

Darkness to hyper-visibility: exploring promotional and creator cultures of social media

HDR Workshop: Wednesday 12 November

Symposium: Thursday 13 November to Friday 14 November

Social media's promotional cultures are created not just by advertisers and brands, but also creators, influencers, public figures, and everyday users. These platforms operate on systems of visibility and algorithmic recommendation, requiring all users to engage in promotional practices to be seen, heard, and valued. In doing so, they blur the boundaries between public and private life, branding and authenticity, visibility and obscurity.

This two-day symposium is hosted by the **Centre for Digital Cultures and Societies**, featuring the Tom O'Regan Fellowship Lecture, supported by the **Tom O'Regan Fellowship** and the **School of Communication and Arts**, UQ. It explores the visibility games at the heart of social media's promotional and creator cultures. From influencers and everyday users to advertisers and automated algorithms, everyone on digital platforms is caught in the dynamics of being seen, being hidden, or being unknowingly profiled. What does it mean to be hyper-visible? What does it mean to stay in the algorithmic dark?

See the full program for the event below.

Wednesday 12 November – The Writer's Studio, Level 6 Michie Building

In addition to the symposium, PhD students and ECRs are invited to take part in a standalone workshop facilitated by Dr Kelley Cotter on 12 November as part of the Tom O'Regan Memorial Fellowship. The workshop will explore how social media platforms, and their algorithms shape the construction of identity, influencing not only what users encounter but also how they come to understand themselves and others.

Workshop title: *"Does the Algorithm Know Me Better Than I Know Myself?" Integrating Algorithmic Feeds into Research*

Time: 10am – 1pm, followed by lunch

In this workshop, participants will investigate how social media platforms and their algorithms shape the construction of identity, influencing not only what users encounter but also how they come to understand themselves and others. We will critically engage with concepts of algorithmic identities (Cheney-Lippold, 2011; 2017) and algorithmized selves (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022), asking what they reveal, obscure, or misrepresent about lived experiences and self-making practices. Through a blend of conceptual grounding and hands-on activities, participants will collaboratively analyze social media feeds to consider how users and brands leverage platform features to signal identity, how they attune themselves to algorithms, as well as how algorithmic curation makes certain identity characteristics salient. Guided discussions will extend this inquiry to questions of algorithmic responsiveness (Taylor & Choi, 2022) and the prismatic refraction and diffraction of identity across feeds (Lee et al., 2022). The workshop will conclude by focusing on methodological practice, helping participants cultivate strategies for incorporating social media content and feeds into research designs, including ethical considerations.

Please visit <https://bit.ly/algofeedworkshop> for optional suggested readings and pre-workshop activity instructions. Register here: <https://events.humanitix.com/kelley-cotter-hdr-workshop>

Thursday 13 November – UQ Brisbane City Campus

Start	Finish	Session
8:30am	9:00am	Registrations and Arrival coffee & tea
9:00am	9:30am	Opening Remarks – Darkness to hypervisibility <i>Amy Dobson and Nic Carah</i>
9:30am	10:40am	Panel 1 - How creators do what they do <i>Amanda Lotz</i> Darkness of microculture <i>Emily van der Nagel</i> The Tease: Visibility on OnlyFans <i>Bingxi Huang</i> Vulgarly as a Form of “Digital Suicide Bombing”: Chinese Rural Women’s Self-Deprecating Humour on Short-Video Platforms
10:40am	11:00am	Morning Tea
11:00am	12:10pm	Panel 2 – Creator personas <i>Yuchen Song</i> When Algorithmic Visibility Becomes Manipulative: Exploring TV Series Marketing on Douyin <i>Anthea Taylor and Margaret Henderson</i> Making an Authorial Persona in Digital Times: Women Writers, Platforms and Gendered Labour <i>Mona Rayaprolu</i> Internet celebrity meets AIGC: from AI clones to AI fan fiction
12:10pm	1:20pm	Panel 3 – Virtual visibilities <i>Rachel Berryman</i> Making the Virtual (Hyper)Visible: Towards a Theory of Hypervirtuality <i>Kiah Hawker and Julia Coffey</i> Automating faces: Filters and the data gaze in visual AI <i>Chenxue Guo</i> Traditional Chinese Culture Meets Generative AI on Platforms: Rethinking Authenticity in AI-generated visual content
1:20pm	2:00pm	Lunch
2:00pm	3:40pm	Panel 4 – Dark trades <i>Ian Goodwin and Antonia Lyons</i> Influencers promoting their own alcohol brands on Instagram: From darkness to hyper-visibility <i>Steven Threadgold</i> – Financialised Gimmicks: The Gamified Aesthetics of Buy-Now-Pay-Later Platforms <i>Andrea Alarcón</i> Encoding ambiguity: dropshipping as platform-dependent supply chains <i>Maria Gemma Brown</i> A guide to playing on “slopmode”: Slop, scams and gambling on social media platforms
3:40pm	4:00pm	Afternoon tea

