

Revolutions: An Introduction to the #AoIR2023 Special Issue

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Published 22 November, 2024

Information, Communication & Society, 27(12), pp. 2215-2221

Abstract

This paper introduces the 'Revolutions' themed special issue which includes research presented at the 24th annual Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) conference (2023). The conference theme centred on revolutions, highlighting the connections between digital transformations and social movements across time and space. Focusing on the affordances of digital technologies for mobilization, resistance and achieving social justice, but also their limitations in enabling lasting social change, the conference theme asked participants to reflect on the tradeoffs between empowerment and subordination, and the relationship of digital 'revolutions' to racial justice, anticolonial movements, and the rising tide of white supremacist and fascist mobilization. This special issue includes six papers that offer new angles on critically assessing the groundbreaking early ideas underpinning online networked spaces and questioning the revolutionary potential of the internet today. The range of papers includes contexts related to platform power and user agency, online political subcultures and memeification, the balance between visibility and power for content creators revolutionising live streaming and influencer cultural industries, and perceptions of AI's revolutionary impact on romantic relationships. The studies in this issue also offer a global view, with geographies stretching from the MENA region and China to subcultures and marginalised groups in Western contexts such as the US and Canada.

Keywords: revolution, social justice, democratization, internet studies, Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), power

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2024.2431551>

Citation: Lokot, T., Tønnesen, O. D., & Rodriguez-Amat, J. R. (2024). Revolutions: an introduction to the #AoIR2023 special issue. *Information, Communication & Society*, 27(12), 2215–2221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2024.2431551>.

Introduction

This special issue showcases some of the research presented at the 24th Annual Association of Internet Researchers Conference (AoIR2023) on the theme of Revolutions. The conference took place in person in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, US

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from 18-21 October 2023, hosted by Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania. The chair of the conference organising committee was Adrienne Shaw (Temple University), and the committee included Andrew Iliadis (Temple University), Jessa Lingel (University of Pennsylvania), Larisa Kingston Mann (Temple University), and Jan Fernback (Temple University). The conference theme centred on the theme of revolutions, and their contingent promises and failures as related to digital technologies. Focusing on the affordances of digital technologies for mobilization, resistance and achieving social justice, but also their limitations in enabling lasting social change, the conference theme asked participants to reflect on the tradeoffs between empowerment and subordination, and the relationship of digital 'revolutions' to racial justice, anticolonial movements, and the rising tide of white supremacist and fascist mobilization. At the same time, the conference sought to complicate narratives of the internet's revolutionary power and the determinist views about its democratizing potential.

The connections between digital innovation and socio-political revolutionary ideas have not always been straightforward. During the Arab Spring, Western academics and journalists sometimes overdetermined the role of the digital (Tufekçi & Wilson, 2012), or failed to appreciate both its advantages and drawbacks. While digital tools allow activists to coordinate events, share discourses, and inspire connective action (Papacharissi, 2015; Kavanaugh et al., 2016), they have not reliably lead to the widespread material changes at the root of many social movements (Tufekçi, 2017), such as defunding the police (Freelon et al., 2016; Aubyn and Frimpong, 2022), holding government officials accountable for corruption (Breuer & Groshek, 2014; Mattoni & Odilla, 2021), or reducing the presence and impunity of sexual predators and abusers (Nenoff, 2020; Mendes et al., 2018). The challenges for activists and civil society groups balancing between achieving strategic visibility (Pearce, Vitak & Barta, 2018) and algorithmic surveillance (Wu & Fitzgerald, 2020), and the relationship of digital 'revolutions' to racial justice (Lu & Steele, 2019), anticolonial movements (Carlson & Frazer, 2020), and the rising tide of white supremacist and fascist mobilization (Askanius & Keller, 2021) require urgent and direct attention. These are just some of the tensions around the internet's revolutionary potential that the conference sought to thematize and address. In the spirit of AoIR's wide-ranging geographic focus and its aim to ensure greater diversity and equity in the academic environment, the conference programme committee strove to privilege marginalized voices or those who do not often have the opportunity to address an international audience. A special effort was made to platform scholars from the Global South, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color globally, LGBTQIA+ peoples, scholars living with disabilities, and people outside or adjacent to the academy.

The keynote speech at the 2023 conference was delivered by AJ Escoffery, an associate professor of communication studies at Northwestern University and author of *Reparative Media* (MIT Press, forthcoming). Escoffery, who is also the author of *Open TV: Innovation Beyond Hollywood* and *The Rise of Web Television* (NYU

Press) and whose creative- and community-based work has been recognized by the MacArthur Foundation, Field Foundation, *Variety*, and *Filmmaker* magazine, asked the audience to reflect on why, at a time when we are more connected than ever, does it feel like our cultural divisions are intensifying? He argued that repairing our culture means healing how we make media, how we connect through technology, and how we generate knowledge.

