

SPECIAL ISSUE

Intersections of Politics and Social Media

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The co-editors of this special issue of *The Journal of Social Media in Society* are pleased to present “Intersections of Politics and Social Media.” Social media platforms are significant in the political landscape as they reshape how we communicate, interact, and access information.

In recent years, online discourse and engagement in dialogue have undergone a dramatic transformation, reshaping how individuals exchange and understand ideas. This shift highlights the pivotal role of mass media in shaping political and cultural narratives. As scholars continue to explore the complex intersections of social media and politics, consumers, creators, and critics are responsible for engaging thoughtfully and critically in conversations that matter.

For this special issue, we received 18 submissions and accepted five, resulting in an acceptance rate of 27.8%. As the articles in this issue indicate, social media has proven to be a double-edged sword, providing a platform for underrepresented voices while also serving as a source of misinformation and misrepresentation. Emerging technologies that eliminate gatekeepers and offer opportunities for connection and interactivity also pose risks. One outcome is that media frames often align with broader societal attitudes and beliefs, contributing to the prevalence of fake news and misinformation.

We selected articles based on their relevance to the special issue topic of social media and politics. Although unplanned, most articles focus on international politics and the impact of social media. In the first article of this special issue, Millicent Elewosi and Joseph P. Zompetti examine how cartoon memes from various countries on the African continent have become tools for seeking change in socio-political spheres. By analyzing three memes created by Ghana’s renowned artist, “Tilapia Da Cartoonist,” this study engages in rhetorical criticism from Kenneth Burke’s perspective to uncover how memes serve as a form of public argument, utilizing humor, satire, incongruity, and indigenous artistic techniques to problematize political rhetoric. As a media activist, Tilapia capitalizes on visual discursive strategies to educate and encourage Ghanaian citizens to demand change in online spaces and *tête-à-tête* situations where economic and political crises affect them.

In the following article, Abdullahi Abdi Sheikh examines the impact of social media on conflict dynamics in Somalia, a country still recovering from a devastating civil war that began in 1991. Grounded in Agenda Setting Theory, the study's findings reveal that social media is often weaponized to incite inter-clan conflict, with diaspora-based influencers identified as some of the most significant contributors to online incitement. The study also highlights serious legal and regulatory gaps in Somalia, where monitoring and addressing the misuse of social media remains a challenge. However, despite its negative aspects, social media also holds considerable promise as a tool for peacebuilding, with several examples showing its potential to foster dialogue and reconciliation. Solutions from the study recommend establishing robust legal mechanisms to regulate and control social media usage. Furthermore, raising public awareness about the risks of misinformation and online incitement is crucial. The study also urges Somali diaspora communities to assume greater responsibility for regulating their members' online behavior and to collaborate with authorities in Somalia and abroad to combat the misuse of digital platforms.

Galit Sharon and Moran Yarchi's article explores the intersection of gender and political communication on Instagram during Israel's 2021 election campaign. Analyzing 238 posts from 38 politicians, their study reveals that Instagram does not provide a user engagement advantage for female politicians compared to their male counterparts. However, female politicians achieved greater engagement when they used professional visual self-presentation and addressed gender-related issues. This research contributes to the growing body of scholarship on digital political communication by highlighting how visual platforms can both amplify and constrain political visibility through the persistence of gender norms.

Gregory Gondwe's compelling study examines how social media influencers in Zambia are redefining journalism and public discourse. By analyzing 5,000 posts from 22 influencers, the article reveals how these digital personalities challenge conservative cultural norms, attract advertisers, and increasingly operate as citizen journalists. Their ability to foster trust through direct engagement and provocative content raises critical questions about the future of journalistic ethics and democratic values. As traditional media grapples with a shrinking influence, this article invites readers to consider the evolving power dynamics within the global media landscape.

Finally, Nancy Rios-Contreras examines social media's influence on local activism against police violence in Denver, particularly after Jessie Hernandez's shooting. Through 20 interviews and observations, she identifies five main themes, including the flexibility of activism, the role of social media in organizing, and community mobilization. While social media raises awareness and unites resistance, divisions exist within activist groups concerning online versus offline strategies. The research emphasizes that while digital platforms are powerful, in-person engagement is essential for building solidarity and sustaining movements. The study advocates for a combination of digital and physical activism to foster racial healing and promote lasting community change.

Collectively, these studies explore how digital platforms—from Instagram to social media influencers—shape political engagement, activism, and journalistic practices. They

highlight the influence of gender norms, the redefinition of public discourse, and the balance between online and offline methods in driving social change and political visibility.

References

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Online Connections

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