

Social Media Activism and Networked Desires.
Politics and Performance on Grassroots and Indigenous Networks.
An Introduction.

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The sixth volume of the *Journal of Visual and Media Anthropology* introduces several written articles and short films that explore themes of social media activism and desire, as mediated by digital platforms. This 2021 edition brought particular challenges for our contributors and editors, as two of the films intended for publication were censored. One film was censored for political reasons and taken down by the government of the filmmaker's home country before it could be released. Another was flagged and taken down by Youtube's algorithm for suspected disinformation. Unfortunately, we could not include either film in this volume as of now. The first film cannot be published due to political threats to the filmmaker, who lives in an environment where media is tightly surveilled and controlled. The second film was repeatedly removed from Youtube, even after the filmmaker made a revision with a disclaimer that clarifies the project is critically investigating, not spreading, misinformation about Covid-19. Unlike the first film, the later was censored by a private algorithm, not a State, so we can still reference the film and work in this text without jeopardizing the filmmaker's safety.

Put together, the films' censorship highlights two forms of power that have consolidated control over the once free flowing internet in the 21st century: States—which surveil, regulate, and censor the internet to maintain political authority to varying degrees—, and large private technology companies—which also surveil, regulate, and control the internet for profit. Yet, while State power is maintained by law, sovereignty, and a monopoly on violence (Weber 2008), the corporate power of tech oligarchs is maintained by the algorithmic force of “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff 2019), which seeks to quantify, commodify, and manipulate all aspects of digital life. Alongside governments, big social media platforms in the present do share a serious responsibility to make sure the content on their platforms does not contribute to a health emergency (Vraga and Bode 2021). Behind closed doors, they have re-programmed algorithms and employed additional staff to control and censor content that is spreading misinformation. Yet, these systems may not be able to differentiate between research-based content and conspiracy theory.

We aim to build on a growing body of research spanning the fields of digital and political anthropology together, untangling the webs of power and social effects of digital

technologies through varied ethnographic research (Frömming 2013; Frömming et al. 2017; Kariippanon 2021; Kraemer 2018; Miller 2016; Phillips 2020; Pink et al. 2016; Strassler 2020; Tan-Tangbau 2017; Trémon 2021). This issue is dedicated to the people who continue with political, economic, and social struggles online, despite State or corporate censorship, and the uncertain realities of the digitized present.

The articles in this volume particularly focus on the growing power of large-scale, for-profit technology platforms. These opaque corporations and their oligarchs have now consolidated control over the digital space of the internet, and its material infrastructure. As the privatized, supranational governors of the digital sphere, large technology companies control the flow of information across borders and structure collective responses of desire/loathing through networked exchange. As we “connect” or “make friends” online, we are grouped together into algorithmically networked *enclaves* of affinity (Lim 2017; Christin 2020). We construct *imagined communities* (Anderson 2016) around the (social)*mediascapes* (Appadurai 1990) we inhabit in digital space. Anderson (2016), coined the term imagined communities decades ago to describe how nationalist publics are produced around the nationalized infrastructure and framing of TV news broadcasting. Decades later, Merlyna Lim (2017) coined the term algorithmic enclaves to describe the still nationalist, but increasingly divided and opinionated, publics produced around the rise of social media, and its algorithms. Rather than uniting a nation behind a coherent imagined community, the algorithms behind social media platforms construct many overlapping imagined communities based on data driven assumptions of our preferences. Nationalism has indeed gained salience with the rise of social media and fall of tightly regulated national news distribution, as inherited imagined communities of the nation are reinscribed to the personal preferences of users (Trémon 2021; Kraemer 2018). Thus, we have reached a point where the imagined communities produced by mass media are no longer purely imagined, but digitally structured around algorithms that seek to understand our desires (Christin 2020; Dumouchel 2021), and the desires of the transnational market, better than we can.

