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Technocultural worldings: dialectical dynamics in contemporary media landscapes

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ABSTRACT

In this piece, which frames the special issue “Technocultural worldings,” we build on previous editions of commentary and criticism in this journal. We propose a theoretically anchored way to systematically approach the dynamic, multidimensional, and heterogeneous technocultural communities that have created their own worldings and are engaged in complex dialectical dynamics within the contemporary media landscape. The technocultural communities that are part of these dialectical dynamics are constituted, on the one hand, by the complex collective sense-making of the emancipatory political programs of feminist and LGBTI+ initiatives and, on the other, by the retrogressive mobilizations of far-right and anti-gender movements. Hence, we argue that these worldings come into being due to the ability conferred by digital spaces to incorporate both material and virtual components in performances of gender and sexuality, in all their complex diversity. These issues are explored in more detail in eight articles, grouped into two discretely separate sections, one exploring emancipatory technocultural worldings, while the other describes retrogressive technocultural worldings.

KEYWORDS

Technocultural worldings; emancipatory political programs; retrogressive mobilizations; feminist and LGBTI+ initiatives; far-right and anti-gender movements

Introduction

This special issue continues the critical dialogue initiated in previous issues of commentary and criticism in *Feminist Media Studies* on feminism and hashtags in 2014 and 2015, and special issues focusing on “Digital Feminisms” (Christina Scharff, Carrie Smith-Prei and Maria Stehle 2016) and “Online Misogyny” (Debbie Ging and Eugenia Siapera 2018). In terms of our combined aim—to explore emancipatory and retrogressive technocultural worldings, as well as to identify and highlight the complex dialectical dynamics between them—we seek in particular to contribute to and deepen the discussions that took place in the special issue on “Digital Feminisms” which, among other things, illuminated how online feminist activism has drawn attention to the “relationship of personal experiences to structural inequalities and [...] the on-going precarity of individual female bodies in public spaces” (Scharff, Smith-Prei, and Stehle 2016, 6). In addition, we further expand the

critical insights provided by the special issue devoted to “Online Misogyny” (2018), which aimed “to identify and theorize the complex relationships between online culture, technology and misogyny” (Ging and Siapera 2018, 515). We argue that the present special issue further pursues two important avenues that were tentatively identified by our colleagues back then. The first has to do with “the need for organization and collective action in feminist digital activism” beyond “atomized, DIY approaches—whose successes and limitations” (Ging and Siapera 2018, 522) have been discussed in the contributions collected in the two abovementioned special issues. The second concerns the need for a systemic approach to conveying the complex collective sense-making that characterizes the exclusionary, sexist and misogynist, and anti-LGBTI+ mobilizations, given the fact that these phenomena, individually, “cannot be reduced to isolated antagonisms between individuals or to the outpourings of frustrated trolls (though it certainly does include these)” (Ging and Siapera 2018, 522). Ultimately, as the contributions to this special issue persuasively show, together they blend into one another, due to “the technological affordances of various platforms and their attendant (sub)cultures, which have served to augment, amplify, and polarize contemporary gender politics in an ongoing war of attrition” (Ging and Siapera 2018, 522–523). These dynamics create intricate modes of networked resistances, which cannot be reduced to “borderless” or placeless forms of politics, but need to be seen as a kind of politics that “create new kinds of localities for disruption, but also for solidarity and connection” (Scharff, Smith-Prei, and Stehle 2016, 10). Bearing this in mind, the present special issue endeavors to pursue these avenues in tandem, by proposing the overarching concept of *worldings* (David Trend 2016; Grant Jun Otsuki, Shiho Satsuka, Keiichi Omura and Atsuro Morita 2019a), in order to convey the ecological character of these dynamic, multidimensional, and heterogeneous technocultural communities. The following sections delve into a closer theoretical articulation of the concept, and explain its manifestation as a dialectical dynamic in contemporary media landscapes that develops into an intricate, reciprocal yet antagonist, relationship between the emancipatory and retrogressive mobilizations.