4:00pm	5:00pm	Tom O'Regan Fellowship Lecture <i>Kelly Cotter</i> Platform Epistemology: Shaping Algorithmic Knowledge in the Visibility Game This keynote explores “platform epistemology”, a concept how platforms shape what creators know about algorithms. Drawing on a case study of Instagram influencers, it shows how creators learn through observation, research, and social ties, while platforms control access to and legitimacy of that knowledge. The visibility game isn't just about being seen, it's about how knowledge of visibility itself is produced and valued.
5:00pm	6:00pm	Refreshments in Atrium

Friday 14 November – UQ Brisbane City Campus

Start	Finish	Session
8:30am	9:00am	Arrival coffee & tea
9:00am	10:30am	Panel 5 – Promotion of alcohol and nightlife on social media: Participatory scenes and their proxies <i>Sara Roetman, Lauren Hayden, Kiah Hawker, Meg Thomas, Aimee Brownbill, Amy Dobson, Brady Robards, Daniel Angus, Nic Carah</i> A panel discussion presenting arguments, reflections and outcomes from our Linkage Project with the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education: <i>Brady and Nic</i> on the evolution of the project from screenshot methods onwards <i>Lauren</i> on promotional formats, <i>Sara</i> on nightlife scenes and <i>Dan</i> on the ad library <i>Nic, Lauren and Aimee</i> on the engagement with FARE including the Buy Now button report and the work with the Ad observatory
10:30am	10:50am	Morning Tea
10:50am	12:00pm	Panel 6 - Selective visibility <i>Jin Lee</i> Keep it under the radar: Porn content creators' navigation of the visibility game through pornographic algorithms <i>Jonathon Hutchinson</i> Using Darkness to be Seen: Performance crime communities engaging social media (in)visibility logics <i>Yuxuan Lai</i> Seeing and Not Seeing on TikTok: A Dual-State Lens for AI-Synthetic Short Videos
12:00pm	1:10pm	Panel 7 - Rules and standards in (chaotic) platform cultures <i>Fan Yang</i> Disinformation is a Vibe <i>Anne Kruger</i> Protect your voice, your audience <i>Elif Bose Doyuran</i> The rise and politics of provenance technologies for governing AI-generated content
1:10pm	1:50pm	Lunch
1:50pm	3:00pm	Panel 8 – Shine a light <i>Joanna Strcyharz</i> Exposed and Excluded: Vulnerability Exploitation through Algorithmic Persuasion <i>Giselle Newton, Phoebe Price-Barker, Meg Thomas, Lara Skinner</i> Tuned ad coding as an intimate practice <i>Verity Trott</i> Networking modularity dynamics within a red pill YouTube channel: Validation, instruction and amplification
3:00pm	3:30pm	Closing remarks and afternoon tea

About the Tom O'Regan Fellowship Lecture

Platform Epistemology: Shaping Algorithmic Knowledge in the Visibility Game

Understanding of platform algorithms is central to the creative and strategic work of achieving and sustaining an audience online, as they determine who and what becomes visible in feeds. Platforms have long been criticized for concealing details about their algorithms in ways that limit creators' agency. This talk extends those critiques by introducing the concept of platform epistemology, an additional vector of platform power shaping creativity, labor conditions, and inequity within promotional cultures. I illustrate platform epistemology through a case study of Instagram influencers, demonstrating platforms' control over the epistemic resources shaping the practices by which influencers construct and legitimate knowledge about algorithms. Influencers learn about algorithms via observation, experimentation, desk research, social connections—particularly with platform employees—and training from self-proclaimed algorithm experts. Throughout these learning processes, Instagram, as both an infrastructure and commercial entity, shapes the availability, distribution, and perceived legitimacy of information, influencing how the community constructs and values knowledge about its algorithms. Here, the “visibility game” structures not only pursuits of visibility but also the community of practice through which influencers come to know algorithms. Platform design and disclosure decisions thus do more than constrain and enable creators' strategies; they actively shape the production and distribution of knowledge about how visibility works.

