

Editorial

Sociality and Digitality: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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The articles gathered in this Special Issue emerge from a collaborative inquiry over a period of seven years into one of the defining questions of our time: what does it mean to be social, to belong, and to seek recognition in an age of pervasive digital connectivity? This question, we believe, acquires particular urgency and texture when asked from the vantage point of Africa. Across the continent, digital and mobile technologies have proliferated at a remarkable speed, reshaping how people communicate, organise, socialise, mourn, laugh, protest, and imagine futures. Yet the terms on which this transformation is theorised—and by whom—remain contested. This Special Issue is an attempt to shift that conversation, to insist that Africa is not merely a site where global digital trends play out, but a place where digitality itself is being remade (Akpan, 2024).

The intellectual foundations of this issue lie in a Mellon Foundation-funded project based at the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University in South Africa, which ran from 2018 to 2024. Over those seven years, a community of postgraduate students and academics investigated what new forms of sociality were being facilitated by increasing digital and mobile use in African contexts. The project was animated by a double attentiveness: to the rapidly changing digital environment and to the no less rapidly changing socio-political environment in which African citizens are embedded (Chuma, 2021). Many of those citizens continue to live under conditions of coloniality where the structures, hierarchies, and exclusions inherited from colonial and apartheid histories persist, even as formal political independence has long been achieved (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Democracy, in many places, functions in name only (Toumaras, 2025). It was into this layered, contested terrain that the project asked: what do digital affordances make possible? How are mobile and social media being used not merely to communicate, but to constitute new forms of selfhood, community, and political association?

The call for papers that generated this collection was deliberately broad in its theoretical reach, while specific in its geographical and political orientation. We invited contributions that probed the intersections of media and social belonging; social media and new socialities; coloniality and digitality; youth and self-expression; digital wellbeing; and new forms of political association and action. We were particularly attentive to the materiality of digital devices and networks—the infrastructural conditions under which connectivity is possible or impossible—and to the methodological questions that arise when studying digitality in contexts of deep inequality. What the contributors to this issue share, across their considerable disciplinary and methodological diversity, is a refusal to treat digital media as neutral tools and a commitment to understanding digital life as always already entangled with histories of power, recognition, and struggle (Schoon et al., 2020).

The articles assembled here are united by a concern with the politics of belonging in digital spaces, while ranging widely in their geographical focus, their platforms of analysis, and the social groups they foreground. Several contributions focus centrally on youth



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as social media users, as content creators, as political actors, and as people navigating precarious economic circumstances. Boshoff and colleagues open the collection with a methodologically inventive study of sixteen young adults living in an under-resourced Eastern Cape township, drawing on the mobile diary method to capture the texture of everyday digitality. Their findings, organised around the thematic nodes of waitthood, music, fakes, and wellbeing, reveal the complexity and richness of township digital life, resisting simplistic narratives of either digital empowerment or digital exclusion. Khupe's study of WhatsApp memes among youth in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, offers a complementary perspective, demonstrating through Habermas and Bakhtin how apparently light-hearted digital humour carries genuine political weight, enabling young people to challenge official narratives and participate in socio-political life on their own terms. Adefemi and Mutanga extend the attention to youth into the realm of the creator economy, examining how South African student influencers on TikTok and Instagram adapt global monetisation strategies to local conditions of inequality, limited platform access, and resource constraint. These are findings that speak to the broader need for context-sensitive approaches to digital entrepreneurship in the Global South.

A second thread running through this issue is the relationship between digitality and coloniality, particularly the ways in which digital platforms both reproduce and, at moments, disrupt the legacies of colonial and racial hierarchy (Mejias & Couldry, 2024; Yusuff, 2025). Aiseng's analysis of Black Twitter's global response to the death of Queen Elizabeth II offers a compelling demonstration of digital space as a site of counter-memory and racial identity politics. Through digital ethnography on X (formerly Twitter), Aiseng traces how Black users worldwide resisted respectability politics, refused the erasure of colonial history, and fashioned new forms of solidary knowledge-making in real time. McBrown's article on the Chidimma Adetshina case (the xenophobic social media backlash against a contestant in Miss South Africa 2024) brings the lens of decolonial theory to bear on intra-Black xenophobia, revealing how the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being shapes who is accorded full belonging even in post-apartheid South Africa. Together, these articles insist that digital platforms are not post-racial spaces; they are arenas in which the afterlives of colonialism are actively contested.

Gender and representation constitute a third major concern of the issue. Thatelo's analysis of online political advertisements from the ANC, DA, and EFF across the 2009 and 2024 election cycles deploys an Africana Womanist framework to examine how Black women are visually represented in South African digital campaign content. The findings—that Black women continue to be cast as maternal figures, labourers, and symbols of poverty and underdevelopment even as parties ostensibly campaign on platforms of change—speak to the durability of patriarchal representation even in new media forms. Muringa and Ndlovu's systematic review of the literature on media coverage of women politicians across Southern Africa (2000–2025) maps the persistence of gendered framing across the region: emotional over rational, personal over policy, crisis-appropriate rather than leadership-capable. Against this discouraging landscape, the review does identify emerging counter-currents in resistance journalism and feminist digital narratives. Battisti and Dalvit's article on TikTok introduces a different dimension of digital representation, examining intersectional ableism through a case study of jokes targeting Black women with disabilities. Their finding that ableist microaggressions are both naturalised and difficult to detect (precisely because humour operates as cultural cover) underscores the need for more nuanced analytical frameworks for studying subtle forms of digital discrimination.

The issue also attends to questions of language, media ecology, and democratic possibility. Ajala and colleagues' study of Yoruba-language podcasting, employing natural language processing of user-generated content alongside in-depth interviews with pod-

cast hosts, illuminates both the promise and the limits of digital platforms as vehicles for indigenous language preservation and community-building. The study finds genuine potential in that the podcast generates social identity formation and community among learners, but also points to structural obstacles, including the absence of standardised curricula and the underdevelopment of monetisation models for indigenous-language digital content. Salawu and Adeyeye's examination of the Alaròy newspaper's transition to digital platforms traces a more institutional story of media transformation, showing how an indigenous Yoruba newspaper has navigated the shift to digital distribution while seeking to maintain both its commercial viability and its cultural mission. Maodza's case study of Zimbabwe's Daily News offers a sobering counterpoint: investigating how the newspaper framed the 31 March 2025 anti-Mnangagwa protests, the article finds evidence of media capture by pro-regime forces, documenting the erosion of press independence and the narrowing of democratic discourse in a country still seeking political pluralism.

Across these contributions, there is considerable methodological diversity. The study of digitality in the Global South requires methodological innovation, because the populations, platforms, and practices involved do not always conform to assumptions built into research methods developed elsewhere. The articles in this issue include mobile diary methods, digital ethnography, natural language processing and sentiment analysis, systematic review following PRISMA protocols, qualitative interpretive case studies, Africanist analytical frameworks, and combined textual and content analysis. This methodological pluralism is itself a form of intellectual argument: that understanding African digital life in its full complexity demands tools sensitive enough to capture that complexity.

Taken together, the articles in this issue make a collective contribution to our understanding of digital sociality in Africa. They demonstrate that digital and social media are not simply imported technologies that change African life from the outside; they are being actively shaped, repurposed, and contested by African users who bring to them the full weight of their histories, identities, aspirations, and structural conditions. The questions this research raises, about belonging, recognition, exclusion, expression, and power, are not peculiar to Africa. But they are asked here with a specificity and a groundedness that enriches the global conversation. We offer this collection in the conviction that the Global South has not merely lessons to learn from digital modernity, but lessons to teach it.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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