Technocultural worldings

In this special issue, we approach *worldings* as an overarching concept for exploring the specificities that characterize the ways in which these divergent actors connect and build communities, and give purpose and depth to their political programs. At a time of devastating militarized conflicts in various locations around the globe, a planetary environmental emergency, and assaults on democratic institutions at the hands of radical-right populists, the available toolkit for such political programs appears limited and insufficient, and may require the world as we know it to be *unbuilt*, in order for there to be any chance of making it anew. While *worldings* do indeed awaken associations with such a life-affirming potentiality, we do not assume *a priori* any positive valence in our conceptualizations of *worldings*. Instead, we set out to explore how imaginings of other worlds can enable political projects that are sometimes diametrically opposed: both the emancipatory political programs of feminist and LGBTI+ initiatives, and the retrogressive mobilizations of far-right and anti-gender movements. More precisely, we are interested in

understanding how such imaginings can bring shorter- or longer-term coalitions into novel, hybrid constellations, how they can work to define which futures are to be deemed thinkable and desirable, and how, in return, these shape the available toolkit for political action in the present, which is exercised to fulfil their respective political agendas.

Although “worlding” (Martin Heidegger 1962 [1927]) originally pertained to art as a form of being—“world” and “being” (*Dasein*)—more recently, postcolonial scholars have used the notion to illuminate how actors reimagine the globe through ontological multiplicity and asymmetrical worlds (Edward W. Said 1978; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 1985). As the idea of worlding began to be employed to explore postcolonial analytical landscapes, scholars have envisioned a world marked and transformed by the developments of colonization, de-colonization, and re-colonization (Spivak 1985). This entailed a recognition that particular geopolitical circumstances have brought a postcolonial world into being, and postcolonial theory is deployed in order to generate a reading of that world. From this point of departure, postcolonial scholars have illuminated the multiple worlds actualized at the margins of hegemonic worlds (Mei Zhan 2012; Sasha Su-Ling Welland 2018). The creation of worlds that exist alongside, or beyond, the dominant one, have been explored by researchers from different scholarly contexts, with a focus on worlding as a generative and critical practice, and paying attention to the establishment of meaningful relations with other beings and an openness to the world (Pheng Cheah 2014). In particular, scholars of linguistics and literature have shown that the emergence of world literature indicates such a possibility. They have theorized that the life of a literary work that circulates beyond its culture of origin generates a strengthened consciousness of the whole world (Theo D’haen Franco Moretti 2013; 2016).

While decolonial researchers have emphasized that the survival of “multiple worlds” (Robin Dunford 2017, 390) is threatened by attempts at colonialism at a global level (Arturo Escobar 2018), they have simultaneously deployed the concept of worldings to recognize the blending of different realities, such as the entanglement of modernity and indigeneity (Keiichi Omura, Grant Jun Otsuki, Shiho Satsuka, and Atsuro Morita 2019). Through the concept of “the world multiple” (Omura et al. 2019, 2), decolonial scholars have attempted to make sense of the compound and multi-layered realities that different people experience and live within. This includes indigenous people, but also other groups living outside, or at the margins, of the dominant world, for example through the exclusion from national agendas (Miriam Ticktin 2008; Omura et al. 2019). In this sense, worldings take shape as situated “figurings of relevant worlds,” articulations of who and what matters in a particular form of life (Anna Tsing 2010, 48). In contrast, geopolitical developments, and the crystallization of only a handful of superpowers in the aftermath of World War II, have led some literary and cultural scholars to express concerns that these developments could risk reducing multiple existences to a standardized world, through the imposition of a single literary culture and language (David Damrosch 2003; Erik Auerbach 2013). Meanwhile, other researchers have urged caution about the ever-increasing processes of globalization, alongside the advancement of the Internet, and highlighted the risks of continuing limitations on cultural, linguistic, and literary multiplicity through time/space compression (Rodolphe Gasché 2009; David Harvey 2005). This notwithstanding, by asking: “Who is it that experiences [the aforementioned time-space compression], and how?” and “Do we all benefit and suffer from it in the same way?” Doreen Massey (1991, 24) has suggested that such a characterization of time/space

compression may itself represent a western, colonizer's perspective. By demonstrating how communities can exist without being in the same place, exemplified by scattered networks of friends, by non-territorial religious, ethnic, or political communities, and by illuminating the different positions that people occupy within any community, Massey has emphasized the unlikeliness of experiencing a single sense of place. She has highlighted instead the specificity of place, derived from the understanding of each location as a "distinct *mixture* of wider and more local social relations" (1991, 29). Such wider, yet concomitantly more localized, social relations shape the theoretical foundations of our understanding of the concept of worlding, as a key concept for this special issue, addressing as it does the complex and multilayered realities that people, communities, and networks experience and are situated within (Browne, B. Sumita, Kath Niharika Banerjea, Leela Bakshi, Nick McGlynn, Rukmini Banerjee and Ranjita Biswas 2017; cf. Mia Liinason *Forthcoming*).