Algorithmic communities reconfigure inherited categories of social life around new structures of power and the evolving conditions of the present. Yet, the same algorithms that constrain and manipulate political participation bring new potentials for overpowered, delocalized political movements. As political and digital anthropologists, we must invent new forms of political constation by engaging creatively with the digital “messy web” (Postil 2012), which is already consolidated by the ruling class and interests of companies and capital (Zuboff 2019). Subject to the structures of technology platforms, the films and articles in this volume explore how digital technologies produce atomized and hyperconnected users, loosely bound together by algorithmically defined communities. At the same time, contributors raise questions about the power and weaknesses of grassroots NGOs and indigenous social media strategies. How can small politically engaged organizations ensure their voices are heard above the “digital noise” of the crowd online, while outspent and outnumbered by corporations with large marketing teams (Seaver 2017)? These pieces build on anthropological research that suggests indigenous social media users around the world deploy the ubiquitous technologies to connect with kin across geographic space (Ponzanesi 2020), and contest dominant narratives through

creative self-representation (Kariippanon 2021; Ginsburg and Myers 2006; Tan-Tangbau 2017).

Chiara Beneventi applies a background in marketing and NGO social media management some of these central debates in anthropology. Since 2019, Beneventi has worked at *The Baobab Home*, an NGO in Bagamoyo, Tanzania. As part of this job, she helps manage the organization's social media accounts. In "Instagram and social noise: Where are the NGOs?" she uses her work experience and results of her ethnographic fieldwork in Tanzania to investigate the social media strategies of grassroots NGOs, alongside an analysis of the forms of participation produced by web 2.0 platforms, like Instagram. She finds that social media platforms prioritize the voice of the individual over the collective within the logics of digital capitalism. Although Beneventi critically questions the forms of subjectivity and participation web 2.0 produce, she ultimately hopes they can also bring networks of individuals together for common causes, despite the self-centered marketing-driven logics of the platforms that connect them.

Also applying a critical background in marketing to digital anthropology is "Paradoxes of Digital Democracy in Brazil: Media coverage of 'Marco Temporal' and the online activism of indigenous movements," by **Thaís Harumi Omine**. Omine uses social media analysis to challenge the relationship between agency and subjectivity across media frames. Her analysis compares corporate sponsored public media and independent indigenous social media coverage of the 'Marco Temporal' legal process of expropriating indigenous land in Brazil. She finds that Brazil's largest media producers align with the interest of capital, and particularly, agribusiness, while leveraging indigeneity as a visual trope to support the elite. A former marketing professional herself, Omine finds that although some indigenous news producers find organic growth on social media, their counter-hegemonic messages are overpowered by streams of content created by paid professionals who reinforce the status quo of the market. Omine suggests the algorithmic bias of big tech platforms reinforces the interests of capital, and "privileges those who have money to burn". Omine urges people to reject their status as "users" of social media to take a more critical role in engaging with platforms stacked in favor of the corporatized elite.

Despite the limitations of dominant social networks, Harumi also describes particular historical moments when astounding political collectives have emerged from the self-centered logics of the corporatized platforms. This emerging form of digital activism is limited by the near sovereign power of the technology companies and governments that seek to control them, yet enabled by the reach and connectivity of digital networking products. Several other contributions in this volume also address the structuring potentials and limitations of social media and internet technologies as emerging stages for political performance and activism.

After working and researching with journalists in Myanmar for several years, **Daniel Wood** (an editor of this edition) writes "(Social)mediascapes Carved in Blood: Digital Performance and Myanmar's Spring Revolution." Following the 1st February military coup in Myanmar, countless crowds of everyday people swarmed streets across the country to protest the genocidal military's rule, thus launching the Spring Revolution. Unlike previous Myanmar's previous revolutions, most people had access to smartphone technology and affordable mobile internet to stream their experiences for the world to see.

Yet, through surveillance, misinformation and unpredictable internet blackouts, the Myanmar military has particularly targeted the country's journalists, media producers and digital activists. Wood highlights the risks that these digital activists assume as they use social media to reproduce and perform the anti-coup movement, while documenting military war crimes from heavily surveilled and persecuted digital space. Although these strategic performances of digital activism have not prompted the international response that many protestors hoped for, they have cemented the Spring Revolution in digital space, as a point of connection for ongoing revolt, and script for future movements to come.