Kelley Cotter (The Pennsylvania State University)

Kelley Cotter is an Assistant Professor at The Pennsylvania State University whose research explores how data-centric technologies (especially algorithms) shape social, cultural, and political life. Her research examines how everyday users understand and interact with algorithmic systems, and how these insights can inform more equitable forms of platform governance.

Full Abstracts

Panel 1 – How creators do what they do

Darkness of microculture

Amanda Lotz (Queensland University of Technology)

The spectrum of 'creators' may be broad, but much of it remains invisible to most outside of a creator's core audience. Contrary to mass culture, most creators are known to relatively small audiences. This paper explores Substack and Patreon earnings to uncover sustainable creator enterprises operating outside mainstream ad-hosted media. It argues for taxonomies that better conceptualize the creator economy's diversity.

Amanda is a professor and leader of the Transforming Media Industries research program in the Digital Media Research Centre at Queensland University of Technology.

The Tease: Visibility on OnlyFans

Emily van der Nagel (Monash University)

OnlyFans creators are masters of what Kelley Cotter (2019) calls “the visibility game”. In a platform context in which nudity and adult content are so often banned, but OnlyFans itself offers so few discoverability options, creators must get creative about becoming visible. The strategy, like a striptease, involves layers. Creators build profiles on mainstream platforms like X, Instagram, and

TikTok, and find ways both obvious (“I’m in the top 1% on OnlyFans”) and subtle (“yes I have one”) to direct audiences to OnlyFans as a paid layer on top of this social media presence. Once on OnlyFans, more layers are revealed. The OnlyFans subscription button does not function as simply as a padlock, which, once opened, grants access to all content. Instead, platform features including tips, pay-per-view content, direct messages, and multiple accounts involve creators working to maintain enough erotic visibility to keep their fans wanting more.

In insisting on the importance of adult creators to studies of creator cultures, this talk also explores the methodological challenges of conducting research in a way that exposes OnlyFans the platform, without compromising the careful visibility practices of the adult creators who have made it such a success.

Vulgarity as a Form of “Digital Suicide Bombing”: Chinese Rural Women’s Self-Deprecating Humour on Short-Video Platforms

Bingxi Huang (The University of Queensland)

This presentation explores vulgarity as a prominent form of rural women’s self-representation on Chinese short-video platforms. I argue that vulgarity takes the form of self-deprecating humour – what I call “digital suicide-bombing” – closely tied to the attention economy on short-video platforms. To gain visibility, rural women exaggerate and commodify their rural bodies in grotesque, self-mocking ways that align with the urban-centric humour. This strategy, however, risks sacrificing dignity and reinforcing stereotypes of rural backwardness.

The humour itself, draws its force from structural inequalities, particularly the rural/urban divide and gender disparity. Urban audiences laugh at these women from a position of superiority, yet also laugh with them when the humour resonates with urban life. I describe this ambivalent dynamic as “soil taste” culture, shaped by urban-centric, sexist e’gao (parody) traditions and sustained by platform logics.

At the same time, vulgar self-representation unsettles broader systemic issues: the persistence of the rural/urban divide, China’s digital development agenda, and cosmopolitan optimism. Paradoxically, what looks like self-erasure is also a way of sustaining life – rural women metaphorically “live on” their digital suicide.

Panel 2 – Creator personas

When Algorithmic Visibility Becomes Manipulative: Exploring TV Series Marketing on Douyin

Yuchen Song (Monash University)

This study examines how Douyin's algorithmic visibility reshapes TV series marketing. Based on interviews with industry experts, it reveals how marketers are compelled to conform to platform logics, undermining creativity and disadvantaging smaller productions.

Making an Authorial Persona in Digital Times: Women Writers, Platforms and Gendered Labour

Anthea Taylor and Marg Henderson (University of Sydney)

This paper presents findings from an ARC Linkage project on Australian women authors' use of digital media for promotion. It explores unpaid labour, platform preferences, and risks like trolling. The concept of the "digital-I" updates Barthes' "paper-I" to reflect the challenges of persona-building in hostile online environments.