In order to delve deeper into the creative dimensions that allow such multiplicity and compound realities to appear, the present special issue focuses on the *technocultural worldings* that enable actors to establish the material and virtual connections necessary for sustaining emergent communities across distances, as well as within particular local sites. In this vein, rather than seeing the Internet as challenging the multiplicity of worlds, here we expand those previous scholarly contributions that have deployed the concept of worlding to explore the layers that emerge through the mixing of material and virtual worlds (Moya Bailey, Sarah Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles 2019; Trend 2016; Tara Conley 2017). To this end, we conceptualize the virtual as an embedded possibility that can inspire imaginaries of other worlds. Rather than understanding the virtual as separated from the material conditions of everyday reality, we suggest that virtual elements have a central presence in our daily lives by carrying an immanent potential. On digital platforms, the virtual presence of actors appears through the materiality of digital text, images, or videos, supported by the specific architecture of the digital platform being used (Ov Cristian Norocel 2022; Sama Khosravi Ooryad, Mia Liinason and Lisen Selander 2024; Mia Liinason *Forthcoming*). In these spaces, the virtual carries the potential to extend "the notions of reality and the context of action" (Rob Schields 2002, 79). We argue that it is precisely due to the ability to incorporate both material and virtual components in performances of gender and sexuality in digital spaces that such spaces can inspire new modes of subjectivity, establish transversal connections, and inspire new worlds, which emerge through the mixing of the material and the virtual.

Emancipatory technocultural worldings

Our concept of *emancipatory technocultural worldings* begins by recognizing the multiple tensions inherent in the notion of progressive modes of politics. In contradistinction to the dictionary's stipulated meaning of a progressive as a "person who supports new ideas and social change" (Cambridge Dictionary 2024), our skepticism about the notion of progress is rooted in a recognition of the problematic connections between ideas of progress and a number of violent political formations. These work, both separately and in tandem, to exploit and violently exclude populations through epistemic border work (Gayatri C. Spivak 1988; Thom Davies, Arshad Isakjee and Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik 2023), dispossess people from their lands and livelihoods (Dunford 2017; Harvey 2005),

and destroy relationships with nature and continuities with the past (Elizabeth Freeman 2005), through capital accumulation and extractivism (Enrique Dussel 2012; Veronia Gago 2020). Recognizing the close ties between notions of progress and diverse neocolonial and neoliberal developmentalist projects, pursued by state and private enterprises alike (Felix Butzlaff 2022), we share with abolition feminism and indigenous feminism an acknowledgement that state violence today has come to be used as a commonsense solution to the crises of capitalist development, which of necessity produces and requires inequality (Ruth Wilson Gilmore 2022). While these broader strands of exploitative and violent practices—in particular connected to precarious, informal, domestic and migrant workers, to women and LGBTI+ people, and to stateless and indigenous peoples—have often been kept apart in feminist critique, we follow theorizations arguing for the need to remap these conflicts from the starting point of the living body (Barbara Sutton 2010; Gago 2020). This allows us to understand the relationship between capital accumulation and heteropatriarchal and colonial violence as rooted in concrete and historical developments (Rita Segato 2003; Silvia Federicci 2004).

Building further on intersectional critiques with roots in broader strands of critical theory within post-Marxist, anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTI+ of color scholarship, we adopt *emancipation* as a concept to connect a critical analysis of historical and present structures of domination with struggles for social change (Amy Allen 2015; Diana Coole 2015; Paolo Rebughini 2015). Consequently, we retain the possibility of multiple options; that is, a world in which many worlds may co-exist, and anchor our notion of emancipatory struggles and critiques in a vision of a pluriversal world, with space for “many options, possible lives, livelihoods and cosmovisions” (Dunford 2017, 393). This is, and has to be, an open-ended project, informed by convivial dialogues among actors from across the globe (Paul Gilroy 2004).