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar and Spring Revolution are part of an ongoing era where Covid-19 lingers behind political crises around the world. Continuing with our last issue, which presented work on machinima films and the pandemic, Covid-19 and digital film-making remains as the collective background for ongoing research in Visual Anthropology, as the virus moves in and out of salience in a digitally and pathogenetically connected world. Yet, as digital anthropologists, we continue to invent new ways to connect amidst the changing conditions of politics and the internet (Pink et al. 2016), and across wide diasporas in digital space (Ponzanesi 2020). At the time of publication, a global pandemic response continues to be thwarted by a surge of mistrust in science and public health, a trend that seeps across borders and contexts. This crisis of authority is particularly widespread within liberal democracies, where free speech is protected by the State, but censored by private platforms with non-transparent regulatory structures. Yet, despite the efforts of big tech platforms, (mis)information continues to spread rapidly online between enclaves of digitally networked, vaccine-hesitant bodies.

Digital misinformation has infected not just the beliefs, but the vital organs of social media users who deny the virus or science of vaccines by amplifying the risks of viral contraction and spread. Extremely concerned about the health effects of Covid, and the ways that some people skewed public health information about the disease, **Helga Laufey Ásgeirsdóttir** created *Covid-19: Misinformation in the Digital Age*. The film uses digital recording techniques, and the random chat platform Omegle, as tools to research attitudes towards Covid-19 around the world engages in sincere conversation about the virus with Doug, a conservative U.S. American Covid skeptic. Taking an open, yet critical, perspective, Laufey demonstrates how anthropologists can play a role in engaging with dialogue across intractable political and subjective differences. The film puts forward a method of engaging with politicized differences, without enraging or accepting them. Despite the value of this type of intersubjective endeavor, the film was flagged quickly by platforms for spreading Covid misinformation, even though it is clearly framed as research into misinformation. Algorithmic filters likely flagged the title or language of the film, lacking the human insight to understand that the controversial views presented inside the piece do not equate to its message. Even after the filmmaker added clear disclaimers, the film was recently flagged again by Youtube as we attempted to upload it for the December issue of this journal. For this reason, we are unfortunately unable to publish it as of now. The publication and censorship of *Covid-19: Misinformation in the Digital Age* begs the question, how are the limits of pandemic related discourse in social space adjudicated by big tech platforms?

Rebecca Benoit also uses digital cinematography and social networks to present dialogue around contested political conversations in “*white silence is...*” Parallel to the rise of Covid-19 in the United States, the grassroots Black Lives Matter movement became harder and harder for white U.S. Americans to ignore, as people crowded streets and digital spaces to protest the murder of George Floyd, on top of centuries of police violence and systemic anti-Black racism in the United States. The film interrogates the phrase, “white silence is violence,” which spread rapidly around off and online protests. Benoit raises questions about the value of the phrase, and why it took up such meaning amidst the protest movement. Combining online research with focused interviews, Benoit structures a polyvocal conversation around the racialized experiences of people in the United States, white silence, and the participation of white allies who may remain complicit in the very systems they use anti-racist language to distance themselves from. Contending with highly politicized assumptions, Benoit’s research proposes inventive ways of navigating the politics of difference and connection through digital technologies.

Sharing a technique of machinima filmmaking, **Maria Giovanna Ciccari** uses digital recordings and interviews to structure conversations around how users simulate “*Forbidden Desires*” within the video game world of the Sims. Less of a social network, and more of a hyper-individualized simulated digital reality, the Sims promotes individual gameplay around pre-programmed landscapes and experiences. Ciccari investigates how women modify *Sims* gameplay to express unfulfilled desire related to experiences with fertility, childrearing, and domestic violence. Engaging with the politics and anthropology of gender, the film dives deeply into how virtual worlds can become a platform for the expression of desires repressed by the physical world. Although the mass-market video game is programmed to reproduce the gendered and classed dynamics of the patriarchal society it simulates, Ciccari emphasizes that players can bypass the limitations of the algorithm by modifying the game’s rules. These modifications of the code allow possibilities for expression beyond what is possible in the patriarchies we inhabit. Using screen recordings and interviews, Ciccari creates a shared conversation and thread of connection around the desires of women in an atomized (virtual) world.

Linked by a shared connection to digital technology, our politics and desires have become increasingly polarized and interconnected. Together, the contributors of this issue probe at how we can find space for collective agency beyond the neat control of big technology platforms. What particular forms of sociality emerge through technologies that, enable, yet constrain, our communication across digital space? Learn more in the sixth volume of the *Journal of Visual and Media Anthropology*.

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