Overall, the 2023 Philadelphia conference attracted 596 participants from 41 countries across six continents. In total, there were 261 accepted papers, 30 accepted panels, 17 roundtable, experimental and fishbowl sessions, and 156 publications in AoIR's *Selected Papers of Internet Research* (SPIR) proceedings. Other events included the Doctoral Colloquium, the online and in-person Early Careers Scholars Workshops, several pre-conference workshops, and social events.

The 2023 Nancy Baym book award was awarded to Kevin Driscoll for his book *The Modern World: A Prehistory of Social Media* (Yale University Press, 2022), while the dissertation award was awarded to Tuğçe Bidav (Maynooth University, Ireland) for her thesis "Global Platform, Local Labour: Precarious YouTubing in Ireland and Turkey." Finally, the best student paper was awarded to Nermin Elsherif (University of Amsterdam) for her submission titled "The Not-so-revolutionary Facebook: Nostalgia and the return to a centralized state."

The conference theme responds to a tension in internet studies that emerge from the polarising debate between techno-optimists and -pessimists about the internet's potential to reshape everyday lives, democracy and societal structures. This tension becomes apparent when we look at how the same technologies that help revolutions germinate, give authoritarian governments ample opportunities to surveil and suppress citizens; platforms that are hailed as great equalizers for gaining social, political and economic power perpetuate the same profit driven media logics where a few preside over the many. The conference sought to bring together works addressing these promises and failures of digital technologies relating to their revolutionary potential, asking, how, then, do we account for the role of digital technologies in the work of revolution? How have digital platforms and infrastructures been enrolled in revolutionary projects? How have discourses of revolutions taken shape in projects of social justice, the reorganization of social orders, or as corporate manipulations of revolutionary promises? And how has the history of revolutions and internet technologies informed the current fascination with new sovereignties within, across, and against the digital world, including revolutionary or alternate sovereignties to those that currently exist?

The papers in this special issue offer new angles on critically assessing the groundbreaking early ideas underpinning online networked spaces and questioning the revolutionary potential of the internet today. The papers cover a broad range of contexts, including platform power and user agency, online political subcultures and

memeification, the balance between visibility and power for content creators revolutionising live streaming and influencer cultural industries, and perceptions of AI's revolutionary impact on romantic relationships. The studies in this issue also offer a global view, with geographies stretching from the MENA region and China to subcultures and marginalised groups in Western contexts such as the US and Canada.

The first paper, 'Revolutionary discourses from the past: a digital hermeneutical analysis of widely read academic publications on the social impact and significance of the internet,' by Nathalie Fridzema, Susan Aasman, Tom Sloopweg and Rik Smit, takes a historiographical approach to identify and define the themes, concepts and imaginaries of the internet in the key Anglo-Saxon texts written in late 90s and early 2000s. Often infused with the rhetoric of radical transformation, these academic ruminations either consciously or unconsciously engendered a revolutionary period marked by digital utopian views about the significance of the internet, at the same time critically reflecting on its transformations. Focusing on frequently used keywords *virtual* and *digital*, the paper traces how imaginaries of the internet went on to shift from ontological to practical to normative ones.

The second paper, 'Lodging complaints against platform power: how Lebanese journalists and activists experience reporting mechanisms, platform failures, and techno-alienation,' by Azza El-Masri, Martin Riedl, Inga Kristina Trauthig and Samuel Woolley, explores how women and queer Lebanese journalists and activists experienced failures by Meta-owned social media platforms in addressing and mitigating harms and violence based on sexual or gender identity. Using Sara Ahmed's feminist notion of "complaint" as a lens, the paper documents the condition of techno-alienation caused by the platforms' negligence in catering to the marginalised populations in non-western societies. The sense of abandonment and danger reported by the participants of this study towards Meta showcases how the revolutionary potential of networked platform publics may falter when platforms fail to do their due diligence to the local societal structures and the contextual nuances that exist beyond the settings engineered from the geographies where the platforms are founded.

The third paper, 'Revolution by Other Memes: On the Playful Subcultures of r/PoliticalCompassMemes,' by Marc Tutters and Gavin Mueller, considers political meme production on reddit through an original prism of subcultural theory associated with the Birmingham School of cultural studies. Based on the mixed methods analysis of over 20 million posts scraped from the /politicalcompassmemes subreddit, the paper documents the construction of political subjectivities in this subculture and frames it as a response to the ongoing erasure of radical alternative political imaginaries. The study illuminates how everyday social media users are engaging in mundane political meme work, and how such efforts connect to their

understandings about their own and others' ideological and political positions along various spectrums.