In this context, we argue that one distinctive trait of contemporary feminist and LGBTI+ protest movements is the reconfigured role of bodies in collective struggles within entangled online—offline spaces: when bodies appear as memes and core parts of digital cultures, they become something more than flesh in networked modes of resistance (Khosravi Ooryad, Liinason, and Selander 2024). We find that digital artifacts, such as memes, despite their apparently ephemeral and frivolous character, can work as collaborative tools to support meaningful change as they are circulated, imitated, and transformed via digital platforms by many users (An Xiao Mina 2019; Sama Khosravi Ooryad *Forthcoming*). On this matter, Mina (2019) has built upon Limor Shifman’s (2013) definition to illuminate internet memes as highly visible digital objects that share some basic characteristics with each other, and are created with awareness of each other: memes are made to be seen. Highlighting the key distinction between a meme and a viral object, Mina has emphasized that internet memes are circulated, imitated, and/or transformed. These characteristics underline the potentiality of digital artifacts, in this case memes, to function as collaborative and connective tools in emancipatory struggles, allowing activists to imitate, transform, and circulate visuals, slogans, and even performances, within and across struggles, in order to create a sense of belonging, express solidarity, and support meaningful change.

Perhaps the most well-known example of such circulation in recent years is the multiple copies of the cutting of hair meme in the Woman—Life—Freedom movement. In its multiple renditions, this meme has also been transformed to include transversal

references to other struggles, such as the clenched fist from the #BLM movement, representing ethnic solidarity, or the red, white, green, and black colors of the Palestinian flag, to express solidarity with the people of Palestine, to name just two. Within these dynamics, a *technocultural lens* (Sanjay Sharma 2012) allows us to grasp these interconnections between the digital, the social, and the cultural, and to pay attention to the ways in which emancipatory collectives materialize—or not—through the technology of digital platforms.

The digital loci of emancipatory protest movements serve to build connections between actors across distances through the affordances of social media platforms such as the microblog *Twitter* now known as *X*, the image blog *Instagram*, and the amateur video platform *TikTok* (Sama Khosravi Ooryad Forthcoming; Onur Kiliç 2023; Yener Bayramoğlu 2021), or Chinese social media apps such as *WeChat*, the microblogging platform *Weibo*, and the Chinese equivalent of *TikTok*, *Douyin* (Shao Shao and Guanqin He 2024; Suay Melisa Özkula, Patricia Prieto-Blanco, Xuanxuan Tan and Norita Mdege 2024). Feminist scholars have explored the role of hashtags, hyperlinks, and other metadata, as well as the remixing of slogans, visuals, and goals in facilitating the creation of a community and collective belonging on these platforms, enabling the building of networked activism (Shana MacDonald, Brianna I. Wiens, Michelle Macarthur and Milena Radzikowska 2021; Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg 2020; Jessica Ringrose and Emilie Lawrence 2018).

Onook Oh, Chanyoung Eom and H. R. Rao (2015) demonstrate the agential capacity of digital technology to shape sense-making processes, suggesting that the hashtag works as a technolinguistic grammar to build ambient affiliation and a sense of belonging among actors. Moreover, as a DIY video platform, *YouTube* has popularized the emergence of participatory cultures and connects actors in digital space through highly specialized personalization algorithms and engagement by actors. *YouTube* and *TikTok*, which enable the sharing of events and commentaries from an insider and grassroots perspective to be circulated across the globe, without intervention from an editor (Jane Arthurs, Sophia Drakopoulou and Alessandro Gandini 2018), are examples of digital loci that encourage activists to also perceive their own everyday activities as filmable and shareable online. Meanwhile, those activists emerge as an assemblage of interconnected subjects, connected through the affordances of these DIY video platforms.

In this way, the digital ecologies of emancipatory protest movements draw upon visibility and a remixing of messages, slogans, and visuals as key tactics, and unfold via online—offline entanglements. These can be seen, for example, through the massive, mediated revolts that have established transversal connections between protestors within and across diverse movements such as *Black Lives Matter* (Michael Cholbi, Hogan Brandon, Madva Alex and Yost Benjamin 2021), the *Woman—Life—Freedom Movement* (Sama Khosravi Ooryad 2022), *NiUnaMenos/International Feminist Strike* (Anna Laura Rodríguez Gustá and Elizabeth J. Friedman 2023; Raquel Guitérrez Aguilar 2018 and Veronica Gago), and the *Umbrella Movement* (Ngok Ma and Edmund W. Cheng 2019), which are simultaneously situated in physical space and connected across diverse digital platforms (Khosravi Ooryad, Liinason, and Selander 2024).