Internet celebrity meets AIGC: from AI clones to AI fan fiction

Mona Rayaprolu (Queensland University of Technology)

This paper focuses on the ways AI-generated content (AIGC) shapes, reshapes, and is shaped by internet celebrity, understood as both a discursive regime and a fundamental dynamic of the creator economy. On digital media platforms, content creators across various genres are using the mimicry functions of audiovisual AIGC for impersonating celebrities/influencers or cloning themselves in order to retain high online visibility. This use of AIGC is broadly disputed, as it blurs the boundaries between human and non-human actors, and in turn intensifies the politics of authorship, visibility, and labour among emerging creator cultures. In this context, AIGC featuring both traditional celebrities and internet celebrities presents an intersection to map out how creators outsource their 'AI clone' to maintain consistent production of their online persona, or how they navigate a saturated content landscape through new genres such as 'AI parody' or 'AI fan fiction'. This paper explores how creators such as fake ortega and kwebbelkop AI are developing new media practices via AIGC in order to sustain their internet celebrity. While the former utilises AIGC to curate a seemingly intertextual experience, the latter hyperproduces their online persona across multiple digital media platforms to navigate algorithmic triggers as well as affective audiences.

Panel 3 – Virtual visibilities

Making the Virtual (Hyper)Visible: Towards a Theory of Hypervirtuality

Rachel Berryman (Curtin University)

This paper introduces “hypervirtuality” through a study of virtual influencers. It explores how these entities foreground their artificiality to gain visibility and discusses implications for AI-generated content and digital persona-building.

Automating faces: Filters and the data gaze in visual AI

Kiah Hawker (The University of Queensland) and Julia Coffey (University of Newcastle)

This paper examines how AR/AI filters reconfigure self-presentation through real-time generative transformations. Drawing on studies of selfie editing and filter creators, it explores how gendered and racialized norms shape visibility and creative practice.

Traditional Chinese Culture Meets Generative AI: Rethinking Authenticity in Human-Community-Machine Interaction

Chenxue Guo (Queensland University of Technology)

This study explores how creators in the “Chinese national style” subculture use AI-generated visuals to balance authenticity and algorithmic visibility. It examines platform ambivalence toward AI content and creators’ strategies to maintain visibility while adhering to cultural and regulatory expectations.

Panel 4 – Dark trades

Influencers promoting their own alcohol brands on Instagram: From darkness to hyper-visibility

Ian Goodwin and Antonia Lyons (University of Auckland)

This paper explores how celebrity influencers promote their own alcohol brands in hyper-visible ways, challenging regulatory definitions of advertising. It draws on survey data from young people in Aotearoa and argues that such practices destabilize traditional notions of visibility and accountability.

Co-authors: Antonia Lyons, Jessica Young

Financialised Gimmicks: The Gamified Aesthetics of Buy-Now-Pay-Later Platforms

Steven Threadgold (Newcastle Youth Studies Centre)

BNPL platforms use gamified aesthetics and social media tactics to engage users and extract value. This paper analyzes how these strategies create financialized subjects and explores their affective and aesthetic dimensions through Sianne Ngai’s work on gimmicks.

Encoding ambiguity: dropshipping as platform-dependent supply chains

Andrea Alarcón (The University of Queensland)

This paper looks at dropshipping as a platform-dependent e-commerce practice, and shows how the Facebook ad model is formatted to make it visible while also obscuring business formality.

Co-authors: Nicholas Carah, Sokummono Khan; Affiliation: Centre for Digital Cultures and Societies, University of Queensland

A guide to playing on “slopmode”: Slop, scams and gambling on social media platforms
Maria Gemma Brown (The University of Queensland)

This presentation explores the “slop economy” of AI-generated content and gambling ads on social media. Using interviews with young Australians, it examines how platforms are flooded with strange, scam-like content and how gambling companies exploit this cultural economy.

Panel 6 – Selective visibility

Keep it under the radar: Porn content creators’ navigation of the visibility game through pornographic algorithms
Jin Lee (Curtin University)

This paper analyses how porn content creators in Japan and South Korea evade algorithmic moderation while sustaining niche visibility. It introduces the concept of “pornographic algorithms” as a mode of governance that both suppresses and promotes subcultural content.

Using Darkness to be Seen: Performance crime communities engaging social media (in)visibility logics
Jonathon Hutchinson (University of Sydney)

This paper explores performance crime content—criminal acts recorded for social media—and how creators use hyper-invisibility to avoid detection. It presents findings from an Australian Institute of Criminology project and proposes a framework for understanding hyper-invisibility in digital crime communities.

