifested through *unconscious* othering, which crucially shapes the subject's identity and belonging.

Since 'networks perpetuate segregation [because] segregation in the form of homophily lies at [the networks'] conceptual core' (Chun, 2018, p. 62), homophily is the spatial condition for *producing* commodified antagonisms. The manufacturing of 'commonsense' ontologies in homophilic networks (e.g., identities, inequality) responds to the neoliberal imperative to uphold its constancy in the face of the Real of the political. In Laclau and Mouffe's terms (2014), homophily stagnates progress since it promises and conveys as possible ('whole') the *impossible society* marked by antagonisms. Chun argues that the 'comfort' and 'predictability' stemming from segregation stabilise the neoliberal order. In complement, I emphasise 'difference' and 'borders' as signifiers of the anxiety caused by the misrecognising online Other – in other words, antagonism and its substantiating anxiety are, paradoxically, essential for temporarily stabilising the subject. Homophilic networks reproduce this oscillation between comfort and conflict, reminders of what 'we are/have' and what threatens us. Chun argues that they essentialise political complexity, eliminating 'politics, conflict, and deliberation' (Brown, 2015, p. 179, in Chun, ibid., p. 75). I problematise the 'fullness' of this elimination, conceptualising homophilic networks as dynamically appropriating, cannibalising, and commodifying politics and antagonism. The Real of the political cannot be eliminated or integrated into the neoliberal fantasy, only *masked* as self-representation oscillating between comfort and conflict. For instance, the US Republican conflict in transgressing 'law and order' is conditioned and enjoyed through the comfort of the *promise* of a return to a 'real America'. In this oscillation, the subject experiences its Symbolic attachment through heroic antagonisms. Homophilic networks become the arena where the object-cause of desire is heroically wrestled from would-be thieves by endlessly producing its anxiety-inducing theft.

Regardless of the intentionality of tech overlords, policies, and programmers, our return to the Symbolic (or 'correction') reinforces and is reinforced by neoliberalism and its means of production. The gap between algorithmic prediction and reality marks the space for political action (Chun, 2018, p. 67) yet also perpetuates the political as spectacle, conditioning antagonisms as commodities. While potentially a space of emancipation, this gap is a neoliberal spatial-symbolic artefact performing as homophilic *hope* – a site of ontological security fostering illusory political belonging and resistance. It grants the subject a coherent narrative of struggle against the big Other and the imaginary other, mobilising the oscillation between anxiety and hope of recapturing lost enjoyment. For instance, neighbourhoods are constituted by algorithmic predictions based on interactions; however, these often

fail, revealing their limits in 'figuring us out', providing a sense of individuality and uniqueness. This failure is affectively repurposed via ontological security as hallucinations of agency, where antagonisms sustain politically-paralysing neoliberalism rather than enabling radical democratic alternatives.

The laundering of hate into love under homophilic networks reveals deeper dynamics between identity formation and political action, distinguishing the antagonistic tension between far-right and liberal discourses. This laundering reflects love's status as an ontological-securitising fantasy. The algorithmic structure prevents us from confronting far-right's normalisation in-depth, nudging us to consume its performative, stupefying spectacle to satisfy the neoliberal order's imperatives. Next, I examine *love* as a political factor in social media through the Lacanian framework and develop the concept of *liebesraum* or 'space of love'.

5. *Liebesraum*: The expanding enjoyment-love continuum

The issue of how the co-constitution of social media and the Symbolic Order condition the normalisation of the far-right has focused on the architecture of social media via their logics (programmability) and spatial characteristics (homophily). This architecture, driven by neoliberalism, generates self-sustaining spectacles of antagonism. However, the ontological (in)security they produce is bound to political entropy. While the modern liberal order is crumbling, the Symbolic Order will persist in new paradigms, hybridised with neoliberalism's attempts at self-perpetuation through spectacular antagonisms, leading to the contemporary Symbolic Order's phasing-out alongside the normalisation of the far-right.

This process is simultaneously a dislocation and a reallocation perpetuating neoliberalism while shedding its liberal kernel, a mutation into a new political articulation stemming from its technosocial predecessor's spatial and affective conditions. This shift is marked by the far-right as a paradox that, via neoliberal fantasies, delimits both the fringes and the 'centre' of the liberal order's Symbolic structure. The far-right carries on neoliberalism's perverse material and discursive legacy while serving as the vessel for its affective metamorphosis. In this context, *liebesraum* constitutes a novel theory resulting from the Lacanian reading of programmability and homophily. *Liebesraum* is an analytical window to explore the techno-affective conditions of possibility (e.g., in normalising the far-right) and foreclosure (e.g., in commodifying antagonisms) towards a post-neoliberal Symbolic.