Emancipatory feminist and LGBTI+ actors also engage in more subtle or hidden ways to facilitate community-building and activism. Through the notion of refracted publics, Crystal Abidin (2021) shows how social media platforms can allow minority

groups to build fragmented publics on less-visible sites on digital platforms. These can support the organization of resistance in new ways through encouraging in-group discussions or the sharing of selective information to insiders. Previously, *Tumblr* functioned as such a site while, in today's platform ecologies, *Discord*, *Signal*, and *Telegram* are the prime sites to gather emancipatory activists who, for different reasons, prefer to connect but maintain a low(er) profile (Nadia 2024). On these sites, there may also be openings for what Thung-Hui Hu (2022) discusses as forms of "inaction, such as loitering online, feeling stuck, or quiet quitting," which can work as tactics for moving away from the values of "productivity and (self)-growth promoted by digital capitalism" (Johannes Zeller and Tung-Hui Hu 2023, np).

As the first group of contributions to this special issue show, these collective online actions emerge within the diverse and overlapping contexts of a rise in mediated anti-feminism (Khosravi Ooryad 2024a), visual misogyny (Özkula et al. 2024), anti-feminism, nationalism, and online misogyny (Shao and He 2024), as well as in contexts of increasing right-wing authoritarianism (Kiliç 2024). As these contributions make clear, in the contexts of these emancipatory protest mobilizations, feelings of anxiety and fear are prominent due to online surveillance regimes. Simultaneously, as the authors highlight, these forms of digital feminism and LGBTI+ activism have the potential to challenge anti-feminist hate, misogyny, homo-, queer-, and transphobia, and to cultivate community-building and solidarity in local and transnational contexts. In this special issue, by deploying the concept of emancipatory technocultural worldings, the contributions highlight key practices and tactics of collective grassroots feminist and LGBTI+ activism for structuring these resistances, as they connect and build networks across digital platforms.

Retrogressive technocultural worldings

When we look closely at the conceptual construct of *retrogressive technocultural worldings*, a few theoretical clarifications are necessary. To begin with, this composite construct rests on the theoretical insights provided by the concept of "retrogressive mobilization" (Ov Cristian Norocel and Ionela Băluță 2023; Ov Cristian Norocel and Katarina Pettersson 2023). Retrogressive mobilization has been deployed to theorize a form of socio-political mobilization that aims to "'normalize' inequalities, hollow out public welfare provision, and reinstate real or imagined gender, social, or racial hierarchies" (Gisela Zaremborg, Constanza Tabbush and Elisabeth Jay Friedman 2021, 528). It engages a "complex assemblage of political parties (both mainstream conservative right and radical-right populist parties), religious institutions [. . .], conservative civil-society organizations (militating against women's reproductive rights or against equal marriage rights [. . .]) and far-right groups preoccupied with safeguarding the majority population's ethnic and racial purity" (Norocel and Pettersson 2023, 6). At the heart of retrogressive mobilization, we argue, stands a fierce opposition to emancipatory feminist policies, which are disparagingly labelled "gender ideology" (Dorit Geva 2021; Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk 2022; Ov Cristian Norocel and David Paternotte 2023; David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar 2018). This notwithstanding, several scholars have aptly noted that there is an intricate relationship between such opposition to "gender ideology," which engages a wide array of entities entangled in "opportunistic synergies" (Graff and Korolczuk 2022), and far-right mobilization. Indeed, these two are rather discretely distinct projects, which

may be convergent or compete with one another in different political contexts (Norocel and Paternotte 2023, 126; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018, 13–14).

When we look closer, the concept of retrogressive mobilization displays a certain theoretical overlap with that of “heteroactivism” (Kath Browne and Catherine Nash 2020; Mia Liinason 2023), with which it shares the advocacy of normative gender and sexual orders; however, it is more stringent in its emphasis on the use and refashioning of the past to serve contemporary political aims. We also wish to make another observation here. In our view, the concept of retrogressive mobilization and the manner in which “progressive politics” are given empirical and sometimes conceptual consistency are not necessarily exclusive or complementary. More clearly, the entire media presence of certain political entities centers on their alleged pursuit of “the progressive agenda,” which is then presented as embodying an inescapable “golden path” towards continuous progress projected into the future. This is concomitantly discursively codependent with retrogressive mobilization, which these entities formally oppose, by maintaining the status quo of working within the neoliberal paradigm (cf. Charles Devellennes 2023, 9–10; Nancy Fraser 2016, 281–284). Bearing this observation in mind, we argue that, in order to better understand the complexity of the matter, we need to conceptualize such retrogressive mobilization as accompanied by and mirrored in an emancipatory mobilization, whereby these antagonistic camps resort to related communication strategies and political toolkits for mutually exclusive ends. In so doing, we are indebted to the critical scholarship that has deployed the metaphor of the double helix as a model to visualize the intricate, reciprocal yet antagonistic, relationship between them, which must account for each other’s presence in constant interaction, in both national and international contexts (Phillip M. Ayoub and Kristina Stöckl 2024).