Seeing and Not Seeing on TikTok: A Dual-State Lens for AI-Synthetic Short Videos
Yuxuan Lai (University of New South Wales)

This conceptual paper proposes a dual-state lens to understand how AI-generated political videos on TikTok achieve hypervisibility while remaining opaque. It introduces a content-behaviour network framework to analyze transitions between visibility states.

Panel 7 – Rules and standards in (chaotic) platform cultures

Disinformation is a Vibe
Fan Yang (University of Melbourne)

This paper examines how disinformation operates through emotional resonance and cultural texture, not just factual inaccuracy. It critiques current legislative approaches and fact-checking practices, arguing that disinformation’s authenticity lies in its affective power.

Protect your voice, your audience
Anne Kruger (The University of Queensland)

During the Covid-19 pandemic, influencers helped dispel disinformation across Australia and New Zealand. This paper explores their role in vaccine campaigns, their evolving relationship with public institutions, and the regulatory frameworks needed to support influencers in an era of AI-backed misinformation.

The rise and politics of provenance technologies for governing AI-generated content **Elif Bose Doyuran (Queensland University of Technology)**

As concerns about AI-generated content proliferate, so too do technical solutions that promise to contain it. Among the most prominent is C2PA: a cryptographic metadata standard developed by an Adobe-led coalition to link media to its provenance data - including authorship, origin, and edit history - with the goal of signalling AI involvement. Framed as a solution to AI's "authenticity problem," C2PA also underpins Adobe's broader push for "commercial safety." This paper traces the standard's development to examine how it rose to prominence and took shape as a technical artefact. We show how support from actors such as human rights and media organisations helped legitimise the standard, while the exclusion of professional creators was key to its instrumentalisation in advancing the political and economic interests of dominant commercial players

Panel 8 – Shine a light

Exposed and Excluded: Vulnerability Exploitation through Algorithmic Persuasion **Joanna Strcyharz (University of Amsterdam)**

Algorithmic persuasion exploits digital vulnerabilities by exposing or excluding individuals based on inferred traits. This paper uses digital data donation and surveys to map targeting strategies and their implications for consumer vulnerability.

Tuned ad coding as an intimate practice

Giselle Newton, Phoebe Price-Barker, Meg Thomas, Lara Skinner (The University of Queensland)

Through the practice of sifting and sorting an unknown other's tuned advertising, a sense of closeness or intimacy often develops. Ads which are typically "dark", personalised and ephemeral, become visible and examinable by the researcher, who looks in making inferences about the participant's biography, consumption, desires and preferences. In Jamieson's (2011, p.1) framing, practices of intimacy are those which "enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness". In this presentation, we draw on our experience coding data from the Australian Ad Observatory and reflect of instances in which we developed a specific closeness to research participants. In doing so, we contribute to scholarship on digital methods by considering the impacts of engaging with others' intimate traces and archives in research.

Networking modularity dynamics within a red pill YouTube channel: Validation, instruction and amplification **Verity Trott (Monash University)**

This study maps the ideological and relational dynamics of an Australian red pill YouTube network to understand how masculine grievance ideologies propagate across YouTube videos. Combining social network analysis of 620 videos and over 107,000 comments along with topic modelling of the transcripts of videos with the highest degree and betweenness centrality scores, the study maps how ideological cohesion and affective narratives are cultivated in digital spaces. The co-commenting network reveals a densely interconnected audience structured into modular clusters, each reinforcing themes of institutional betrayal, cultural decline, and gendered injustice. The analysis of transcripts also demonstrates how the three modularity classes are characterised by specific rhetoric and discursive strategies – instruction, amplification, and validation – and offers a nuanced framework for understanding how masculinist ideologies are structured and sustained within algorithmic digital environments. Overall, I demonstrate how red pill content functions as a pedagogical infrastructure, algorithmically facilitated and socially reinforced, and offer new insights into how the affective and

relational dynamics of reactionary digital masculine movements. The paper speaks to wider debates around the processes and pathways of radicalisation in digital spaces and the role of platforms, such as YouTube, that rely heavily on recommendation algorithms and how this contributes to the circulation and propagation of harmful ideologies.

Verity is a Senior Lecturer in Digital Media Research in the School of Media, Film and Journalism at Monash University.