5.1 What is love?

Before discussing what the 'space of love' entails, it is crucial to explore the key concept of *love*. For Lacan, love originates in the subject's demand for the Other to satisfy its needs, and this relational structure constitutes the 'proof' of the Other's love towards the subject (Evans, 2006; pp. 35-36). This demand has a double function: it articulates need and becomes a demand for love, a symbolic dimension eclipsing its real function (ibid.). Evans argues that this dual function produces *desire*, as 'the craving for love is unconditional and insatiable, [persisting] as a leftover even after the needs have been satisfied; this leftover constitutes desire' (ibid., p. 36). The lacking Other cannot grant the unconditional love craved by the subject, resulting in leftover dissatisfaction that constitutes desire, whose only drive is self-reproduction. While love operates through language (i.e., the Symbolic) it is also directed at the imaginary other since 'to love is to want to be loved' (Lacan, 2006, p. 723), i.e., love implies the desire for the Other's desire or 'love for what the subject imagines as existing in the other' (Demandate, 2014, p. 102). For Demandate, the phantasmatic dimension of love resides in the belief in 'completeness' or 'wholeness' that the subject craves in recognition and promises to the desired-other (ibid., p. 116). In this belief of/towards wholeness, love can also be understood as a fantasy of ontological security managing long-lost *jouissance* in seeking the 'missing piece' or organising desire.

For Lacan, love intricately relates to the Real of *jouissance*. Love, due to its intersubjective nature, deceptively moderates enjoyment in service of desire: 'love [...] is the fruit of an intersubjective

agreement imposing its harmony on the rent nature on which it is based' (Lacan, 2006, p. 265). The Real of *jouissance*, experienced in anxiety, challenges the Imaginary and Symbolic aspects of love. Love is not a 'natural occurrence' but the result of an agreement with the imaginary other, of managing disruptive *jouissance*: 'only love allows *jouissance* to condescend to desire' (Lacan, 1999). *Jouissance*, opposed to desire's stability (Hook, 2017), is fundamental for love as its transgressive incursion is the moment of subjectivity, without which love lacks an object of completion. For Žižek (2009), love deceptively attempts to fill the gap of intersubjective desire (*chè vuoi?*). He argues that love is 'the interpretation of the desire of the [fundamentally lacking, unknowable] Other' and that its deception is a double operation: 'the subject fills in his own lack by offering himself to the other as the object filling out the lack in the Other' (ibid., p. 130). Love is deceptive because in mutual completion lack is obliterated (ibid.), ending desire and thus subjectivity, forcing the anxiety-inducing encounter with the Real of de-subjectification. Thus, love both manages the *jouissance* of '*what do I/desire want/s?*' and produces it in the deceitful promise to obliterate lack.

Applying the structure of love to the techno-social architecture of neoliberal social media showcases how homophilic networks, through their dehumanising algorithms and commodified antagonisms, produce promises of 'wholeness' in the guise of the post-political. Following Žižek, this promise of obliterating lack entails an anxiety-inducing encounter with the Real of the political and the *jouissance* destabilising yet providing it with direction. Programmability and homophily organise love's deceitful, seductive, and paradoxical structure. They permit transgressive enjoyment (e.g., racist *jouissance* against 'threatening' minorities) while committing to a stabilising 'correction', a return to the Symbolic's embrace. For example, the sparking insurrectionist vitriol mobilised by US congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene against the 'thieving' left ('Stop the Steal!') was 'corrected' yet provided with a narrative-affective backdoor to the *loving* promise of 'recapturing' enjoyment. Taylor Greene insisted on Twitter/X that she 'did not call for violence' (BBC, 2022), condemning the insurrectionist's violence alongside that of ANTIFA and BLM (i.e., antagonising the Other), while reiterating the QAnon hashtag '#FightForTrump' (Kunzelman et al., 2021; @RepMTG, 2021). This discussion now turns to the political significance of the affective-spatial apparatus of these deceptive technologies of love – *liebesraum* – grounded in the phenomenon of far-right normalisation and experienced in 'heroic' antagonisms.