The fourth paper, 'Room with a viewership: visibility work & Twitch.tv in the domestic context,' by Christine Tran, examines the domestic worksites of game streamers on Amazon's live video platform Twitch as a crucial site for understanding the politics of visibility work on platforms. Employing ethnographic interactive methods and grounded in feminist theories of domestic work, the study documents the challenges marginalized Twitch creators face with livestreaming revolutionizing the platformization of game cultures. The paper finds that while streaming provides opportunities for creative self-expression and shields against hostile gaming communities, it also relocates streamers' precarities before audiences to the sensitive enclaves of their personal (and often intimate) domestic space. As a result, Twitch streamers have to balance self-presentation and discretion as they construct their online presence through intricate strategies of visibility management in social media work.

The fifth paper, 'Manufacturing influencers: the gatekeeping roles of MCNs (Multi-channel Networks) in cultural production,' by Fan Liang and Li Ji, investigates the revolutionary role of MCNs (multi-channel networks) in the Chinese influencer economy and their impact on cultural production. Drawing on platform studies, media industries and cultural production scholarship, the study charts the development of MCNs and reveals the ways they come to shape cultural production on platforms and how they can circumscribe the individual influencers' creative autonomy as they take on a more formative and powerful role. This process of 'manufacturing influencers' which encompasses talent incubation, content optimization, and platform monetization, transforms MCNs from intermediaries into gatekeepers dictating the norms and expectations of cultural production on platforms.

The sixth and final paper, 'Media frames, AI romantic relationships, and the perspectives of people in relationships: mapping and comparing news media themes with user perspectives,' by Tony Liao, Elizabeth Rodwell and Debriunna Porter, focuses on media narratives and moral panics around human romantic relationships with AI conversational agents. Such revolutionary romantic human-AI relations have long been the realm of science fiction, commenting on the ethics of technological development, human desires and vulnerabilities, and what constitutes meaningful and authentic connection. The study combines framing analysis of news stories about an AI application called Replika which offers the option of simulating romantic interactions/relationships, with semi-structured interviews with users in romantic relationships with their Replika, recruited from the Reddit forum 'ILoveMyReplika'. Focusing on the hyperbolic hopes and fears in media coverage, the study compares these with self-reported user experiences and offers insights into the potential of human-AI romantic futures.

Conclusion

The revolutionary potential of the internet and its connection to social and political life remains a central issue in internet studies, focusing on citizens seeking to harness the affordances offered by digital technologies and networked platforms to enact political change and achieve social justice, as well as on those exposed to the harms of disruptive innovation and unchecked adoption of smart tech. It also poses a continuing challenge for the the researchers investigating the advantages of digital tools for sociopolitical transformations and the obstacles posed by the very nature of the neoliberal platform corporations propelling them forward, as well as by the networked authoritarian regimes capitalising on the coercive power of algorithmic control and online surveillance. Such questions will continue to be addressed by AoIR in conferences to come. The theme from the 2023 conference connects to that of the 2024 conference, held in Sheffield, on the theme of 'Industry,' where AoIR researchers will present a wide range of work on everything from digital technologies being used for rural social entrepreneurship to threats of monopolisation and anti-competition, the rise of the influencer economy to the emergence of global supply chains of AI.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Acknowledgements

The special issue editors would like to express their gratitude to all of the volunteer reviewers for the special issue and to the broader AoIR community.

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Dr. Tetyana Lokot is Associate Professor in Digital Media and Society at the School of Communications at Dublin City University, Ireland. Her research focuses on digital media, networked authoritarianism, digital resistance, networked citizenship, threats to digital rights and internet freedom. Her research has been published in *Information, Communication & Society*, *Social Media + Society*, and numerous other journals. She is the author of *Beyond the Protest Square: Digital Media and Augmented Dissent* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021). Dr. Lokot was on the conference committee of the Association of Internet Researchers conference in 2022.

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Dr. Joan Ramon Rodriguez-Amat is Senior Lecturer in the School of Journalism, Media and Communication at the University of Sheffield, United Kingdom. He says his research is about people talking to each other; but he means that his work spreads across the factors that shape the communicative spaces and the misfits between data geographies, and culture. His works on governance of culture and media policies; politics of technology, data infrastructures and algorithms, and geographic inequalities; and on hybrid communities, have been published in *New Media and Society*, *Communication Theory*, among many other journals. Dr. Rodriguez-Amat is on the Sheffield conference committee of the Association of Internet Researchers conference in 2024.

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