In this context, it is noteworthy that such retrogressive mobilization is driven by metapolitical ambitions. Metapolitics convey the attempt to gradually shift and reconfigure the attitudes and boundaries of the wider public sphere and recast the relationship between politics and the political towards establishing an alternative cultural and ideological hegemony (Patrik Hermansson, David Lawrence, Joe Mulhall and Simon Murdoch 2020, 107; Louise Knops and Benjamin De Cleen 2019, 168; Norocel 2022, 1; Jan Zienkowski 2019, 13). From this point of view, we argue that metapolitics entail a long-term and programmatic attempt to open up the public sphere to the influence and gradual prominence of specific counterpublics (Jonas Kaiser 2017; Susanne Reinhardt 2023a). These counterpublics embrace a retrogressive approach to politically and morally polarized issues, adopt an oppositional attitude to the manner in which the issue in question is interpreted within the public sphere, or claim to be excluded from making their position known to the public sphere although they possess their own media (Kaiser 2017; Reinhardt 2023a). It is important to specify here that anti-democratic, retrogressive metapolitics are founded upon a “perennial imagery of fixed gender roles and racial homogeneity,” which in turn is “injected with [an] explicit rhetoric of victimhood and betrayal” (Joshua Paul 2021, 14). They encompass vastly intricate “configurations of anti-egalitarian, anti-democratic, authoritarian, fascist, xenophobic, racist, ethno-nationalist, anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic, anti-LGBTI+, antigender, reactionary and hierarchical agendas” (Kathleen Blee 2020, 416).

It is interesting to note here the digital loci of these retrogressive metapolitics, which, in the digitally interconnected contemporary context, play an increasingly

pivotal role in both cementing support among their followers, advocates, and patrons, and recruiting new supporters, especially among younger generations (Stephane J. Baele, Lewy Brace and Travis G. Coan 2023; Anna Krasteva and Gabriella Lazaridis 2016; Ico Maly 2019; Robert A. Saunders, Rhys Crilley and Precious N. Chatterje-Doody 2022). Among these, important positions are occupied by public-facing discussion forums (such as *Reddit*, *4Chan*, and *8Chan*, which are geared towards a global community of users who resort to English as their primary medium of communication; and *ActiveNews*, which is curated for a more localized community of Romanian-language users, or *Homma(forum)*, which services the even smaller community of Finnish-language users), mainstream social platforms (such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, or *TikTok*), and alternative microblogging social platforms (such as *Garb*, *Truth Social*, and increasingly in more recent times *X* previously known as *Twitter*), blogs and internet sites of the various entities mentioned above (for example *Arktos (Media)*, which publishes and popularizes English translations of European far-right literature), and the user communities built around them (such as *The Right Stuff*, an invitation-only dating app catering to USA conservatives) (cf. Baele, Brace, and Coan 2023, 1601–1602; Ov Cristian Norocel 2023, 4; Richard Rogers 2020, 214–215). This does not mean, however, that these digital loci for retrogressive mobilization are compartmentalized or isolated; rather, they are enmeshed within a composite ecology, which is dynamic, multidimensional, and heterogeneous, with diffuse boundaries between it and the public sphere. Consequently, by deploying the composite concept of retrogressive technocultural worldings, our ambition in the present special issue is to convey the centrality of gender as a logic for structuring these intricate digital ecologies.

Dialectical dynamics in contemporary media landscapes

As highlighted in the contributions to this special issue, emancipatory and retrogressive technocultural worldings interact with each other in complex ways. The dialectical dynamics engaging these two technocultural worldings emerge as the opposing party picks up the slogans, images, and even the goals of its counterpart following a double helix pattern (Ayoub and Stöckl 2024). To further explore and deepen our insights into these dialectical dynamics, the present special issue offers in-depth analyses of both emancipatory and retrogressive networking practices, political tactics, and visions.

