Social Media + Society submission

**Platform-mediated social norm contestation of climate change publics on Instagram and Twitter**

**Introduction**

At a November 2023 Climate rally in Amsterdam, Greta Thunberg, world-renowned climate activist, shared the stage with pro-Palestinian protesters, and in her speech connected the struggle for climate justice to the war in Gaza. She was interrupted by a protester who took her microphone and said “I came here for a climate demonstration, not a political view”. The protester was escorted off stage, but defended by several users on social media who agreed the war in Gaza should not be mentioned in their climate protest. The incident is demonstrative how the climate movement is composed of many different publics that sometimes do not see eye to eye, both in the offline and the online world.

The crowd of people motivated to halt climate change has grown tremendously in the last decade with the help of social media (Pearce et al., 2019), but this crowd has had varying degrees of self-organization. Some have taken the shape of a movement, which Dolata & Schrape (2016) describes as ‘collective actors capable of intentional, strategic action’ with distinct group identities and shared norms of behavior. Others have remained part of non-organized collectives that can be categorized as what Bruns (2023) calls ‘issue publics’. These issue publics are connected by networking technologies into a larger public spherule on climate change, or ‘networked publics’ (Ito, 2008; boyd, 2010).

Given the variations in organization of crowds, there can be conflict over acceptable norms of behavior in the climate change public spherule. Norms are understood as non-institutionalized rules governing societies. They are expectations raised on members of collectives that share a certain identity. Norms (temporarily) set the demarcations on what is acceptable behavior, but they are always subject to change. (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004)

Crowds can come to a shared understanding, or as Mouffe (1999) would call a ‘conflictual consensus’ of their identity and norms through their discursive practices. How they come to this shared understanding, has to be understood as a socio-technical process ( Lievrouw, 2014; Dolata & Schrape, 2016). The affordances of the online spaces where these discursive practices take place can shape the norms of behavior to a certain degree. (Van Dijck, 2013)

In the incident in this introduction, the voice of the protester who reprimanded Thunberg would likely not have been heard by all participants had he stayed in the audience. When he got on stage and took over the microphone, his voice was amplified, affording visibility to his intervention. The affordances of the space shaped how he tried to enforce a norm of what he thought should be acceptable behavior in the climate change public. Similar affordances can be found on social media platforms.

**Objectives/research question**

The objective of this research is mainly to create an understanding of how the affordances of social media platforms play a role in shaping the normative processes in public spherules.

For this purpose, we make a comparative analysis of the practices of users on Instagram and Twitter in the climate change public spherule. One of the objectives is to gain a better understanding in what way these two platforms shape the visibility of interventions, and the belonging to an in-group.

These two elements – visibility and group membership - are relevant according to the literature on social norms. Norms are learned from salient behaviors and interpersonal communication (Cialdini et al., 1991; Geber & Hefner, 2019), where people are more likely to conform to a social norm in their public behavior (Helbing et al., 2014; Rimal & Lapinski, 2015). How platforms thus shape the visibility of interactions matters for how social norms are established, enforced or contested. People are more inclined to behave according to a group with which they perceive to share a social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Thus is it important to understand how Twitter and Instagram shape this shared social identity.

This research provides a deeper insight into the role communication technologies play in the conflictual consensus on norms of acceptable behavior that social movements are built on.

It also provides insights on how crowds can devolve into group think, where unanimity is more important than critical reflection (Janis, 1982) and group polarization, where the group becomes more extreme when talking to only each other (Sunstein, 2009).

**Methods**

We chose Instagram and Twitter not only due to its intensive use by climate change activists, scientists, educators, politicians, NGO’s and opinion makers, but also due to its lack of fixed boundaries around communities, networking loosely connected issue publics.

To identify the mutual shaping of affordances and social norm behavior, we conducted 22 in-depth interviews of a purposively selected sample of worldwide Instagram and Twitter users that engage with climate change content. These interviews were conducted online and in-person between May 2023 and December 2023. We opted for a maximum variation of our sample, selecting users of varying size, and users that participate in different ways in normative processes on the platforms. We vary on participation by basing ourselves on the Small Acts of Engagement framework by Picone et al. (2019). They make the argument that besides posting, small acts like sharing, commenting and liking are also audience engagements with content flows. From our perspective of social norms, these acts not only contribute to what Bruns (2006) coined ‘produsage’, but they also contribute to normative processes in the networked publics. Instagram and Twitter respondents have varying practices from creating their own content, to sharing other people’s posts on the platforms, commenting and liking. We also included a few users who do not engage at all but ‘lurk’ on the platforms.

We varied on the number of followers since the number of followers can determine a user’s power to enforce or contest norms in the networked publics due to their degree-centrality. (Ognyanova, 2017) Those with less outgoing links (followers) in a network, may have less weight in the information exchange.

To reach theoretical saturation, we sampled respondents from different regions and with different perspectives and theories of change on how to tackle anthropogenic climate change.

With these variations in mind, we aimed to reach a deeper understanding on the shaping role of Instagram and Twitter’s affordances for normative processes in online climate change publics.

During the interviews, we used an elicitation technique where respondents were asked which communities they perceive on the platforms and which communities they could self-identify with. This allowed us to prompts users to describe the norms of these communities and their own position towards these norms. We then probed which features of the platforms play a role in how they perceive such norms and how they see their own contributions in enforcing or contesting norms, which provided valuable insights on the relevant features in the shaping of norms.

**Results**

The practices of Instagram and Twitter users reveal how there is a difference in their experience with norm enforcement that has an impact on the connections between issue publics. On Twitter, users report to have their norm contested often and they report to engage in this contestation often. The interactability of the platform affords the possibility for many people to climb on the metaphorical stage to let others know that the norm they are propagating is incorrect. Such interactions also have visibility beyond the social graph of the users involved, leading to many more converging contexts or as boyd (2002) calls it ‘collapsed contexts’. The affordances of Twitter thus shape discursive practices that pressure users to come to a ‘conflictual consensus’ over shared norms.

The way respondents conceptualized ‘group membership’ on Twitter was for large part determined by a common out-group on the platform whose norm contestations were disregarded and didn’t affect behaviour. Due to the external visibility of interactions, users were reportedly very cautious to correct a norm of people they saw as in-group. They cited fears of no longer being regarded in-group, and fears of their norm correction being weaponized by the out-group and sow dissident. In this way, a form of ‘group think’ can emerge in certain issue publics on Twitter.

On Instagram norm contestation is a far more scarce practice of users. Users cite to mostly be pushing norms to their followers through posts and stories, which primarily stays in the realm of their social graph, creating far less occurrences of collapsed context.

Respondents also rarely engaged in norm contestation. Those users who do engage in contestation, stated to not bother contesting norms in Stories as the visibility is limited to the private inbox of the user. They would only contest in posts if they presumed it would be visible to users who would be receptive to potential contestation and would thus not be an out-group. The visibility of norm contestation is entirely subject to the user who makes the post or story on Instagram. Users report to being rather unfamiliar with climate change issue publics on the platform with different norms. This means contestation is more siloed on the platform, which can lead to more group think, but also affords the possibility for norm pluralism.

**Future work**

With the results of this research we aim to provide more insights on the socio-technical processes underlying movement building and self-organization.

We also provide a pathway to investigating discursive practices between issue publics for other platforms.

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