5.2 Liebesraum: The technosocial architecture of love and enjoyment

Liebesraum is an ontology and interpretive framework to understand far-right normalisation as a neoliberal-sustaining spectacle, merging the spatial concepts of homophilic networks and *lebensraum* ('vital' or 'living space'). *Lebensraum* is a racist geopolitical ideology of exclusion and imperial expansionism, later assimilated into Nazism to justify the territorial expansion for German supremacy (Smith, 1980). Smith's analysis of lebensraum resonates with Chun's (2018) view on the power of homophilic networks and Wilson's (2017) approach to contemporary neoliberalism. This ideology's grip on German right-wing discourse and practices stemmed from its legitimising basis in 'objective science' and the 'common good', aligning with the rise of reactionary politics (Mondon & Winter, 2020) during prolonged crises (Smith, 1980, pp. 51–52).

Nazi Germany's *lebensraum*, in psychoanalytic terms, frames the quest for the object-cause of desire and recovering stolen enjoyment (i.e., the pride of Empire) to become a whole nation again. This quest imbues 'struggle' with a drive to enjoy transgressing the 'thieving' Other's space, masked as a righteousness (e.g., 'take America back!', 'Stop the steal!'). Heilbronner (2021) argues that *lebensraum* is about the celebration and *enjoyment of utopia*. However, this utopian enjoyment is bound to dystopia since *jouissance* is painful, insofar as its excessive experience relies on reenacting the loss against the thieving Other.

Lebensraum's affective structure, binding enjoyment to hatred, anxiety, hope, and love can be analytically transposed under neoliberalism into *liebesraum* (space of love). In *liebesraum*, the Real of

the political is backgrounded in favour of the 'righteous' quest for the object-cause of desire and programmed 'love' for 'the people'. Antagonisms are foregrounded when sustaining neoliberalism by manufacturing *jouissance*. *Liebesraum* organises the political experience of homophily, constituting i) a *space* of anxiety masked as love for the fantasy of self, group, nation, or 'people' that procures subjectivity; ii) a *mechanism* of emotional governance through commodified antagonisms; and iii) an ontological security *narrative* of righteous expansion promising wholeness (*jouissance*). In the contexts of political loss for US Democrats and Republicans, social media market imperatives generated a violent site of grievance production and dissemination. They relied on algorithmic assessments of social traffic and networking value in detriment of rigorous editing, surveillance, and fact-checking.

The expansionist drive of *liebesraum* is seen in the online US Republican self-portrayal of rebelliousness and 'heroism' during the 2021 Capitol insurrection, in contradiction to their alleged deeply-held beliefs in 'law and order'. This crisis was associated not only with ratifying the 2020 election results, but also with the purported theft of national *jouissance* away from 'righteous Americans' perpetrated by the incongruous amalgam of 'the left', conflating all actors 'left' of far-right Republicans. The *jouissance* of righteous 'rebellion' was mobilised on Twitter/X by far-right Reps. Lauren Boebert, Marjorie Taylor Greene, and Matt Gaetz around Donald Trump's infamous 6th of January speech. Trump's *jouissance*-triggering and algorithmically-viralised *promise* of wholeness – 'we will stop the steal' (BBC, 2021) – and directive to 'fight like hell [or] you are not going to have a country anymore' targeted 'emboldened radical-left Democrats [and] fake news media' (Naylor, 2021). These grievances, loss, and antagonisms were amplified in and as homophilic networks on the day by Boebert's 'today is 1776' claim, a metonym of the primordial *jouissance* of rebellion, agency, and wholeness distinguishing the US' 'spirit' and 'righteous', heroic patriots (USA Today, 2021).

Liebesraum epitomises the ideological yoke of the neoliberal Symbolic Order and provides a window into its demise by pandering to the far-right politics it seeks to assimilate via post-political mechanisms. Re-addressing neoliberalism's ideological 'naturalisation' (Wilson, 2017), *liebesraum* emerges as its techno-spatial effectuation, an algorithmic machinery of ceaseless ideological-emotional expansion based on co-constituted illusions of agency, enacted through programmability, and belonging to homophilic networks. It is an algorithmically-mediated space of deceptive love and enjoyment sustaining the Symbolic Order by disavowing yet permitting transgressions, subsequently re-organising or 'correcting' them according to sociosymbolic imperatives. *Liebesraum* governs and occludes the normalisation of the far-right through co-performative antagonisms, tightening neoliberalism's ideological grip on subjects addled *by* yet emotionally-bound *to* the anxiety of 'permanent crises' (Krzyżanowski et al., 2023).