Four original contributions explore the contours of emancipatory technocultural worldings. To begin with, in their contribution, Shao and He (2024) examine the consequences of censorship on *Weibo*, through an analysis of account bombing, and the resulting experiences of enforced disappearance and resilience. In these cases, the user account remains logged in and its content accessible, but its interaction capabilities are disabled and it is publicly displayed as an invalid account, showing “content does not exist.” Shao and He metaphorically employ the concept of “living ghosts,” and scrutinize how digital feminists continue to perform after their account bombing. Through in-depth interviews, they explore feminists’ responses to online disappearance, their engagement with platform censorship, and new feminist sense-making strategies. By way of conclusion, the article argues that the cultivation of ambiguous multiplicities allows Chinese feminists to develop innovative strategies, hybrid activism, and alternative narratives that extend beyond conventional forms of resistance.

Next, Özkula et al. (2024) analyze the potential of feminist methodologies for critically examining the new visualities of gendered hate. Such expressions, the authors show, emerge at the intersection of social media, participatory cultures, platform logics, and affective media practices. Across four case studies, the authors explore how the gendered dynamics of opposition collectively build imaginaries of visual misogyny. They develop detailed analyses of: (i) content moderation of visual gender violence; (ii) critical visual creation and performance of gender identities, i.e., exploitation through stereotyping (of women, femaleness, and femininity), diminishing, branding, falsifying, reinforcing imaginaries, and movement-hijacking; (iii) the role of aesthetics and design in gender violence; and (iv) feminist research ethics in visual misogyny. In conclusion, the article argues in favor of deploying feminist approaches to analyze such dynamics of hate, because feminist methodologies enable a critical examination of visual expressions in the face of platformed visual misogyny.

After this, Khosravi Ooryad (2024a) examines the emerging Farsi meme-feminism that is being deployed against the rise of mediated anti-feminism in Iran. Embedded within broader global struggles, tactics, and forms of networked feminism and aesthetic intervention, Khosravi Ooryad uses the notion “memeing back” as both a tactic and a concept in order to unpack the transnational interconnectivity of shared global and local humorous vernaculars, image-making, and solidarity expressed via feminist reconfigurations of new media aesthetics. While recognizing the oppressive and exploitative functions of digital technologies and mainstream digital platforms toward marginalized bodies, Khosravi Ooryad highlights that the emerging meme-feminism in the Iranian context illuminates how memes can act as political tools for a structural, satirical critique of anti-feminism and the socioeconomic inequalities impacting women and marginalized bodies in Iran. In such meme-feminism, the article finds, the anonymity, the novel aesthetic visibility, and the collective nature are distinct features that signal the important, and new, political development of networked, community-oriented, and world-building collective feminist digital activism.

In the last contribution exploring emancipatory technocultural worldings in this special issue, Kiliç (2024) digital ethnographic study explores the first-ever digital-only Pride events in Turkey and elsewhere in 2020. Focusing on transformations in LGBTI+ resistance in everyday cultures, Kiliç considers subtle and temporal interventions as transformative for resistance cultures. He analyses the dissonances within everyday activism, examines affective solidarities in the digital, and explores the contested nature of the digital as a space for resistance. Using multi-sited ethnography, Kiliç thinks beyond national or rural—urban boundaries and online—offline divisions, and brings Turkish-speaking queer bodies together from a variety of locations and working across different digital platforms (*Zoom*, *YouTube*, and *Instagram*). Recognizing that silosociality in digital spaces can increase the participatory potential of sexual citizens, Kiliç argues that an online presence not only causes a blurring of safety/visibility boundaries but also provides flexibility. To this end, Kiliç finds transformative potential in the “grey zone” between contentious and subtle activism, where mass visibility is not the only measure of social change.

In addition to the above, the present special issue contains four original contributions that map the complex contours of retrogressive technocultural worldings across different digital loci and in various settings (Mareike Fenja Bauer 2023; Băluță 2023; Susanne Reinhardt 2023b; Henry Price 2023). These analyses deploy varying methodological

apparatuses: qualitative approaches, borrowing freely from netnography and discourse analytical perspectives (Bauer 2023; Price 2023); quantitative methods, blending quantitative content analysis and social network analysis (Reinhardt 2023b); and mixed-methods approaches (Băluță 2023). They focus on diverse digital loci for retrogressive metapolitics, such as platforms and discussion forums with a global reach (Bauer 2023; Price 2023), or localized language communities and national media ecologies (Băluță 2023; Reinhardt 2023b).

