

Social Media

Intensification of social transformation through acceleration, reproduction, and algorithmization of visibility in social media

Viktoria Flasche & Maria Schreiber

Against the backdrop of platform capitalism (Srincek, 2018) and hegemonic algorithmization (Galloway & Thacker, 2007; Jörissen, 2020), the hope of the early internet for distributed agency, visibility for all, pluralization, and freedom for diverse identities has paradoxically been realized under different circumstances: globally commercially successful platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok etc. offer low-threshold visibility, simplify content production, and suggest relevance of self-presentation (you are important, you are part of the network). Historically, media production and visibility are no longer reserved for professional media actors, institutions, and thus also journalistic gatekeepers, for example. However, platforms have economic/capitalist interests (Zuboff, 2019); in order to remain marketable, they incorporate the interests and/or needs of users (reactively and productively), but their primary interest is to generate revenue. Like historical media technologies (Kittler, 1987, 2003; McLuhan, 2003), their interfaces, algorithms, and policies play a key role in shaping how something is presented (boyd, 2011; Bucher & Helmond, 2017; van Dijck, 2013).

Web 2.0 or 3.0 thus enables participation in the public sphere and debates, in media design, in networked communication spaces of all kinds and on every conceivable topic. The hope associated with the internet in the 1990s is therefore being realized for those who have access and the corresponding resources (Nieminen, 2016), albeit on condition that they submit to the logic and business models of the respective platforms. Platforms therefore offer **empowerment through subjugation**. Once they are online, users and their content are potentially globally visible, but whether and to what extent they are actually seen remains to

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be seen for the time being and is also controlled by algorithms. In any case, the structure of the internet and the platforms mentioned above enable the emergence of specific subcultures in which the relevant users come together on various topics and translocally in order to form communicative communities (Krotz, 2009). The participatory turn is accompanied by the availability of technology, infrastructure and bandwidth, as well as a professionalization of image and video production techniques (Bruns, 2016; Deuze, 2006). At the same time, user data is sold to advertisers ("If you don't pay for it, you're the product" (Orlowski, 2020)) and the visibility of content is controlled algorithmically or curated by the users themselves (see f.i. filter bubbles). However, the extent to which social media actually contributes to the consolidation of existing attitudes or sometimes even enables new perspectives remains empirically controversial (Jones-Jang & Chung, 2022).

What relevance do these dynamics have with regard to transformative imagery?

Instagram in particular has not only forced **a medial aestheticization of everyday life, but also an 'everydayization' of medial aesthetics** / aesthetic perception and thinking (Leaver et al., 2020): We think of ourselves as (digital-photographic) images. With the omnipresent camera on our smartphone (Schreiber, 2020) or laptop (Carnap & Flasche, 2023), we constantly anticipate **the potential pictoriality** of ourselves and our lifeworlds: e.g. in Zoom, when we check our image with regard to the camera section or when we already mentally frame the sunlit coffee cup as a social media post. Ways of perception and conventions of representation are transformed by platforms while filters and design criteria are learned and internalized: Corresponding social norms and values about what can be shown and said where and how are established and images are produced in a platform-specific way (Flasche & Carnap, 2021; Schreiber, 2017).

A **thematic dissolution** of boundaries is another part of the low-threshold nature of social media: All topics and images of one's own life are potentially platformable, i.e. relevant enough to be made into an image and shown to a diffuse networked public (boyd, 2011). An infinite number of themes exist side by side, genres and typologies can be combined in many ways. The potential wild jumble of topics is also a result of the participatory turn that

accompanied the establishment of Web 2.0. However, **what is or becomes visible and how**, or whether and how (supposed) order is created, is in turn tailor-made for each user, as no two social media feeds look the same. Each user sees a different combination of content – this combination is more or less intentionally curated (through subscriptions, hashtags, etc.), but always also algorithmically controlled by others. The power relations behind these visibilities are difficult for users and researchers to understand and thus often remain in the realm of speculation or imagination (Bucher, 2017; Cotter et al., 2022).

Platform-specific transformations

In addition to the many creative possibilities offered by simple programs on smartphones (f.i. Canva), audio and video memes have become particularly popular on TikTok. They provide templates, structure your own content, and at the same time encourage creativity. Not only do they limit the creative scope, they also inspire action. The ambivalence of empowerment and subjugation is also repeated at the micro level of content production:

„The creativity of the many, which brought about the 'participatory internet' as such in the first place, takes on an opposite participatory function in the form of platforms: subject-decentering and collectively-oriented strategies are the solution to the platform's core economic problem of constantly generating content and increasing engagement“ (Flasche, 2022; translated from German original by Author).

Basic emotional reflexes and condensed affects are central to the content on the currently popular platforms, for example when videos are tailored to cuteness, disgust or a quick joke and the display algorithms are structured around these affective forms of reference (Breljak & Mühlhoff, 2019). At the same time, content has become more serious or political overall in the course of the pandemic (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019; Ovide, 2022).

Instagram, on the other hand, has become less *fancy* and also more political or discursive, which is accompanied by a trend or tendency towards writing and text instead of or in addition to images and video on the previously highly visual platform: This raises the question of why or to what extent the media mode of imagery/iconicity is no longer 'sufficient'. In the meme tradition of combining a diffusely defined canon of images (<https://knowyourmeme.com>) with ever new phrases and slogans, communication becomes

less atmospheric and emotional, the polysemy of the image stands in contrast to the clarity of text/language: In the course of social transformations and crises, users are confronted with a pressure to position themselves vis-à-vis the diffuse public typical of networks, which demands more unambiguous communication (For or against vaccines? Anti-racism?). For example, images of war must either be posted together with the small Russian or Ukrainian flag emoji or the latter must be edited into the image so that the contexts can be clearly defined. Condensed, bite-sized knowledge transfer is required or has become established and social media has become the primary source of news for (young) people (Arceneaux & Dinu, 2018; Newman et al., 2019; Russmann & Hess, 2020). Political topics are dealt with here in the same style that was primarily typical for games or film reviews (see f.i. the Youtuber Rezo <https://www.youtube.com/c/Renzo69>). The fact that social media content creators are thus being turned into a kind of new journalist by users is questionable in terms of participatory politics, since they have no institutional legitimacy. It is also questionable to what extent traditional professional ethical standards such as objectivity or transparency are (or can be) adhered to.

In summary, platforms and social media have significantly transformed the relationship between society and imagery over the last two decades. Key overarching dynamics can be identified:

- empowerment through subjugation,
- democratization/participation in global visual worlds,
- thematic dissolution of boundaries/the 'everydayization' of aesthetics,
- (algorithmically) curated visibilities, and
- simultaneity of politicization and affect orientation

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