The case of Democratic loss in 2024 is illustrative in this instance, both in terms of *liebesraum*'s *continuum* as well as its reliance on (and construction of) the commodified political. The Muslim and Latino minorities targeting by Democratic commentators and supporters on social media revealed a core contradiction with their purported values of rationality, progressiveness, plurality, and multiculturalism. For instance, Muslims were targeted for not voting and criticising Harris' campaign over the Democratic support for the genocidal atrocities committed by the Israeli state on Palestinians in Gaza (Harb, 2024a, 2024b; Seitz-Wald, 2024). This Liberal-Democratic *jouissance* manifested in sadistic comments concerning Gaza by users on Twitter/X, for instance, stating: 'Fuck Gaza at this point! And I mean that from the bottom of my ass! They at harris rally screaming every time she speak and never at a trump rally! Good! Let Israel run wild on them.' (Mustafa, 2024). The *jouissance* manifested in these algorithmic festivals of excess requires a scapegoated Other – the Muslim, Latino, or woman 'stealing' *jouissance* and enjoying instead of 'true' liberal/progressive Americans – threatening the liberal-Democratic project.

Akin to Trump's 'corrective' plead to MAGA insurrectionists – 'we have to have law and order' (Herb & Cohen, 2022) –, Democratic *liebesraum* entailed the symbolic return to the 'rationality' and 'plurality' that purportedly distinguishes the party. It manifested in highly-mediatised, post-political 'post-mortems' focused on performative shortcomings rather than structural failings – i.e., perpetuating the commodified

political – culminating in the informal slogan 'we need a Joe Rogan of the left' (Marcus, 2024). The 'problem' and trauma of *loss* was excarnated from socially-disavowed expressions of racist and genderphobic *jouissance*, recontextualised within the post-political logic of markets, algorithmic attention, and popularity and grounded in the appeal of social media performativity and affordances (McHugh, 2024). Democratic strategists associate Rogan's political appeal with 'style', bypassing the 'ugly', visceral, *jouissance*-infused structure of politics animating the *liebesraum* that this podcaster expertly exploits. A subsequent tactic by these actors was to, clandestinely (i.e., recognising social disavowal), fund influencers to directly support the Democrats under strict conditions of content creation and moderation (Lorenz, 2025) – i.e., through the exploitation of programmability. Here we can appreciate the expansionist movement of *liebesraum*, the post-political application of 'love' to the antagonistic excess produced by the Real of loss, and the renewal of the ontological (in)security of a wholesome future (*jouissance*) within the homophilic neighbourhood.

Under *liebesraum*, homophilic networks supress political difference by essentialising subjects into programmatic, 'neutral' data configured by their actions rather than identity traits. This positive classification reinforces essentialised difference, situating it away from the political into programmable neighbourhoods of sameness. However, far-right normalisation exposes the 'cracks' in the modern liberal order. By ceaselessly expanding and commodifying difference (Chun, 2018), *liebesraum* erodes this order, hollowing the Symbolic authority to which ontologically-insecure subjects can return to when fantasy inevitably fails. The subject is left with the traumatic encounter against the Real of the political, reconfiguring its dystopias as new Symbolic horizons of ontological security. *Liebesraum* ties our experience of love, identity, and ontological security to sustaining the craved-for Symbolic, obscuring power structures and nudging us to '*enjoy!*' the ever-commodifying, algorithmic spectacle. It ties social media affordances to the waning liberal Symbolic order, revealing the unconscious allure of far-right pretenders emerging from the sublimated Real that exposes the fall of Empire.

The notion of *Liebesraum* reframes social media's role in far-right normalisation especially during crises, revealing neoliberalism's simultaneous decay and clinging-on. In crises, *liebesraum*'s continuum of love and *jouissance* manifests on intense emotions, antagonistic othering, and in the Symbolic 'correction' of enjoyment (Kisić-Merino, 2025). These excessive emotions and contexts fuel *liebesraum*'s expansion, paradoxically exposing a core contradiction in the techno-supremacist discourse critically examined by Chun (2018) and Lindgren (2020): the commodified political strips techno-objectivist and solutionist claims about AI of their perverse veneer of 'neutrality', 'objectivity', and 'rationality' and, in Wilson's (2017) terms, reveals social media's operation as pure ideology. It is, however, through the movement produced by this contradiction – *liebesraum*'s continuum – that the far-right becomes normalised as neoliberal fantasy.