In her contribution, Bauer (2023) examines how female anti-feminist influencers engage in metapolitics, and how the anti-feminist practices of metapolitics unfold within visual social media content. She deploys multimodal content analysis and netnography to contribute new insights to the study of metapolitics and political influencers. Applying network media logic as an analytical lens, Bauer focuses on three female anti-feminist influencers and their metapolitical practices on *TikTok*. Bauer shows that female anti-feminist influencers use different practices to metapoliticize their (supposedly) private lives and commodify their anti-feminist worldview. For their anti-feminist metapolitics, they use and bypass the technological affordances of the platform. Hashtags in particular, Bauer further argues, play a crucial role in framing content politically. While sharing their (supposedly) private lives and introducing their audience to anti-feminist ideas and other anti-feminist actors, these influencers are constantly engaging in a complex interplay of concealing their political agenda and disseminating explicit political messages.

In his article, Price (2023) provides a detailed analysis of the Incel phenomenon, which is an extreme manifestation of misogyny and antifeminism. Price develops existing understandings of the phenomenon, and contextualizes Incel as the product of a painful embracing of neoliberal ideas about market outcomes and social value, which are expressed through the practices and rhetoric associated with gender relations in this era, with an emphasis on its gendered metapolitical constitution and vision. He draws attention to the Incel worldview's interpretation of the neoliberal era as uniformly pro-feminist, and notes how, in doing so, it collapses the distinction between women, feminists, and elite power. This informs the Incel self-ascription of *transgressive* and *emancipatory* qualities, which serve as additional animating logics for the Incel hatred of feminism, feminists, and women. Price concludes by arguing that this approach enables an understanding of the Incel phenomenon and the role of antifeminism and misogyny within it.

Next, in her contribution, Reinhardt (2023b) explores the epistemic dimension of current struggles over issues of gender and sexual equality in Germany. She compares the representation and production of gender knowledge in legacy and counterpublic media discourses within four dimensions related to the article-content level: (i) the media's issue focus; (ii) its positioning toward gender issues; (iii) its referencing practices through hyperlinks, an affordance that is unique to digital spaces; and finally, (iv) the digital information ecologies created through these referencing practices. For this purpose, she conducts a quantitative content analysis and social network analysis of the content and hyperlink references in articles featuring gender issues. Reinhardt clearly shows that anti-egalitarian, counterpublic media display a rather reactive mode of gender knowledge production, while feminist media's mode of gender knowledge production is more autonomous. The digital information ecologies created through the hyperlink

references display varying levels of integration and fragmentation in relation to the mainstream public sphere, indicative of the underlying epistemic conflicts.

Last, but not least, in her article, Băluță (2023) analyzes the role of radical-right digital media in alternative gender knowledge production, and reflects critically upon the challenges it poses for feminist and LGBTI+ local struggles for recognition and representation. Băluță deploys mixed research methods to examine the discursive articulations of gender on the Romanian-language discussion forum *ActiveNews*, and their intersectional dynamics with sexuality, religion, and national identity. In addition, she explores the (normative) assumptions that underpin alternative knowledge claims about gender on the forum. Băluță highlights that anti-gender campaigns endeavor to create a specific worlding centered on alternative gender knowledge, wherein digital media plays a key role. She argues that the alternative gender knowledge fabricated by *ActiveNews* seeks to discredit empirical data and the conceptualization of gender, sexuality, and family as socially constructed and historically malleable. The anti-gender tropes serve a retrogressive worlding that does not accommodate either gender as an analytical category or non-normative gender displays and sexuality.

In conclusion, the present special issue aims to provide both conceptual and empirical consistency to the dialectical dynamics at work in contemporary media landscapes. The pieces outlined above examine the varying contours of both emancipatory and retrogressive technocultural worldings, by focusing on multi-sited digital ecologies, encompassing discussion forums and social platforms (such as *Instagram*, *TikTok*, *X* previously known as *Twitter*, and *Weibo*), zooming in on national settings across the world (such as China, Germany, Iran, Romania, and Turkey), and also focusing on transnational contexts. We hope that the readership of *Feminist Media Studies* will find the contributions collected in this special issue empirically detailed and analytically persuasive, and that they help to advance our knowledge on these pressing matters.

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