Call for papers for a Special Issue in New Media and Society

Alt Tech Platforms: Into the Mirror Worlds of Reactionary Digital Media

Deadline for abstract submission: November 30th

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Please send your abstracts to AltTechNMS@gmail.com

While much scholarly attention in recent years has been focussed on giant social media platforms' responsibility to police their content, a potentially more consequential development has been less well noticed: the systematic creation of a whole set of parallel, though much less regulated, online worlds. As platforms have taken a more aggressive stance towards content moderation, following successive misinformation scandals, 'deplatformed' content producers have migrated to 'Alt-Tech' platforms (Rogers, 2020), that have emerged as a critical infrastructure for reactionary movements from the alt-right to anti-vaxers (Donovan et al., 2019, Birchall & Knight 2023), whose politics are driven less by politicians than by 'media-of-one' creators (DiResta 2024) and 'ideological entrepreneurs' (Finlayson, 2023). In order to theorize these dynamics and accurately track them in a fluid and changeable informational ecosystem, we see the need for conceptual and methodological innovation.

Drawing from Naomi Klein's (2023) study of online political realignment in the aftermath of the pandemic, this Special Issue uses the metaphor of 'mirror worlds' to consider how Alt Tech platforms seem to offer complete worldviews, ranging from health and wellness to cultural criticism, films, games and sport. Moreover, it is not uncommon to encounter modes of argument in these mirror worlds that reappropriate aspects of 'left theory' (Di Leo & McClennan 2023) — despite their political objectives usually being diametrically opposed. We propose the metaphor as a way to think about specific Alt Tech platforms (including Gab, Rumble, 4Chan, Bitchute and Telegram), to consider the dynamics that connect them to mainstream media, to rethink the relationship between the fringe and mainstream (as with the seeming transformation of Twitter/X into an Alt Tech platform following its acquisition by Elon Musk) and to address new and understudied developments (such as the weaponization of AI by extremists).[1]

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[1] See for example https://www.wired.com/story/neo-nazis-are-all-in-on-ai/

At its core, the call responds to the challenge to 'rethink' and 're-contextualize' political communication studies' 'functionalist' legacy of concepts to empirically study 'disrupted' 21st C media environments characterised by 'complexity and communication abundance' (Bennett & Pfetsch 2018). To go beyond the linear transmission model of 20th C 'legacy media', how do we rethink these disrupted public spheres in more multi-directional, symbolic, ritualistic and above all materialist terms? How do Alt Tech platforms mirror and distort the idealised Habermasian rational public sphere? How are they reflecting back mainstream/liberal and progressive idea(l)s, values, and forms of communication? How are the technologies and infrastructures of Alt Tech constructed, mobilised and used? What are the contours of the 'mirror worlds' they generate? What tools, conceptual and empirical, do we need to capture these worlds? And what may be the socio-political repercussions of these 'mirror-worlds'?

We invite contributions that address (but which are not necessarily limited) to:

- Theoretical approaches to Alt Tech, disrupted public spheres and mirror worlds
- Methodologies for tracing narrative flows within and between Alt Tech
- Alt Tech platform walkthroughs and comparative studies
- Alt Tech algorithms, users and publics
- Cross platform ethnographies
- Event-based case studies (e.g. Alt Tech & the 2024 UK anti-migration riots)
- Ideological entrepreneurs and new reactionary digital politics
- 'Follow the money': political economic perspectives.
- 'Do your own research': amateur, populist social theory
- Alt narratives, beyond mis/disinformation, propaganda & FIMI
- Alt Tech oppositional readings and debunking of mainstream media
- Generative AI development and deployment in Alt Tech platforms

Timeline

- November 30, 2024: Deadline for submissions
- December 20, 2024: 10-12 abstracts selected for full submission
- April 30, 2025: Deadline for full manuscript submission

References

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Birchall, C. & P. Knight (2023). *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of Covid-19*. Routledge

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DiResta, R. (2024) *Invisible Rulers: The People Who Turn Lies into Reality*. Public Affairs

Donovan J, Lewis B, Friedberg B (2019) Parallel ports: Sociotechnical change from the Alt-Right to Alt-Tech. In: Fielitz M, Thurston N (eds) *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right:*

Online Actions and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US. Bielefeld, Germany, Transcript, 49–65.

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Klein, N. (2023). *Doppelganger: A Trip Into the Mirror World*. Knopf Canada.

Rogers, R. (2020). Deplatforming: Following extreme Internet celebrities to Telegram and alternative social media. *European Journal of Communication*, *35*(3), 213-229.