6. Coda: Into the void

This article explored how the co-constitution between social media and the Symbolic order influences the far-right's normalisation amid the (neo)liberal order's retreat. The Lacanian-articulated conceptual framework merging antagonism and ontological security guided this exploration. This framework was deployed to analyse social media in terms of logics (programmability) and space (homophily) concerning their role in sustaining neoliberalism through commodifying antagonisms. From this analysis the co-constitution between social media and the neoliberal Symbolic Order was framed under the novel concept of *liebesraum*, highlighting the centrality of far-right discourses within liberal modernity and conditioning its erosion.

Analysing the *jouissance*-love (transgression-correction) continuum of *liebesraum* helps investigate far-right normalisation in liberal democracies by i) scrutinising liberal and far-right engagement with social media politics, i.e., responding to the algorithmic big Other's demands; and ii) underscoring the process of breakage or entropy of *liebesraum*'s Symbolic structure, i.e., showing how the neoliberal order

cradles supremacist civilisational projects through commodified antagonisms. For instance, in the US, the Symbolic breakage of Republican *liebesraum* lies in pandering to dislocatory far-right ideologies beyond Symbolic correction, while the Democratic iteration resides in frenetically sublimating the Real of the political. *Liebesraum*'s dialectical structure, effectuated through ontological (in)securitisation, lies at the heart of far-right normalisation and provides an analytical window into neoliberalism's metamorphosis.

While Republican and Democratic *jouissance*-correction dialectics coalesce into far-right normalisation, they showcase important differences. Far-right Republicans focused on the liberal establishment, the broadly-defined 'left', and ethnoculturally-coded beneficiaries (e.g., BLM); while Democrats targeted ethnocultural others more directly and underscored the threat of Republicans to the 'soul of the nation' (Lauter, 2024). The corrective, 'stabilising' buffers of their vitriol could be located in each other, yet their *jouissance* exposed the 'true' source of ontological insecurity: the ethnocultural Other outside their *liebesraum*. Their symbolic 'return', the algorithmic fulfilment of the perverse arc of love, exposes the ontological-securitising foundation of neoliberalism, White supremacy (Davidson & Saull, 2017), manifested in commodified spectacles of political difference, purpose, and morality. This ideological fruition becomes evident in the 'moment' of *jouissance* and in political leaders' efforts for Symbolic correction on social media. These processes co-legitimise *liebesraum* as the neoliberal semi-public architecture of post-political modernity.

Both libidinal phases of *liebesraum* – transgression and correction – denote social media as 'the' space for the fantasy of political agency. Interactions in social media, carriers of the fantasies of agency and ontological security, tailor the ever-expanding homophilic networks that compose our intersubjectivity and fantasies of political belonging. *Liebesraum*'s expansion is not limited to increased interactivity and usage volume. Instead, it should be understood as the neoliberal Symbolic's demand for love to sublimate the traumatic Real, the insatiable spectacle of post-political modernity enacted through hollow antagonisms.

Liebesraum's expansion is inherent excess and bonding capacity through exclusionary yet corrective encroachment – i.e., love. In entropy's metaphor, expansion implies eventual decay – politically, a moment of Symbolic unravelling where sovereignty yields to new forms of power. In line with McGowan (2025), under neoliberalism, this 'yielding' to the Real of historical contradiction is not only engaged with but gorged and regurgitated as pure excess – i.e., an *excess* that does not recognise the affective, material, and spatial constraints that condition its own possibility. The normalisation of the far-right is the product of neoliberalism's algorithmically-afforded shambling-on. Converging Brown (2018) with Žižek (2002; 2009), far-right normalisation resembles Frankenstein's monster: it is besieged by *jouissance*-conditioning lack, demands love, and is animated by the combination of techno-libertarianism and neoliberalism's hubristic ontological securitisation. *Liebesraum*'s expansive yet entropic structure is one of paradox, driving the oscillation between *jouissance* and love that normalises the far-right, thus constituting a tragic perversion of the techno-political promise of modernity.

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Appendix

References in Illustrations

These references were collected and selected via a purposive sample process (Etikan et al., 2015; Patton, 2002) in the period January 2024 – September 2025. This sampling logic identified US and international-based online media outlets (newspapers, news websites, blogs, institutional websites) covering and quoting tweets from Republican-supporting social media users concerning the US Capitol Hill insurrection in January 2021 and their Democratic counterparts during the electoral defeat to Donald Trump in November 2024. This sampling was mainly focused on prominent Congresspeople, Senators, and the presidential candidate Donald Trump. However, it also encompassed second-party reporting on celebrities, influencers, ordinary social media users, and otherwise media personalities opining on these crises. A sole exception of secondary purposive sampling was a direct quote to a tweet by US Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene on the 7th of January 2021 (see below).

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